INTRODUCTION

"SHE ISN'T ABLE to have children. Isn't that sad?" my mother-in-law said about a friend's daughter. Her question to me shaped my own perspective on the young woman—let's call her Sally—and on the lives of women who do not have children. Decades later, when I was researching childlessness in the Middle Ages, I remembered this exchange and found it significant. Intimate conversation between women is typical of how, for centuries, ideals of fertility and motherhood have been passed down the generations. Whether Sally shared my mother-in-law's view, whether she even wanted to become a mother and suffered from the prospect of a life without children, I did not know. We hardly knew each other and would never have talked about such a personal issue. Although women, especially, are asked whether they have children as a matter of course, when the answer is negative, the conversation falls silent. Even today, infertility is still a taboo that is talked about behind closed doors and evokes insecurity, consternation, and pity.

Infertility is not "a deviation from a natural, normal state, but as a social category shaped by discrimination." This is what I argued in *Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2022), pointing to the crucial role of language.[1] People do not become childless through sexual acts but through verbal ones. To become so, they must be compared with others, confronted with a failure to conceive, and have their life circumstances classified as deficient. The Hebrew Bible tells some of the earliest stories about how much women suffer from not having a child.[2] Rachel feels so inferior to her fertile sister Leah that she wants to die (Gen. 30:1), and Hannah sheds bitter tears because she is mocked for not conceiving (1 Sam. 1:8). Longing for a child cannot be separated from the countless tales of marginalization that have been told about childless people from the beginnings of written tradition to the present day. Therefore, narrating can be seen as "the origin of childlessness,"[3] as I noted in the epilogue to my previous book.

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1 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 9.

2 Cf. Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*.

3 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 216.

Even in the modern age of reproductive technology, the medical diagnosis of infertility is made manifest in the words of a gynecologist, which, given society's high regard for motherhood, can lead those affected to take on a childless identity.

Literary Infertility Studies

As a German medievalist, I am never interested only in current aspects of anthropology but also in the past. What value was attributed to childlessness and parenthood in earlier eras? Were people without children already considered pitiful in the Middle Ages, and was infertility mainly seen as a women's issue? Other researchers besides myself are interested in the historical perception and interpretation of childlessness. In *How to Be Childless* (2019), the modern European historian Rachel Chrastil argues convincingly that the voices and experiences of childless women from the past five hundred years can help us to re-evaluate the lives of childless individuals today.[4] Especially in medical and sexual history, recent publications include first monographs, two journal issues, and *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility* (2017) with contributions on the medieval and early modern periods, staking out a new field of research in infertility history.[5] Organized by Catherine Rider and Sarah Toulan, the international VivaMente Conference, entitled *Fertility, Medicine and the Body: Theory and Practice across the Premodern World*, in May 2023 impressively demonstrated how many studies are currently emerging in medical history research.[6]

For the category of fertility, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* and Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* established that, in conceptions of the body and sexuality, the biological and supposedly "natural" cannot be separated from cultural and sociohistorical factors.[7] While infertility undoubtedly has a physical dimension, our perceptions and experiences of the body, sexuality, and fertility are decisively shaped by cultural frameworks. This is why I do not consistently distinguish between childlessness as a social phe-

4 Cf. Chrastil, *How to Be Childless*.

5 Cf. Evans, *Aphrodisiacs*; Loughran and Davis, "Introduction"; Oren-Magidor, *Infertility*; Oren-Magidor and Rider, "Introduction," 215–16; Toepfer and Wahrig, "Kinderlosigkeit."

6 Cf. "Fertility, Medicine and the Body," *VivaMente Conference in the History of Ideas*, May 22–23, 2023. The conference volume will be published in the Palgrave Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Medicine series.

7 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, esp. 151–52; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii–ix.

nomenon and infertility as a biological term, as this would suggest that the two concepts are distinct and blur how both are shaped by culture.

If one examines how infertility and childlessness were dealt with in the past, the supposedly purely physical phenomenon is found to have a history of changes, continuities, contingencies, and contradictions. Today, infertility is predominantly understood as a medical phenomenon and conceptualized as a disease, whereas before the modern era, religious and moral didactical perspectives dominated.[8] Fertility was interpreted as a sign of divine grace, while infertility was interpreted as a sign of sacrilege and condemnation. But in some medieval contexts, childlessness was valued completely differently. Someone who had chosen both not to start a family and to renounce sexual activity was regarded as particularly pious. Such alternative meanings and values in the cultural history of infertility are revealing. They should discourage us from seeing our own understandings as absolute, as they show that interpretations can change across space and time.

In my earlier study, I examined how fertility and infertility were talked about in premodern learned discourses and how the biblical mandate to multiply, the Pauline ideal of chastity, ancient theories of procreation, medieval health doctrines, canon law on marriage, restrictions on inheritance, philosophical longing for freedom, and Protestant ideals of the family influenced notions of (non)parenthood. The extent to which these discussions are incorporated and the emotions and experiences of childless people are portrayed in German medieval narrative literature is the subject of this second book. Not only in normative texts and historical reality but also in fictional literature, infertility has serious consequences. It can cause social exclusion, dynastic conflicts, breaks in genealogical lines, and emotional distress. Infertility functions as a catalyst in narrative literature because people who long for a child seek healing and alternative courses of action. Likewise, committed nonparents seek to live out their ideal of life without starting or bringing up a family, and defend it to the hilt.

Even if their functions differ, pragmatic and aesthetic text genres intersect closely. While nonfiction provides authoritative knowledge and formulates norms, narrative literature is less goal-oriented. It has aesthetic value in itself, does not have to represent real conditions, and can test different models. The greater freedoms that this medium offers do not mean that fiction is irrelevant to a cultural history of childlessness. On the contrary: tales

8 Cf. Sandelowski and Lacey, "The Uses of a 'Disease'"; Loughran and Davis, "Introduction," esp. 29; Toepfer, *Infertility*, 6.

are no less relevant to historical anthropological concepts than laws, sermons, or tracts. They reflect common values and are guided by theological, medical, legal, and ethical principles. But they can also counteract these principles, combine different strands of discourse, and develop their own positions.

Literary stories do not—at least not only—want to inform readers about how childless people did or should behave, but also to explore how they could behave. They narrate both the real and imaginary, fictitious experiences of nonparents, whether these seem desirable, exemplary, and ideal or pitiful, daunting, and dangerous. (In)fertility stories help to create normativity and reinforce differences between people who are and are not parents. It is no coincidence that preachers, demonologists, and ethicists like to use exemplar narratives to lend credibility and persuasiveness to their arguments. Yet stories of childlessness can be read to critique norms by analyzing how power relations are generated and strengthened or undermined by those who resist the social demands to reproduce.

The young discipline of infertility history has so far focused heavily on historiography, leading to a neglect of fictional narratives. Indeed, childlessness in the narrative literature of the German Middle Ages often remains an episode and primarily concerns secondary characters, whereas other social ties are foregrounded. Yet stories of fertility and infertility are encountered in countless literary works: in heroic epics, legends, novellas, and romances.[9] Even in the medieval German classics—in the Arthurian novels of Hartmann von Aue, in the *Nibelungenlied* (The Song of the Nibelungs), in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Parsifal), and in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*—forms of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood are negotiated. Therefore, narrative literature forms a unique source for examining what thoughts, feelings, and experiences childless people might have had in the Middle Ages. In literary infertility studies, the people who are always talked about in normative literature without having their own voices heard move to the centre. Statements and reflections made by childless people themselves as well as comments by other characters and omniscient narrators are examined, as are actions and interactions within the narrated world. How do people with children in that narrated world deal with couples without issue? Do they stigmatize and exclude them or show compassion? Or are they neutral and even consider reproductive behaviour secondary? Instead

9 Literary analyses include Samaké, "Erfolgreiche Strategien"; Sliepen, "Erzählen vom Un-Gefügten."

of asking what it was "really" like not to have children, literary infertility studies are about deconstructing explanatory contexts, analyzing situation- and position-dependent valuations, and working out narrative patterns.[10]

For a cultural historical study of childlessness, I find the narrative literature even more informative than theological, medical, and legal treatises for two reasons. Firstly, it reflects different discourses of learning. A metadiscourse of childlessness is constructed through the literature, insofar as medieval authors draw on various, sometimes conflicting, fields of knowledge in their romances and stories, linking different teachings but also contrasting or parodying them. Secondly, the ideals and narrative schemes conveyed through this literature cast a long shadow. Some premodern narrative patterns still shape our ideas of childlessness today, whereas many norms have long since lost their significance. Narratives are more durable than legal texts and exert an unnoticed influence beyond literature on the way people think, feel, speak, and act. Therefore, comparative studies in historical context enable us to observe striking parallels between medieval and contemporary narratives about childlessness and parenthood.

The Danger of a Single Infertility Story

Not all people who are childless want to become parents. How would my mother-in-law have commented on her friend's daughter's story if Sally had not intended to have children? If one is physically able to have children but decides not to, the interpretation of one's story of childlessness changes fundamentally. But women who do not want to become mothers often receive even less social recognition than those who cannot. Two competing interpretations determine the public debate about childlessness today. The first view corresponds to the genre of the complaint, although it is not presented by an individual but by a collective from politics, business, and society. This lament insinuates that too few children are being born in nearly all European countries[11] and can go so far as to accuse childless people of undermining the social security system and even social cohesion. The second view is convinced of technical progress and implies that infertility can be cured by reproductive medicine. Both interpretations converge on blaming people without children as either selfish or lazy for not seeking medical help.

10 For similar approaches in recent historiographical research, see Andenna, "Kinderlosigkeit"; Foerster, "Die Witwenschaft."

11 See Statista, "The Total Fertility Rate in Europe in 2023."

In her famous TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie pointed out how devastating it is to permit only one narrative.[12] This creates and reproduces stereotypes that are not necessarily false but incomplete. Citing her own experiences, she establishes how colonial interpretations continue to impact the stories of Black people on and beyond the African continent and to influence their own self-understanding and identity formation. The issue that Adichie raises regarding narratives of people of colour applies equally to other people who face discrimination based on aspects of their identity or on the groups to which they are seen to belong. If stories about childless people focus exclusively on suffering, women who are medically diagnosed infertile are more likely to take that perspective. Adichie points out that, from another narrative point of view, stories can evolve or take on a completely new interpretation. Different stories can be told about childlessness, depending on who is allowed to present their version, to whom, where, how events are motivated, and when the story begins and ends.

Sally's infertility story sounds utterly different if it is continued, depending on the temporal and personal focus. To the surprise of everyone who knew her and her husband, they had twins. The couple's Passion narrative was thus transformed into a story of redemption, the joy of parenthood, and the success of fertility treatment. If instead, one chooses to focus on a later period, the burdens of parenthood come into view. The double addition to the family had negative effects on the marriage. Caring for both babies put an enormous strain on the couple, and they divorced. It is possible that during this difficult phase Sally longed for her old, childless life and even regretted becoming a mother. Of course, I was not told this story because for a long time it seemed to be beyond the realm of the imaginable. The fact that a woman does not find fulfillment in her role as a mother and would rather not have children does not conform to societal expectations and conflicts with the master narrative of happy parenthood that has dominated since the early modern age. Therefore, regretted motherhood is even more taboo than infertility and has only recently been perceived and researched as a serious phenomenon.[13]

Another story of childlessness and parenthood could be told about Sally's second marriage, which shows that biological kinship is by no means a prerequisite for an intimate parent-child relationship, but that social bonds

12 Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

13 Cf. Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*.

can be more stable. Sally's new husband cared deeply for her girls and adopted the twins as his own daughters. The different facets of this modern family history not only make it clear that the same person can tell different stories of (in)fertility, but also show that one's fertility identity can change over the course one's lifetime: unhappy nonparents can become happy parents, happy childless people, or regretful mothers. People can take responsibility as parents and lovingly care for children, regardless of whether they conceived them "naturally," used reproductive technology, or took over their care at a later stage.

Scientists also tell stories when they communicate their findings, as Hayden White showed when he drew attention to the narrative modelling of historiography in *Metahistory* (1973).[14] The work of historians, in his view, is to relate a series of historical events to each other and present them as a coherent story. White distinguishes between four basic emplotments, or historians' ways of explaining and interpreting historical contexts: as progress toward the better (romance), as failure and capitulation when faced with the immutability of things (tragedy), as partial failure that nevertheless ends with reconciliation and improvement in society (comedy), or as complete failure and insight into the inability to interpret the laws of history at all (satire). When starting to write or read a book about childlessness in the Middle Ages, the first of Hayden White's emplotments that comes to mind is tragedy. Historical case studies and laws under which infertile wives can be disowned imply a history of infertility as social discrimination, where premodern childless people had no choice but to face their immutable fate.

From the start it was clear to me that I did not want to structure this book around the narrative of a Passion play. The suffering of childless people would be expressed, but strategies for overcoming this pain would not. Such a perspective would be problematic for research on childlessness: marginalization in historical practice continues in research narratives that reduce married women who do not bear children to the passive role of victim. Although social stigma is an important aspect, it is by no means sufficient to deal with childlessness comprehensively.

Instead of overemphasizing the exclusion of childless people, I originally wanted to argue the opposite case and draw attention to the productive consequences of infertility: it enables people to act in exceptional ways. In both pragmatic and poetic medieval literature, childless people developed compensation strategies. Since childlessness was considered a social defi-

14 White, *Metahistory*.

cit, couples made considerable efforts to compensate for infertility. They sought remedies and considered alternative courses of action. The disruption caused by infertility thus made people extremely creative and productive; it has extraordinary cultural, religious, and narrative potential.[15] Such an approach has the advantage of attributing agency to childless people in their own histories. They are perceived as active in finding ways to integrate and rehabilitate themselves.

The thesis of infertility as culturally productive is not unproblematic either, but it can be criticized for the following reasons. The binary of fertility and infertility is perpetuated in this interpretation, so that it ultimately contributes to reinforcing unequal relations. The efforts of childless people are seen as attempts to compensate or sublimate, and thus their achievements are subtly devalued. Marginalization is thus perpetuated under different auspices. The only way to fundamentally change perspective is to consider how the difference between fertility and infertility arose. How did childlessness become stigmatized and reproduction the norm? In what ways are people without children marginalized and forced into the role of unhappy nonparent? Are there counter narratives, and under what conditions do such assessments change?

My term, (in)fertility, points to how these valuations vary. The brackets signal that people's fertile identity is not fixed and can change over the course of a lifetime. In addition, they show that an issue can be evaluated differently, and that processes of marginalization and prioritization cannot be separated.[16] The term (in)fertility thus makes visible the methodological rethinking process I have described going through as I wrote this book. In order to avoid the danger of a single infertility story, I do not base my study on one overarching narrative model of interpretation, but I combine a variety of partly contradictory narratives. With the three forms of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood, I attempt to break down the binary between parents and nonparents as well as voluntarily and involuntarily childless people. This critical approach to normativity reveals new sides of the Middle Ages; perhaps we can identify better with the diverse and plural medieval concepts of family and ways of life than with the historical reconstructions of the Middle Ages dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

15 On the active participation of childless people in shaping cultural, spiritual, and religious life, see Signori, *Vorsorgen*, 364.

16 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 9–10.

Seven Narratives of Childlessness

The aim of my book is to present the diversity and heterogeneity of stories of childless people in the Middle Ages. Therefore, I sketch a typology of seven different narratives underlying literary stories about childlessness in the Middle Ages, beginning with the bitter suffering of involuntarily childless couples and ending with the happiness of lovers regardless of children. Childlessness is addressed in various contexts, which are by no means always associated with devaluation and exclusion. In the first three narrative models, childlessness is overcome in the end, whether through divine, demonic, or human help. In the other narratives, the problem is not solved biologically or socially, but the scale of values is reversed. In religious contexts and emotional relationships, childlessness is not considered a problem but an opportunity to develop an intimate relationship with God or a human partner. In narrative literature, forms of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood are fleshed out, combined, and can vary within one story. Most of the texts examined here date from the high and late Middle Ages and are written in German, but I also draw on comparisons with ancient classical and biblical models and consider Latin, French, English, and Italian tales.

The first and most important narrative, Divine Help, is based on the duality of divine power and human powerlessness. The protagonists feel deep suffering without being able to change anything about their childlessness themselves. Therefore, they place all their hope in a metaphysical instance and are ultimately rewarded for their devotion. This narrative shows how couples without children are discriminated against in society, which makes them into unhappy childless people. Spouses must adhere to specific regulations proscribed in theology of reproduction in order to find fertile grace. The reproductive norm is confirmed yet again by the late birth of a child. For this narrative, I draw particularly on the story of Mary's birth to Anne and Joachim in the Middle High German versions of the *Life of Mary* by Wernher the priest (1172) and Wernher the Swiss (first half of the fourteenth century), and also on several courtly novels from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

In the second narrative model, Dangerous Third Parties, childless married couples are not satisfied with vague hope in God but seek their own solutions. They are helped by characters who have magical knowledge and extraordinary abilities but are portrayed as shady or dangerous. The problems with fixation on offspring are shown in this narrative. Children who are born with someone else's help are different and struggle with the consequences of their conception. Important textual bases for this chapter are the

Middle High German Alexander romances written by the priest Lambrecht, Rudolf von Ems, and Ulrich von Etzenbach in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with their learned source texts, as well as the fifteenth-century German adaptation of the French verse novel *Robert le diable* and Niccolò Machiavelli's Italian comedy *La Mandragola* (1524).

The third narrative model, Social Alternatives, replaces biological reproduction with a comparable human bond. In German literature, childless married couples are constantly taking on the care of a child or even passing off a foundling as their biological offspring. The fertility/infertility binary is abolished by social alternative models; indeed, in many cases the social parents surpass the biological parents in love and caring. The text selection for the third narrative includes a wide range of stories dating from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, in different literary genres—biblical poetry, legend literature, verse novellas, romances, and prose epics.

The fourth narrative, Mystical Motherhood, tells of pious women's longing for the baby Jesus, whom they care for, embrace, and nurse in their visions. In the research literature, these women have been devalued as hysterics instead of acknowledged for the specifically feminine form of their religiosity. Women mystics lead a spiritual life with the holy child, describe their great desire to be close to the infant Jesus, and interpret motherhood as religious practice. My analysis is based on accounts of revelations, *Schwesternbücher* (i.e., sister-books or lives of nuns), and biographies primarily of fourteenth-century women mystics, including Margaret Ebner, Lidwina of Schiedam, Adelheid Langmann, and Dorothea von Montau.

As shown in the fifth model, Forced Parenthood, marriage and procreation are not anthropologically self-evident. In courtly narratives, some men vehemently resist marriage, whether because they want to lead an unattached life or because their liaison does not befit their status. However, nobles cannot escape the high social pressure to ensure succession through an heir of the body forever, which sometimes leads to deep remorse and at other times to domestic violence with even fatal consequences. In this chapter, too, the historical and literary span is wide; twelfth-century texts such as Marie de France's *Le Fresne*, Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius*, and the *Nibelungenlied* are analyzed, as are fifteenth-century vernacular translations by humanists. The work on the narrative can be observed particularly well in the rich reception of *Griselda*, Giovanni Boccaccio's last tale in the *Decameron*.

The sixth narrative, Chaste Marriages, tells of people who are committed nonparents. The role model of the Holy Family makes it possible to subordinate reproduction to the ideal of chastity, even within a marriage. If two

spouses renounce physical consummation by mutual consent, their behaviour is considered particularly godly. The religious vocation seems more important than bearing children. In several bride-quest epics, the reproductive norm is questioned on the wedding night and the feudal political *raison d'être* is replaced by a sacral one; childlessness is even interpreted as a sign of holiness in the lives of saints. In addition to the spiritual narrative literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in German, the bridal-quest epics of Oswald and Orendel, the lives of Mary and the legends of Alexius, and the imperial couple Henry and Cunigunde, I also examine the vita of the English recluse Christina of Markyate and the canonization records of the French noblewoman Delphine of Glandèves, dating from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

In my seventh and last narrative, Courtly Love, childlessness is not marked out as a problem—or even registered at all. In the context of a genuinely secular genre, this absence is all the more remarkable. The focus of this chapter is on courtly romances—including Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*, Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneasroman*, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*—and *Minnelieder* (Courtly Love Songs) by Walther von der Vogelweide, Heinrich von Morungen, or Johannes Hadlaub, written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although reproduction is an essential purpose of feudal marriage, courtly literature sketches a social ideal that seems to manage largely without children—the best-known example of this is probably Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*. Fertility and infertility are not relevant criteria for an intimate love relationship and do not determine people's happiness in life.

This book is based on the second, literary studies part of my German-language monograph *Kinderlosigkeit. Ersehnte, verweigerte und bereute Elternschaft im Mittelalter* (Metzler/Springer 2020). For the English publication, I have slightly edited the text, particularly to integrate more of the latest literature in English and to refer to findings from the first part of my study, entitled *Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Palgrave 2022); the introduction and epilogue have largely been recomposed. For their repeated encouragement to publish and their great editorial support, sincere thanks to Anna Henderson and her colleagues at Arc Humanities Press, especially Tania Colwell and Jitske Jasperse. I would also like to thank Catherine Rider for her insightful comments on the manuscript and Felicitas Schmiederer, who supported me with organizing the bibliography and the editorial work. My deepest thanks go to Kate Sotejeff-Wilson, who also translated my previous book into English, for the many productive discussions and her tireless efforts to transform my argument into English suitable for the target culture.