

MYSTICAL MOTHERHOOD

VENERATING THE CHILD

ACROSS CULTURES AND eras, social and emotional characteristics are inferred from biological observations. Because the female anatomy makes it possible to give birth, many believe that women want to have children and can only find fulfillment in motherhood. The old dispute as to whether gender differences can be explained by natural predispositions or cultural imprints has been reignited by the current discussions about childlessness. In *Maternal Desire* (2004) American psychotherapist Daphne de Marneffe reports on how the desire for a baby takes over when women are confronted with infertility. Ambivalence about motherhood recedes and a “vortex of yearning opens up at one’s feet.” Childless women liked to attribute their extreme pain “to the body’s convulsion of protest when its species script is thwarted.”¹ Particularly those who initially decided against having children were astonished by the strength of their drive for a baby. In the midst of a civilized life, the raw desire to have a child feels downright indecent and archaic. In *Ungestillte Sehnsucht* (“Unquelled Longing,” 2012), Millay Hyatt writes how her choice to be childfree changed into longing for a child, and, against her will, she was blindsided by her own body.² Hyatt rules out the possibility that her sense of urgency was imposed by external forces or unconsciously created by social pressure. Rather, she surmises that the urge to reproduce is stronger than emancipated women would like to admit. Longing for motherhood must therefore be a feminine, “primal instinct.”

There are more indications of this in the stories in medieval sister-books, vision reports, and revelatory writings. The thoughts and feelings of many cloistered women who are not permitted to have children revolve around a child. Mystics like Margaret Ebner, Agnes Blannbekin, and many others yearn for God in the form of the infant Jesus. In mysticism, women often make their voices heard and tell their own stories for the first time, which makes their works especially well suited to the study of women’s desire for motherhood. But caution is advised when interpreting reports of mystical revelations: medieval women authors rarely had the sole power of

1 De Marneffe, *Maternal Desire*, 216; on the “cavewoman’ drive” see 222.

2 Hyatt, *Ungestillte Sehnsucht*, 22–24.

interpreting their stories. Their works were often written down, edited, and translated by men. We can no longer know the extent to which the mystics' visions of motherhood corresponded to their self-perception or to attributions made by editors. More important than authenticity is the issue of how venerating the child is described, what is told about it, and how a desire for parenthood arises.

Readers today usually feel very distant from medieval mystic ideals. The goal of mysteriously uniting oneself as an earthly human being with the divine (*unio mystica*) is difficult to reconcile with the image of a transcendent God. Mystics drew on forms of physical intimacy and transferred them to the God-human relationship. The sexual union of bride and groom and the reproductive unity of mother and child served as their models. The greatest way to get closer to God that they could imagine was to take on the roles of bride of Christ or mother of the infant Jesus; with Rosemary Drage Hale we can speak of "mother mysticism."³ My fourth narrative is about how childless women orient their lives around the child Jesus and take on the role of mother.

Suppressed Desire: Modern Perspectives on Spiritual Mothers

Unwanted childlessness can cause not only profound pain but also fear of hysteria. Millay Hyatt describes how, immediately after her infertility diagnosis, she was haunted by the image of a hysterical woman.⁴ She feared becoming addicted to children, putting all relationships on the back burner, and forgetting her own principles. To her, the second version of the horrific image hardly seems any better: an old maid who envies others their bundles of joy. Many women who are unable to have children are plagued by similar worries. The fear of being considered hysterical can be greater than shame at one's own desires.

If one assumes that all women want to give birth and become mothers, there is a fundamental deficit inherent in monastic life. Women who have taken a vow of chastity must suppress their "natural" urge to procreate.⁵ Veneration of the infant Jesus could therefore be a way for women religious to compensate for a longing for a baby that cannot be fulfilled. Researchers

3 Drage Hale, "Rocking," 215.

4 Hyatt, *Ungestillte Sehnsucht*, 22–24.

5 In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), Martin Luther insinuates this of all monastics and declares that it is hardly possible to renounce sexuality and reproduction voluntarily, see Toepfer, *Infertility*, 40–44.



Figure 4. Gregor Erhart, “Venerated Christ Child” (ca. 1500). Wooden figure, height 56.5 cm, width 23 cm, depth 16 cm. Devotional picture from the Cistercian convent at Heggbach. Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, no. 1953.35. Photograph by Joachim Hiltmann, Stanislaw Rowinski, and Andreas Torneberg. Reproduced by permission of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe.

have taken this approach to interpret the late medieval custom of giving nuns a wooden or porcelain figurine of the Christ Child when they entered a convent. Were medieval childless women supposed to be protected from psychological damage and hysteria?

Little Comforter and Soul Child

There is plenty of evidence of Christ Child figurines (e.g., Fig. 4) in the late medieval and early modern period. The Cologne councillor Hermann Weinsberg (1518–1597) recorded in his family chronicle that both his sister Agnes (1540) and his daughter Anna (1567) were given “a Jesus” with an expensive layette when they entered the Franciscan convent of Maria Bethlehem.⁶ In the convents of the

Poor Clares in Munich, Graz, and Vienna, the infant Jesus was even firmly integrated into the clothing ritual: the festively dressed candidate was collected from her parents’ house and walked to the convent church with the baby Jesus in her hand. There, her hair was cut off, she took off her worldly clothes and put on the habit of the order. Afterwards, the novice was presented with her figurine, so that she symbolically became the mother of the infant Jesus. Numerous figurines like this—with their clothing, cradle, jewellery, crowns, and other accessories—are still in existence today, as impressively documented by the *Seelenkind* (Soul Child) exhibition at the Freising Diocesan Museum in 2012.⁷

⁶ Weinsberg, *Die autobiographischen Aufzeichnungen*, Liber Iuventutis LI2: “Agneis hat auch sinen Jhesus [...] bekommen”; LI6: “Mir hatten Annen ein Jesus gegeben [...]”

⁷ *Seelenkind*. On the clothing ritual see Zwinger, “Gekleydter Jesus,” 59.

The baby Jesus depicted here, carved by the Ulm-born artist Gregor Erhart, ca. 1500, comes from the Cistercian nunnery in Heggbach and is now part of the medieval collection of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. The standing figurine is more than half a metre high and depicts Christ at about one year old. The globe in his left hand and the victory sign in his right hand identify him as the future ruler of the world, but the figurine is fascinating above all because of its radiant beauty and vitality. The little boy is unclothed, his naked skin gleams, and each part of his body—arms, hands, chest, navel and stomach, limbs, legs, knees, and feet—is well proportioned. The artist must have put a lot of thought into how to give the figurine such grace and create the impression of movement. The slightly turned posture, the differently positioned legs, outstretched arm, unequal shoulder heights and tilted head make the boy Jesus appear to be stepping into the room. With his curly hair, high forehead, open eyes, red cheeks, and slightly parted lips, he gazes at his onlookers with a lovely smile. Who wouldn't want to care for this child and embrace him?

Researchers have had a lively debate as to the intended purpose of these Christ Child figurines. Some interpretations reduced the figurines to their materiality. Those who held this view saw them as inanimate objects onto which nuns could project their unfulfilled desires. The Christ Child figurines manifest the compassion of biological parents who, after their daughters entered the convent, never saw them again. The “little comforter” was intended to help unhappy nuns bear the losses they had suffered and the hardships that lay ahead. When they were separated from their families of origin and vowed to renounce physical motherhood, the baby Jesus would help them to endure their loneliness in the cell. Nuns could thus fulfill the primary social functions of women, cope with their frustration, and live out their longings within the narrow confines of the convent.⁸

Others emphasized the religious relevance of the Christ Child figurines. They saw them as cult objects that helped young women to develop a deep inner relationship with Christ. When nuns dress and cradle their baby Jesus, their motherly care and love is for the person the figurine represents. The Christ Child figurines were intended to make the divine visible and the salvation story comprehensible. The term “soul child,” chosen by the curators of the Freising exhibition, does not emphasize what is lacking in human relationships but rather their religious potential. Compensatory activity with a

8 Klapisch-Zuber, “Holy Dolls,” 326. For a critique, see Rublack, “Female Spirituality,” 39.

substitute object or devotional aid for religious exercises? This summarizes the opposing positions. Margaret Ebner's *Revelations* show the significance a Christ Child could have for a nun and how it enabled a mystic to become a mother.

Margaret Ebner and Her Christ Child

The holy child plays a central role in the diary-like notes of Margaret Ebner (ca. 1291–1351).⁹ At a young age, the patrician's daughter from Donauwörth was placed in the Dominican convent of Maria Medingen near Dillingen. At the age of twenty, she fell seriously ill and suffered lifelong bouts of weakness, which she exacerbated through strict physical asceticism. Her illness was accompanied by visions, which Margaret interpreted as an experience of grace. In Advent 1344, when she was past fifty, she began to write down her mystical experiences, with the strong encouragement of her friend and spiritual guide Heinrich von Nördlingen (ca. 1310, completed by 1387).

Margaret tells stories of mystical motherhood in which she takes centre stage. At Christmas time, she is seized by a fierce longing for her baby Jesus, whom she wants to embrace and care for. Margaret is the initiator of the action, but Jesus soon takes the reins. In her imagination, the object is transformed into the subject of desire. The holy child comes to life and demands intimate closeness. If Margaret did not take the child to herself, it would withdraw from her. The spiritual mother is only too glad to take her baby Jesus out of the cradle and place him on her naked breast, which sends her into ecstatic rapture. She is overwhelmed by the closeness of the deity, especially through the experience of mystic lactation. In Margaret's vision, she becomes the nurturing mother of the holy child.

Margaret's mystical lactation is not limited to one occurrence. One night, in a second story of revelation, Jesus encourages her to get up. The prospect of renewed motherly joy makes Margaret forget all her physical weakness. Full of desire, she presses her figurine to her heart with all her might. Direct skin contact causes the material object to transform and begin to move. Margaret feels the tiny mouth close to her heart searching for her breast. After the initial shock, she is overwhelmed with joy. She is only briefly unsure whether she is perhaps imagining the motion. Christ soon dispels her doubts; he has far greater abilities than an ordinary child. The infant Jesus responds, declares lactation to be a gift of love, and compares it with the sacrament of the Eucharist.

⁹ Ebner, "Offenbarungen," 87–91. Cf. Drage Hale, "Rocking."

Another night, in the third motherhood story, Margaret wakes up and sees her baby Jesus playing happily in his cradle. A dialogue ensues between the overtired, devoted mother and her lively, attention-seeking son. Margaret asks Jesus why he will not be good and let her sleep, even though she lovingly put him to bed that evening. The little boy refuses to be pacified and wants to come to her. Full of joy and desire, Margaret takes the child from the cradle and places him on her lap. When the baby Jesus behaves well there, the mother expresses her wishes. She wants to be kissed; then she will not blame him for waking her. Slowly, mother and son draw nearer one another until they embrace and exchange kisses. This mutual tenderness is one of Margaret's most gratifying experiences.

Various stories—of both religious choice and suppressed desire to have children—can be told about mystical encounters with Christ Child figurines. In a letter, Heinrich von Nördlingen praised Margaret Ebner for her lactation visions. The mere idea of her motherly, virginal breasts was enough to make his heart leap with joy.¹⁰ To modern readers, however, Margaret no longer appeared a gifted mystic but a hysterical nun. An adult woman talking to a Christ Child in a cradle and imagining herself to be the mother of this “doll” was considered immature and sick. Anyone caring for an imaginary baby was no longer giving religious comfort but seemed in need of care themselves.

Infertility and Hysteria

Nowhere is this devaluation more evident than in the Swiss pastor and psychoanalyst Oskar Pfister's essay “Hysterie und Mystik bei Margaretha Ebner (1291–1351)” in the first issue of the *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse* (“Hysteria and Mysticism in Margaret Ebner,” *Central Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1911).¹¹ Pfister reads the literary work as the medical records of a hysteric who has compiled her own “chronicle of her primary and sublimated hysterical manifestations.” For Pfister, Margaret's visions are nothing more than hallucinations, dreams, and obsessions that can be traced back to repressed urges. Her dreams are so easy to see through that they hardly require any interpretation. The fact that the nun still longed for the baby Jesus in her fifties and felt desire when breastfeeding revealed that her reproductive and sexual drives had not waned with age.

10 Heinrich von Nördlingen, “Briefe,” no. 42, 25–30.

11 Pfister, “Hysterie und Mystik,” 468, 477, 485. Cf. Beutin, “Hysterie und Mystik.” On the criticism see Rublack, “Female Spirituality,” 51.

The psychoanalyst finds an event dated March 14, 1347, particularly revealing.¹² The first-person narrator tells of a mystical pregnancy that is announced loud and clear. Again and again, she cries out in uncontrollable labour pangs; her voice can be heard throughout the convent. The screams increase continuously and are accompanied by massive contractions. Her body is shaken so badly that three women have to hold her with all their strength. One holds Margaret on the left side under her heart, another presses against it from behind, while the third holds her head. The helpers feel something alive moving around in Margaret's body. The contractions become ever more violent, so Margaret feels as though she will split in two. Her belly swells enormously; the bulge is firm and unyielding to the touch. Her screams increase from one hundred, to one hundred and fifty, to two hundred and fifty, until they finally subside. When the whole ordeal is over, the mystic is filled with great joy. She has the use of her voice and limbs again.

For Pfister, the birth scene is proof of his diagnosis. He regrets that the "existing confessions" were not sufficient for a satisfactory analysis. In particular, he would like more information on "infantile sexual fantasies, consistent repressions and acute traumas." Yet, this does not stop him from recognizing the connections between mysticism and hysteria and drawing conclusions about "pathogenic influences." Margaret does not really succeed in suppressing her instincts; instead, her "mistreated nature" takes cruel revenge. Like Margaret, Pfister tells a story, albeit from a completely different perspective. He looks down on the mystic, incapacitating her and forcing her onto an imaginary couch to be scrutinized. Pfister is all too confident in his judgment without realizing that what pathologizes Margaret is his clinical terminology.

Had Pfister analyzed other mystics' visions of pregnancy, birth, and lactation, he is unlikely to have reached a different diagnosis. Margaret Ebner's mystical motherhood is not an isolated case.¹³ Lidwina of Schiedam (1380–1433) experienced how her breasts filled with milk. Adelheid Langmann (1306–1375) narrated breastfeeding the baby Jesus. Lucardis von Oberweimar (1274–1309) noticed how her girth expanded. Dorothea von Montau (1347–1394) felt her uterus widening, as if she were about to give

12 Ebner, "Offenbarungen," 119–21. On mystical pregnancy, cf. Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 187.

13 *Het leven van Liedewij*, chap. 29, 80–81; Langmann, *Die Offenbarungen*, 66; *Vita venerabilis*, 334; Marienwerder, *Das Leben der heiligen Dorothea*, 365 (Septililium 1,25). See also Dinzeltacher, *Deutsche und Niederländische Mystik*, 135–36, 172–74, 274; Dinzeltacher, *Körper*, 79–109.

birth. Her vision of pregnancy goes hand in hand with ideas of sex and violence. Dorothea experienced her unions with the divine as painful, as if her swelling uterus were being pierced with lances. Such descriptions would probably have only reinforced the Zurich psychoanalyst's belief that suppressed drives cause hysterical states in women. Failed repression leads desires to emerge "in wild anarchy," Pfister argued, with examples from his own therapeutic practice. He knew of several patients who suffered from suppressed desires and showed similar symptoms.

Pfister's essay is an extreme but typical example of the hystericization of the female body. As Michel Foucault shows in *The History of Sexuality* (*La volonté de savoir*, 1976), specific dispositives of knowledge and power unfolded in the realm of sexuality from the eighteenth century.¹⁴ The female body was understood, analyzed, and disqualified as being completely permeated by sexuality; women become hysterics who required medical help. Thus, the fear of being considered hysterical due to an unfulfilled longing for children that women feel today has a long history. For centuries, it was believed that an unsatisfied reproductive instinct has a horrifically negative impact on women. Yet, this hystericization does not do justice to either modern spiritual mothers or medieval mystics. In *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991), Caroline Walker Bynum emphatically warns readers against projecting modern notions of sexuality onto medieval texts.¹⁵ It is not advisable to diagnose mystics with hysteria, depression, or anorexia; such syndromes belong to a specific culture and cannot simply be transferred.

If we want to understand the phenomenon of mystical motherhood, there are several issues that we must not overlook. Firstly, the mystics are not expressing longing for an ordinary or even physical baby. A clear indication of this is how the motherhood visions are tied to the liturgical year. The nuns participated in the Christian story of salvation in their minds and bodies, so they mainly encountered the infant Jesus during Advent or Christmas. Secondly, the mystics oriented their visions on literary models. The gospels of Matthew and Luke narrate the Nativity of Christ, focusing Christians' attention on the mother and child. Thirdly, veneration of the holy child is not specific to childless nuns but is embedded in a larger religious context. Through God's incarnation, Christianity as a whole is a religion centred on a child and based on motherhood—although this mother-child relationship is very specific.

14 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 103–4.

15 Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 140.

The Christian Mother-and-Child Ideal: Mary as Role Model

The medieval veneration of the infant Jesus begins with Christ made human: the biblical miracle of the virgin birth. Matthew and Luke agree that Mary became pregnant without a man being involved. Even before she had married Joseph, she was expecting a son through the work of the Holy Spirit. As both virgin and mother, Mary is the perfect figure for women to identify with if they long for a child but want to live chastely.¹⁶ In Christian literature, motherly love is not dependent on sexuality and reproduction.

Both gospels emphasize adoration and veneration of the newborn, whereas the description of the birth and care is very brief: “and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:7). In Luke, the shepherds learn that the Saviour of the world has been born and rush to worship the child. In Matthew, magi—astrologers or kings from the East—search for the newborn king of the Jews. When they find the mother and child, they kneel down and worship him (Matt. 2:11). Regardless of time and place, pious Christians take the shepherds and magi as an example. If they want to see the infant Jesus, they can visualize the Christmas story in texts, pictures, sculptures, songs, and plays—or in visions and meditations.

Christmas Visions

Benedictine Elisabeth von Schönau (1129–1164), the first German mystic, describes in her *Liber Visionum* (Book of Visions, 1152/55) how she was enraptured during the Christmas service and able to see the miracle at Bethlehem.¹⁷ From afar, she sees Mary lying in bed and caressing a very sweet little baby. In contrast to Margaret Ebner, Elisabeth keeps a respectful distance. She observes the Nativity without being involved herself. Exchanging caresses with the baby Jesus is reserved for the biological mother. Only Mary is allowed to touch and embrace the child. After she has swaddled the newborn as the Bible tells, and placed him in the manger, she soon takes him into her arms. Time and again, literature reports that mystics see the Christmas event with their own eyes. According to the *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch* (Sister-Book of St. Katharinental Convent, mid-fourteenth century), for instance, Ite von Hallau has a vision during midnight mass in

¹⁶ On Josephite marriage as a model in patristic and scholastic doctrine see Toepfer, *Infertility*, 38–40.

¹⁷ Elisabeth von Schönau, *Werke*, 36.

which she sees the Holy Family and the ox and donkey by the crib. When they sing the hymn *Christus natus*, the words become reality, and, within her, Christ is born.¹⁸

The best-known and iconographically influential medieval vision of the Nativity was experienced by Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373).¹⁹ In her book of revelations, she describes what she experienced on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land at Jesus’s manger in Bethlehem. Because she saw it at this holy site, in the Middle Ages Bridget’s description of Christ’s birth was considered particularly authentic. In her vision, the finely dressed virgin goes into a cave alone to give birth. She takes off her shoes, removes her cloak and veil, prepares linen cloths for the newborn, and kneels on the floor in her shift with her hair loose. The birth itself remains a mystery for the observer; the Virgin stays rapt in contemplation and prayer, and the child suddenly lies naked and radiant before her. The birth is so quick that Bridget cannot even tell from which orifice the baby has emerged. The young mother appears unchanged, with no sign of weakness or pain. Her body seems unaffected, but simply, miraculously, contracts. The virgin birth leads to an ideal of motherhood without compromising bodily integrity that still makes it possible to care for, nurture, and breastfeed a child. The narrator focuses on the crying baby lying on the floor, shivering with cold. The mother feels deep compassion, takes the baby in her arms, and warms it at her breast. She lays the swaddled infant in the manger and worships him, joined by her much older husband.

The biblical historical and monastic contemporary spheres do not always remain strictly separated. Like Margaret Ebner, many mystics participate in the Christmas story. At first, the Viennese Beguine Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315) observes silently when the heavily pregnant Mary appears to her, ever more radiant. As she gives birth, she is surrounded by countless angels who praise God and serve her and her child. Agnes is so overwhelmed by the sight that she can no longer bear the sweet rapture and faints. When she comes round, she sees first Joseph and then the kings and the shepherds reverently venerating the child. The spiritual vision causes Agnes’ body and veins to swell like a pregnant woman’s. The vision of the Nativity is directly related to the mystical pregnancy.²⁰

18 Meyer, *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, no. 24, 108. Written records of the *Schwesternbuch* begin only in the fifteenth century.

19 Sancta Birgitta, *Revelaciones*, chaps. 21–24, 187–92. Cf. Wolf, *Weihnachtsvision*, 34–36; Andersen, “Das Kind sehen,” 297–99.

20 *Leben und Offenbarungen der Agnes Blannbekin*, 403–7.

Maternal Role Models

Women who do not have children are constantly confronted with motherhood. Other women demonstrate what a happy and fulfilling life they could lead if they had a child of their own. In the narrative of mystical motherhood, this does not require a physical readiness to conceive but a spiritual one. Through devotional literature, pious women learn to go through Mary to approach the infant Jesus. The *Meditationes vitae Christi* (Meditations on the Life of Christ, early fourteenth century), for example, guide the reader through this process, encouraging worshippers to kneel, kiss the feet of the infant Jesus, and ask Mary if they may hold her son. With his mother's permission, they can look upon the face of the baby Jesus, kiss him reverently, and share her joy in him. They then have to give the baby back, but they are allowed to watch Mary breastfeed. Meditators on the Nativity should observe the Mother of God closely in all her actions and always be ready to help her care for the baby.²¹

Pious nuns are explicitly asked to put themselves in Mary's place. In the *Medinger Andachtsbuch* (Medingen Prayerbook, first printed in 1485), the Cistercian nuns are told to reflect on the joy the chaste mother felt when she took her beautiful baby in her arms and pressed him to her breast.²² Likewise, in the *Puerperium Marianum* (Mary's Lying-In, first printed in 1601), worshippers are encouraged to sympathize with the Mother of God's feelings after childbirth. They should consider the abundant grace and joy with which Mary was overwhelmed at the sight of her son. The appeal leads to a prayer for affective participation in her motherhood: "Tell me, O holy mother, or let me feel what your heart, your mind, and your soul have felt" ("sag mir O heilige Mutter oder laß mich empfinden/ was als dann dein Hert / dein Gemüth vnd dein Seel empfunden habe").²³ The prayer request alternates with detailed descriptions of the intimate tenderness of mother and son. In the meditation on the Nativity *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu* (On the Tender Little Christ Child, first printed in 1565) readers are asked to visualize the intimate love with which Mary kisses the bright eyes and holy little ears of her son. In particular, those readers who find it difficult to focus on the

21 On the *Meditationes* as a "Drehbuch der Einbildungskraft" ("script of the power of imagination") and on the question of authorship, which was long attributed to Bonaventure, see Wolf, *Weihnachtsvision*, 74, 80, 86–88.

22 Andersen, "Das Kind sehen," 307.

23 [Mattspurger], *Puerperium Marianum*, 182; Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fols. [Tvjv–Tvijr], Vijr–v, Xijr.

child can take the mother as a model. They are encouraged to remember how Mary treated her beloved son. The infant Jesus is always approached via the ideal mother. By identifying with the Mother of God, women religious learn to develop loving feelings toward the Christ Child and to take on the role of mother.

The mystics' visions of pregnancy, lactation, and birth are the fruit of intense religious meditation and successful identification with Mary.²⁴ Lidwina of Schiedam's vision shows that the Mother of God is the measure of all body-related forms of female piety. In it, the mystic is transported to a wondrous place where she meets the Virgin Mary and encounters countless other virgins. As the time of Christ's birth draws near, Lidwina notices how her own breasts and those of all the other virgins swell. Each of them has exactly as much milk as the Mother of God once had. In her vision of the Nativity, Margaret Ebner enquires at length about the infant Jesus, how he came from heaven to earth, and how his mother experienced pregnancy and birth. Margaret is most interested in whether Mary's desire for kisses and other caresses was fulfilled. When the mystic takes on the role of the biological mother in her lactation vision, her thoughts are with Mary. She finds the presence of God so overwhelming that she wonders how a woman could bear it at all.

In many revelation stories, Mary invites women religious to share in her maternal joys. One night at Christmas, Adelheid Langmann of the Engeltal convent has a vision in which Mary appears at her bedside with her son and places the baby in her arms. The mystic is allowed to hold Jesus until Matins, marvelling at his incomparable beauty and even breastfeeding him, which brings her immense joy.²⁵ Two Dominican sisters at Katharinental see the Virgin and Child during the communal and individual prayers. As the sisters sing the Marian hymn *Ave stella*, Adelheid of St Gallen sees Mary walking through the choir with her child. She nods kindly to all the sisters until she reaches the singers and hands her son to each of them. Another sister is praying before the statue of the Virgin Mary, when the child in her arms suddenly comes to life. Jesus extends his little foot to Adelheid Othwins so that she can touch it and feel he is flesh and blood. As in all cases, contact

24 *Het leven van Liedewij*, chap. 29, 80–81; Ebner, "Offenbarungen," 99–102. On the imitation of Mary, see Drage Hale, "Rocking," 211–12.

25 Langmann, *Die Offenbarungen*, 66. Cf. Thali, *Beten*, 191–93.

with the holy child is fleeting. While the infant Jesus withdraws his foot from Adelheit, Mary reclaims her son in other visions.²⁶

Mystics who relive Mary's motherhood become role models themselves. By talking about their visions, they share their experiences with others and encourage them to follow suit. This structure of imitation characterizes the narrative of mystical motherhood in both form and content. For instance, Margaret Ebner's doubts as to whether she was really able to breastfeed the baby Jesus are dispelled by the story of another Dominican sister. Margaret is overjoyed to hear her nurse tell her about a dream that coincides with her own vision: the Christ Child figurine came to life as soon as she placed him on her breast. Both motherhood stories mirror each other and are thus regarded as proof of the other's veracity.

This observation from a single episode in Margaret's *Revelations* applies to the medieval sister-books as a whole.²⁷ Recurrences help to authenticate mystical experiences and reinforce the ideal of motherhood. Many sisters want to experience for themselves the joy that others have had with the baby Jesus. Two sisters in the *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch* even compete for motherhood. Cecilie von Winterthur sees Anne von Ramschwag in bed tenderly holding the baby Jesus and would like to take him in her own arms. However, Anne does not want to give up her beloved child so easily. The desire to become a mother thus arises from a desire to imitate.

The Urge to Be a Mother

Women feel an internal urge to be mothers, argues Daphne de Marneffe.²⁸ This contradicts the view that women face social pressure to enter motherhood. The psychotherapist admits that women's wishes are influenced by social norms, but she is convinced that there is a general feminine desire for motherhood. In their role as mothers, she argues, women are not subject to external forces but are acting as autonomous subjects. The ability to sensitively care for a child evokes feelings of joy, recognition, and self-worth.

The experience of ecstasy is integral to the medieval narrative. Many mystics emphasize the immense joy that they receive from their visions of motherhood. When she is breastfeeding, Margaret Ebner feels so filled with the divine presence that she can no longer perceive anything else and feels

²⁶ Meyer, *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, no. 20, 105–6; no. 53, 139–40.

²⁷ Ebner, "Offenbarungen," 90; Meyer, *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, no. 41, 130–31.

²⁸ De Marneffe, *Maternal Desire*, esp. 9.

completely overwhelmed. Mystics repeatedly use the topos of inability to express them in words to emphasize the greatness of their feelings.²⁹ Lidwina of Schiedam feels such joy that it cannot be fully perceived by any sensory organ or adequately depicted by any writing instrument. No eye could see her happiness, no ear could hear it, no heart could feel it, no tongue could pronounce it, no pen could describe it. The sweet rapture that Agnes Blannbekin feels during her mystical pregnancy is also described as incomparable and is explicitly distinguished from orgasm. Agnes does not feel lust, but a chaste delight, which she would not have exchanged for any pleasure in this world. Although the visions of pregnancy and labour are sometimes accompanied by severe physical pain, they are dominated by joy.

The ambivalence of parenthood has no part in the narrative of mystical motherhood. For the nuns, contact with the infant Jesus is always a source of maternal joy. It is never a burden for them to have to hold, breastfeed, or look after the Christ Child. Rather, they must take care not to neglect their monastic duties.³⁰ Ite von Hallau finds playing with the baby Jesus so enjoyable that she allows herself to be distracted from her work with herbs. When the bell rings, she has not completed her task, much to her own chagrin. Several visions in the *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch* address this implicit problem of mystical motherhood. They have a disciplinary function and are intended to show that the much-desired motherhood must not keep one from everyday duties. Those who act in “due obedience” and willingly renounce the presence of the Christ Child will be granted further maternal happiness. Adelheit von Spiegelberg, Adelheit die Huterin, and another sister can once again enjoy the presence of the baby Jesus in the refectory and kitchen. But the nameless sister, who does not want to break off her vision of motherhood, loses her imagined child. When she refuses another sister’s request, the object of her desire disappears. Shortly afterwards, she hears the child’s voice rebuking her for her unkindness. The desire to be a mother can endanger monastic life if the mystics are so taken up in it that they do not abide by the general community rules.

So, is the desire for motherhood a feminine “primal instinct” that women religious must take pains to keep in check? Even those scientists who emphasize the influence of biological factors reject this understanding of (in)fertility. There has long been a consensus in the social and cultural

29 Ebner, “Offenbarungen,” 88; *Het leven van Liedewij*, chap. 29, 80; *Leben und Offenbarungen der Agnes Blannbekin*, 407–9.

30 Meyer, *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, no. 2, 97; no. 18, 104; no. 24, 107–8; no. 27a, 109; nos. 27–28, 110–11.

sciences that all ideas about the body, gender, and sexuality are shaped by culture. “Clearly, human appetites are not expressed in pure form but rather are inflected by the intimate relationships and larger culture in which they are expressed,” admits Daphne de Marneffe.³¹ Millay Hyatt, who characterizes her longing for a child as a primal urge, also points out that our perceptions of our own bodies are always shaped by the desires, images, and stories of our ancestors. The female body cannot be thought of prediscursively, as Judith Butler makes clear, with reference to Michel Foucault. The desire for motherhood is therefore not an archaic drive but “an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self.”³²

Mystical motherhood is a genuinely literary phenomenon, insofar as the visions are recorded and handed down in writing, follow a basic narrative pattern, and are based on biblical and contemporary sources. Some visions of motherhood make explicit literary references. Dorothea von Montau receives a revelation in which her vision of pregnancy is legitimized by a written model. If St. Bridget had not already declared that a fetus was moving in her womb, Dorothea would not have been able to narrate anything similar. Her imitation of this pregnancy experience is combined with the gesture of outdoing it. Dorothea’s belly swells more than Bridget’s did, so she is able to report on it in more detail.³³ The fact that mystical phenomena can be triggered by the reception of literary works is illustrated in the *St Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*. In two vision stories, the sisters encounter the baby Jesus during their reading, with the body of the book acting as a kind of manger.³⁴ When she opens her book, Elsbeth Hainburgin sees the Christ Child wrapped in swaddling clothes between its pages. In turn, Anne von Ramschwag sees how he lies all naked before her, grasping his little feet with his hands. The Christian mother-child ideal thus proves to be a medial projection.

The link between literature and desire is particularly evident in the work of Margaret Ebner. As she writes her revelations down, her desire grows and becomes so strong that she would give her life for it to be fulfilled. She constantly longs for the baby Jesus, so that she is often unable to sleep at night or think about anything else when praying in the choir. Through

31 De Marneffe, *Maternal Desire*, 216; Hyatt, *Ungestillte Sehnsucht*, 23.

32 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 92.

33 Marienwerder, *Leben der heiligen Dorothea*, 365 (Septilium 1, 17).

34 Meyer, *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, nos. 40–41, 125–26, 128–29.

writing, Margaret recalls her mystical experiences, visualizes earlier visions, and reactivates the associated feelings. So, it is when she is writing that she is overcome with the greatest urge to be a mother.³⁵ Overwhelmed by this feeling, she presses her baby Jesus to her bare breast and finds fulfillment in the intimate touch. Writing and breastfeeding are analogous activities with which Margaret becomes a mother both to the Christ Child and to the readers of her revelations; she nourishes with milk and ink. As soon as she has taken the baby Jesus from his cradle and nursed him, another revelation flows from her pen. Even Margaret's mystical pregnancy is both a cause and a consequence of literary activity. What she forces out with great pain, violent contractions, and hundreds of cries is a theological speech that she later records. Margaret's spiritual labour shows that in mystical motherhood, body and text are inseparable.

Spiritual Parenthood: Thinking and Acting Maternally

In the stories venerating the child, motherhood is not rooted in the biological act but in the act of caring. Those who care for the Christ Child and whose life is centred on him become mothers. In the late Middle Ages, a specific form of devotional literature emerged that was intended to guide nuns toward spiritual motherhood. In reading it, pious women learned how they could provide the infant Jesus with everything he needed. Numerous activities that are necessary for the care and upbringing of biological children are listed and interpreted allegorically.

Motherhood as a Social Practice

One such devotional book on spiritual motherhood was printed in Dillingen in 1565.³⁶ Adam Walasser (ca. 1520–1581), an extraordinarily prolific edification writer, linguistically updated the older, Middle High German text, adding an introduction. Especially at Christmastide, he considers *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu* extremely useful for meditation on the birth of the Saviour. The stable, the manger, or the crib to be prepared for the holy child is the human heart. The baby Jesus grows and flourishes when his spiritual mother cultivates a godly way of life. Purity and chastity of mind, sisterly loyalty and love, peace, gentleness, and gratitude help one to lovingly care for the Christ Child.

35 Ebner, "Offenbarungen," 86, cf. 120–21. Cf. Quast, "'drücken und schreiben,'" esp. 301–4.

36 Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fols. Ciiijv–Oijv.

The message of the 160-page Christmas devotional can be summarized as follows: whoever cares for Jesus' wellbeing should avoid vices, renounce worldly pleasures, and strive for virtues. Yet spiritual motherhood is not reduced to banal moral teaching. The loving care is portrayed in far too much detail, with spiritual mothers constantly being urged to follow the example of biological mothers. In this way, pious women learn to care for a newborn's every need, from warm water for a bath to fortifying food; breast is best. A mother has to feed her baby again and again, so it gains weight properly.

Special attention is paid to rocking the baby's cradle. Walasser describes exactly which accessories are required for this: a small straw mattress and a pillow, clean swaddling cloths, a warm blanket, and a good swaddling band. If caring mothers want to put their children to sleep, they hang a cloth in front of the baby's face to keep out daylight, cold wind, or even gnats. To calm them down, mothers lay their hands on their children, rock them, and sing them to sleep. The vivid descriptions are always linked to allegorical interpretations, so that secular and spiritual motherhood are closely connected. For instance, Walasser interprets dangerous drafts as self-praise and the gnats as restless thoughts that disturbed the baby Jesus while he slept. All these behavioural instructions are held together by the idyllic image of a loving mother-child relationship; those who meditate on this are supposed to take the female lead. With devout desire, spiritual mothers should kiss, embrace, and lovingly carry around their beloved child. Like biological mothers, however, they are only allowed to have enjoy being with their child when they have nothing else to do.

In *Puerperium Marianum*, the Würzburg theology professor Daniel Mattsperger (1563–1607) even invites readers to sing a spiritual lullaby, though he stresses other tasks:³⁷ an infant must be swaddled tightly so that it does not develop physical deformities and fall out of the cradle. They should hang in the air and not stand on the floor so that no livestock or vermin can reach the baby. A baby may only be placed on its back, not on its face or side. The mother puts the baby to sleep by rocking the cradle, singing, or putting a finger in the child's mouth. What reads like a historical guide to infant care is repeatedly given a religious twist through allegorical interpretations. As the author makes clear, the Christ Child demands at least as much attention as a real baby.

Women religious are also encouraged to learn from secular women's strategies for combining housework and childcare: mothers make sure that

37 Mattsperger, *Puerperium Marianum*, 120–25.

the cradle keeps moving easily while they do manual labour nearby. With a long strap, the child can still be rocked from a distance. Mattsperger urges readers to always stay close to their little lord Jesus like a caring mother. He severely warns against placing the baby in the care of others, especially children. Spiritual mothers must always be concerned that something could happen to their infant Jesus. When the child cries, they should help and try to soothe him. Attentive mothers quickly realize when their little one needs anything and do not give in until they have found what is causing them distress. Likewise, pious women's thoughts should always revolve around the holy child.

The devotional literature differs from the motherhood visions in its imperative character. Its authors do not report on their inner vision and personal encounter with the infant Jesus but want to instruct others to achieve this. Thus, a specific concept of piety emerges, which I would like to call "motherhood theology." Both Mary and other mothers are held up as ideal role models for pious women. The origin of all motherliness remains strangely undefined. Mary also acts based on implicit norms, as is revealed in the *Puerperium Marianum*. Mattsperger notes that the Bible does not describe in detail how the Holy Virgin treated her child. He therefore advises readers to imagine everything exactly as it usually is. Like other caring mothers, Mary also picked up her son and laid him down, carried him around, cuddled him, and hugged and kissed him. Mary is therefore not the archetype but the image of motherhood. Nevertheless, through her the mother-child relationship is charged with such religious significance that it can appear as a woman's path to salvation. This chimes in with the Protestant doctrine of marriage and gender that women are destined to be wives and mothers,³⁸ but a decisive difference in the Catholic Reformation concepts of Walasser and Mattsperger should not be overlooked. In order to fulfill their religious destiny, women do not need to give birth but can be the mother of a spiritual child.

Literature and lifeworld are interwoven in the narrative of mystical motherhood in so many ways that nature and culture, biology and religion, everyday life and liturgy cannot be separated. The mystics' desire to be the mother of the infant Jesus is part of a theological model in which motherhood is regarded as a genuinely feminine form of piety. When writers of the medieval period and Catholic Reformation repeatedly show women religious the behaviour of biological mothers, they are of course not trying to sanctify

38 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 42–44.

the reproductive order and portray secular family relationships as superior. Rather, they imagine a maternal ideal to which wives and nuns should orient themselves in the same way. Motherhood is a social practice and an inner attitude characterized by mindfulness and care, love and tenderness. Therefore, not only do spiritual mothers learn from physical mothers, but also vice versa. It is difficult to say which group ultimately contributed more to the development of maternal feelings or gender-specific role models and social expectations. In any case, the desire of the one is inconceivable without the desire of the other.

Living Spiritually with a Child

The author of *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu* explains what religious life with a child means.³⁹ He synchronizes the monastic Liturgy of the Hours with the everyday duties of a mother and thus creates a daily program that is completely focused on the holy child. The nuns should think of the noble Christ Child when they hurry to night prayer. After all, every mother has to get up at night sometimes when she has a small child. In the morning, her first thought should be of her beloved child; may he accompany her all day so that she can dedicate her every thought, word, and deed to him. Spiritual mothers should constantly remind themselves of this pious wish throughout the day and thus contribute to its fulfillment. Prayer in choir is intended to remind them of how Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father. In the chapter and in confession, they should think of him and talk to him. During the reading at meals, they should imagine their little child, his blessed mother, and dear Joseph are present and talking about God. In bed at night, they can imagine the tenderness of the mother tucking in her child.

On the one hand, this spiritual care goes far beyond what would be appropriate for a biological baby. Every action is centred on the holy child, so that all day, every day, women religious can be completely absorbed in their role as mothers. Whatever they do, whether they remain silent or speak, pray or work, feel joy or sorrow, they should offer everything up to their child and understand it as an act of motherly love. On the other hand, the divinity of Christ goes far beyond the analogy of secular family relationships. The infant Jesus is always the object of adoration, which creates certain ambiguities in the mother-child relationship. The Son of God can be loved and cared for as a little child but not educated and chastised. He does not need to be taught table manners; instead, he is treated like an honoured

39 Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fols. Qv–Riiijr.

guest to whom the spiritual mother humbly submits. Before she starts eating herself, she should first offer her food to the infant Jesus and ask for his blessing. If she wants to drink, she should encourage him to do so first.

For nuns, continuous dialogue with the Christ Child is a common practice. The frequent devotional exercises permeate everyday life—especially during Advent and Christmas—enabling visionary encounters with the divine. This is why the Dominican sisters of Katharinental see the infant Jesus in all sorts of situations: during the consecration at mass, at the altar and in the choir, in the kitchen and at table, in the workhouse, and in bed.⁴⁰

Spiritual living with a child was not only for nuns. Adam Walasser explains that the infant Jesus is especially entrusted into the care of women religious, who are more suited to this than anyone else. Nevertheless, two other groups may be considered as foster mothers: pious women who maintain their chastity in the world and all believers who preserve their inner purity and remain virginal in their faith.⁴¹ Spiritual motherhood therefore represents a clear alternative to the secular family model: renouncing sexuality and reproduction creates the best conditions to devote oneself to the Christ Child. The biological sex of spiritual mothers is secondary.

Although mystical motherhood is primarily a feminine phenomenon, there is a masculine version of the narrative. The devotional *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu* tells the story of a Carthusian monk from Trier who focuses his daily exercises and prayers on bringing up the infant Jesus.⁴² In his cell, he sets up his own table with a little plate and spoon, asks the Christ Child to sit down at mealtimes, places the best morsels in front of him, and encourages him to eat. Veneration of the holy child follows the regular pattern until intellectual doubts disturb the spiritual family relationship. The monk begins to find his devotional exercises tiresome; they seem nonsensical, even naive. This man has lost interest in being the father of the baby Jesus. The point of the story is not that caring is devalued as vain child's play. Rather, the criticism of "masculine reason" is invalidated by the divine child proving the skeptic wrong. After the Carthusian has stopped doing his exercises for three days, at night he hears the voice of little child, calling "dear father, dear father" (*Vätterlin Vätterlin*).⁴³ When the monk wants to know who is talking

40 Meyer, *St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch*, nos. 2, 18–19, 24, 27a, 27–28, 31, 40–41, 43, 47. On eucharistic miracles, see Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 129–30.

41 Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fols. Ciiijv–Ciiijv.

42 Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fols. [Qiiijv]–Rv.

43 Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fol. Rr.

to him and what the matter is, the Christ Child reveals himself. Crying, he complains of hunger and neglect. This convinces the monk that his previous actions were meaningful. He continues the devotional exercises with joy and gladly accepts spiritual fatherhood.

However, this anecdote and others like it do not make spiritual parenthood as attractive for men as it was for women. Does this mean that the desire to care for a child is specifically feminine? This returns us to the question of how biological and cultural factors affect longing for children, and thus to the Christ Child figurines in convents.

No Dolls

The function of the “soul child” is clear in the context of devotional literature, especially as the authors themselves refer to the widespread Christmas custom of rocking the Christ Child. The figurines are intended to help nuns take the perspective of Mary at the birth of Christ. Spiritual mothers’ duty of care can be exercised using the figurines, but because of their religious significance, this interaction with the infant Jesus is anything but playing with dolls.⁴⁴ Nuns should not act out Mary’s motherhood but rather empathize with and understand it. This difference between imaginative imitation and fictitious staging becomes clear when compared with a Nativity play: while the actors take on the roles of biblical figures and act as if they were Mary and Joseph, shepherds and kings, the worship of the baby Jesus is not fiction.

When the sisters feed, clothe, and bathe their figurines, in their mind’s eye, they see Christ.⁴⁵ During this devotional exercise, some, like Margaret Ebner, experience that their baby Jesus suddenly comes to life. The founder of the Brixen Tertiary Sisters, Maria Hueber (1653–1705), has a vision of her child stirring and putting his arms around her neck. Margaret of Zurich experiences how the figurine changes during the Töss sisters’ shared Advent ritual. Jesus appears to her in the bathtub when she is allowed to bathe the convent’s Christ Child for her spiritual comfort, causing her to weep profusely. Her tear turns into a golden button that falls into the water. But in it sits a delicate child, happily splashing about.

⁴⁴ Cf. Drage Hale, “Rocking,” 220–21. A clear distinction is also made in terms of terminology: Margaret Ebner never uses the Middle High German term for “doll” (*tocke*), but always speaks of a material representation (*bilde*).

⁴⁵ De la Iglesia y Nikolaus, “Heilige Puppen?,” 91; Stagel, *Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töss*, 36.

Remarkably, the “little comforters” (*Trösterlein*) did not only emerge among nuns in late medieval and early modern convents. Wives and mothers also possessed such figurines, which again disproves the thesis of suppressed drives. In the fifteenth century, figurines of the Christ Child were part of the usual religious artifacts of convents and town houses, parish and cathedral churches, and were incorporated into ritual acts.⁴⁶ In Augsburg, women brought their personal figurines into church for public ceremonies of rocking the Christ Child, where they were passed from hand to hand, caressed, and danced around. In Florence, women received a figurine as a gift when they got married, and a “bambino” was often passed on from mother to daughter. The Christ Child figurines were intended for women of marriageable age—regardless of whether they could hope to have children of their own or not. Women inside and outside the convent walls were thus equally obliged to play the role of spiritual mothers, whereas neither children nor men were ever given such figurines.

In the early modern period, male scholars began to criticize the Christ Child tradition.⁴⁷ Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445–1510) accused nuns of using all the “doll stuff” (*buppen werck*) only for their own amusement and warned of undesirable side effects. If you spent too much time with the baby Jesus, you could also find yourself developing other forms of feminine desire. The reformers rejected the Christ Child figurines for other reasons. On the one hand, spiritual motherhood no longer fitted in with their ideal of family; women were to marry and bear children instead of worshipping the infant Jesus behind convent walls. On the other hand, Protestant theologians considered it a transgression of boundaries in the God-human relationship that Christ should be cared for and represented by a figurine. Martin Luther contemptuously labelled the custom of lulling children as “monkey business” (*Affenspiel*), and Thomas Naogeorg (1508–1563) even called it idolatry. In response the Catholic reformers defended spiritual motherhood. Why should believers not worship the infant Jesus when there are numerous models for this in the New Testament and in church history?

46 Men only interacted with figurines of the infant Jesus in liturgical contexts. Heinrich Seuse venerated the child during a Marian procession at Candlemas, and in the convent at Medingen his veneration was even celebrated like the consecration during mass. The priest took the child from the altar and lifted it up to the sound of the bells. See Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften*, 31; Klack-Eitzen, *Heilige Röcke*, 59–60; Klapisch-Zuber, “Holy Dolls,” 311–13; Tripps, *Das handelnde Bildwerk*, 68, 79, 82–83.

47 Geiler von Kaysersberg, “Der Haß im Pfeffer,” fol. Cijr; Neumann, *Geistliches Schauspiel*, vol. 2, no. 3738, 900; no. 3750, 906.

“For were the child not born, we would all still be forlorn” (“Dann were das Kindlin nit geboren/ so weren wir gewüßlich all verloren”), as our salvation would not have come, argued Adam Walasser.⁴⁸ However, the dispute about the Christ Child was more a battle of the sexes than of denominations. Protestant women continued to cradle and dress their figurines until this was forbidden by decree.⁴⁹ In Catholic convents, women continued to look after their “soul children” until the Enlightenment.

Prospects

In the medieval mystical narrative, motherhood is understood as a relationship that is established through religious, not sexual, acts. Entering a convent did not mean giving up on family relationships or life with a child but signalled a decision for spiritual motherhood. The dichotomy between fertility and infertility is also overcome in this narrative by the fact that parenthood takes different forms, not all of which are dependent on biological reproduction. The visions of pregnancy and breastfeeding are about experiences of the greatest possible physical intimacy, which fulfill the desire for mystical unity with the divine. Even male mystics and authors share these spiritual encounters, albeit much less frequently.⁵⁰ The longing to reproduce, to see oneself in one’s offspring, is not part of this desire; rather, the nuns want to encounter God in the holy child.

The origin of all stories in which pious people honour the infant Jesus is the Gospel of the Nativity. For Mary’s role as a mother, care is crucial, whereas conception and birth are miraculously passed over. This is why the man in the Holy Family remains a marginalized figure.⁵¹ *Imitatio Mariae* gave rise to a devotion specific to women in the Middle Ages, which centred on caring for the holy child. As Caroline Walker Bynum puts it, women religious took on the usual tasks of feminine care but discovered “that Mary and the Christchild appreciated their services more than did the whining children, disgruntled husbands and embittered beggars of more mundane situations.”⁵² Spiritual motherhood was oriented toward family relationships

48 Walasser, *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu*, fol. Aiijr.

49 Neumann, *Geistliches Schauspiel*, vol. 2, no. 3705, 877.

50 The breastfeeding visions of male mystics are linked to the idea of a female soul, cf. Rublack, “Female Spirituality,” 42; Thali, *Beten*, 139–41.

51 Koschorke, *The Holy Family*.

52 Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 198.

in the world and impacted on them. The role of mother was valued because it was charged with religious significance, but women were restricted to caring for children. In this way, mystical motherhood consolidated social concepts of gender, contributed to the spread of the feminine ideal of a caring mother, and encouraged tender feelings toward children.⁵³

Taking my critical approach to normativity, the feminine “primal instinct” to become a mother proves to be a projection of religious longings. Hysteria is only a risk from the Freudian perspective, which degrades the female subject of desire to an object of male psychoanalysis. The mystics did not want to be healed or sexually liberated but felt pleasure in their spiritual motherhood. This mother mysticism lives on in a secularized form today. Motherhood is perceived as the ultimate joy that gives a meaning to life, which extends beyond the individual. If the quest for unity no longer applies to the divine, but to a physical child, the medieval narrative is skewed. For medieval mystics, spiritual motherhood was an extraordinary experience that they could not access themselves. Yet, modern reproductive technology creates the impression that women can fulfill their own longing for a child. What medieval mysticism regarded as grace modern medicine presents as feasible. The pressure on childless women (and their partners) is subtly increasing, so that some feel they must expend all means of fertility treatment. Ways of life are hierarchized, and childless women are devalued as selfish, deficient, or even hysterical. But even biological mothers are not immune to criticism; they are expected to put their children first but not care for them too much. Women whose lives do not revolve around their children are considered bad mothers; women whose lives do, are denigrated for helicopter parenting.

53 Klapisch-Zuber (“Holy Dolls,” 328–29) reverses the assumption that the veneration of the infant Jesus testifies to a new appreciation of children. She proposes that readers trace “in the ritualization of their desire for a child [...] the origin, not only of a pedagogy of pious practices, but of an apprenticeship in what we call maternal attitudes.”