Chapter 2

DANGEROUS THIRD PARTIES

A CHILD AT ANY PRICE

SIBYLLE LEWITSCHAROFF (1954–2023) caused a scandal at the Staatsschauspiel (State Playhouse) in Dresden with her speech *Von der Machbarkeit* (On Feasibility).[1] The award-winning German writer was highly negative about assisted conception techniques and warned that it was dangerous to overstep boundaries. Lewitscharoff thus rejected the dominant modern narrative of (in)fertility: that reproductive medicine helps couples with an unfulfilled longing for children and relieves them of their suffering. Instead, she constructed a story of unscrupulous people who want to have or facilitate having a child at any price.

Much earlier, too, in medieval narrative literature, the prevailing feeling toward those who are not content with religious methods is skepticism. My second narrative is about what can happen when divine help fails to materialize. Some couples are not satisfied with the vague hope that their longing for a baby will perhaps be miraculously fulfilled at some point but seek their own solutions. In so doing, they violate the basic tenet of reproductive theology, which is to practise patience and trust in divine grace. Helping oneself can be told as a story of religious disobedience, dangerous seduction, skillful deception, or sexual violence. People who put having a child above all else violate religious and ethical principles; they are vulnerable to being manipulated by a number of knowledgeable but shady characters.

Medieval stories of infertility basically have a dyadic structure: a husband and wife long for an heir; the childless turn to God in supplication. In the narrative of the dangerous third party, a two-way relationship—either God-human or man-woman—is broken open and extended into a triangle. This expansion of the personal relationship is perceived as a threat per se. Conception is neither the accidental product of sexual intercourse between spouses nor the result of fervent prayer, but it is enabled with the assistance of a third figure. This has far-reaching consequences for the family order, the perceived value of the would-be parents, and the status of the child.

1 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede." For criticism see, e.g., Schalansky, "Ungeheuerliche Hetze."

Fertile Deputies: Problematic Positions

The easiest way to fulfill fruitless longing for a baby is to change sexual partners. A married couple can make use of the procreative assistance of a third party, whether the infertile partner delegates his or her reproductive task or the fertile partner acts without the knowledge and will of the other. In the Middle Ages, however, this procedure was strictly limited by Christian church and inheritance law.[2] A child was only recognized as the heir if its conception within marriage was beyond question. According to the canonists, childlessness did not justify divorce or infidelity; on the contrary, all adultery was considered a serious sin. Therefore, assisted conception had to be carefully concealed, which was much easier to do if the man was infertile. The fact that the medieval literature includes tales of fertile women serving as surrogates at all has to do with well-known Bible stories and their reception in the vernacular.

Biblical and Historical Surrogate Mothers

In ancient Rome, around the Mediterranean, and in the Middle East, different models of marriage and family prevailed than in Christian Europe, notes historical anthropologist Jack Goody in *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983).[3] Men in these societies had more options to compensate for infertility because polygamy and concubinage were permitted; the forefathers of Israel did not live according to the ecclesiastical marriage laws of the medieval European aristocracy. The best-known biblical story of surrogate motherhood is told in the book of Genesis (Gen. 16) about the three-way relations between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. In the narrative of divine help, reference is often made to Sarah's late motherhood, whereas Abraham's earlier recourse to an unauthorized reproductive strategy is usually omitted. Yet the authors of early German Bible poetry translated Hagar's story into the vernacular without condemning it as illegitimate or immoral.

The *Frühmittelhochdeutsche Genesis* (Early Middle High German Genesis, second half of the eleventh century) leaves no doubt that the cause of infertility lay with the woman. While in the Latin Vulgate translation (late fourth century), Jerome only writes that Sarah bore no children, the German translator states that "she was barren" (*diu was umbare*).[4] This creates a fun-

2 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 91–111.

3 Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage*.

4 *Die frühmittelhochdeutsche Genesis*, W1687.

damental tension between God's promise of salvation and the patriarch's current family. God has promised Abraham countless descendants, but, even when they reach the promised land, God allows his marriage to remain childless. The initiative to overcome their infertility ultimately comes from Sarah. Ten years after her arrival in Canaan, she speaks openly with Abraham about her difficulty conceiving. At this point, Sarah has accepted that she will not have a baby. She does not ask for divine mercy but looks for a human solution. Her Egyptian maid Hagar is to conceive and serve as the birth mother of their child. In the Vulgate, Sarah hopes that she will have sons of her own in this way; in the German *Genesis*, she wishes for heirs for Abraham. Sarah views Hagar as a mere surrogate, claiming motherhood for herself in one case, whereas all that counts in the other is fatherhood. Sarah steers the entire reproduction process. Abraham does not comment on their plan but implements it immediately. For him, therefore, a human surrogate does not contradict God's promise to him nor do the authorial narrators criticize it.

As soon as Hagar realizes that she is pregnant, the relationship between the two women changes. As in the story of Anne and Joachim, (in)fertility is a powerful force that threatens the domestic hierarchy. Her pregnancy strengthens Hagar's self-confidence; she despises her mistress because of her infertility, but Sarah defends herself against this degradation. In the *Vulgate*, she complains to her husband, demanding that he take responsibility and make a decision. When Abraham takes Sarah's side, she treats her enslaved maid so badly that Hagar runs away before the birth. Sarah's strategy of using another woman to become a mother has failed. Although—commanded by an angel—Hagar returns to her masters and bears a son, Sarah never takes on the role of his mother. Instead, she perceives Hagar and Ishmael as disruptive factors, and once Sarah has a son of her own, she ensures that they are driven away.

Other surrogate motherhoods in the book of Genesis are less conflictual. Rachel and her sister Leah have a veritable childbirth contest for the love of their husband Jacob (Gen. 30:3–13). When the childless Rachel sees her sister giving birth to son after son, she introduces her enslaved maid Bilhah to Jacob. Rachel asserts her claim to this longed-for baby by performing a ritual act. Rachel demands that Bilhah bear upon her knees so that motherhood can be transferred to her with the act of birth. But the pain and dangers of childbirth are outsourced to another woman's body. Surrogate motherhood works twice as planned for Rachel: Bilhah gives birth to two sons for her mistress.

In the early Middle High German version, the narrator reports on the overwhelming joy of the social mother.[5] Rachel's grateful prayer in the Vulgate shows that she makes no distinction between her own bodily and surrogate motherhood. Her claim to the sons is documented in the names Rachel gives them (Dan, "[God] judged [me]," and Naphtali, "I have prevailed"), which allude to her history of (in)fertility. The feelings of the birth mother are never discussed. Bilhah is not allowed to comment on the conception, birth, and parenthood of the sons. She and Zilpah, who serves as a surrogate to Leah twice, disappear from the story without a word. The surrogate mothers enable both sisters to increase their fertility without jeopardizing their domestic life together. The family community is already so disturbed by the competition between two the wives that the third and fourth women calm the situation down.

In *Kinder machen* (Making Children, 2014) the German cultural scientist Andreas Bernard aptly characterizes surrogate motherhood as "simultaneously the most modern and most archaic form of assisted reproduction."[6] He suspects that this fertility strategy has been used repeatedly over the centuries, even if literary and historical sources tell us little about it. This silence could simply be due to the lack of historical research on childlessness, as the case of the wealthy Italian merchant couple Francesco di Marco Datini (1335–1410) and Margherita di Dominico Bandini (1360–1423) suggests. An extensive collection of letters shows that Margherita never got pregnant despite a range of medical, religious, and magical treatments, but the fertility of other women ensured that her marriage did not remain childless.[7] Whether Francesco intended to impregnate one of his wife's maids from the outset, the sources do not say. Yet, there is every indication that he was only too happy to acknowledge his paternity and take responsibility for his illegitimate son: He gave Ghirigora a rich dowry, married her off in the first months of her pregnancy, took charge of her child, had it baptized, hired a wetnurse, and financed the baby's basic needs: nappies, blankets, cushions. If Francesco had really wanted a fertile surrogate to make him a father, his first attempt was short-lived; the boy died at six months. Only his second child, presumably conceived with an enslaved woman, survived, was

5 *Die frühmittelhochdeutsche Genesis*, W2668.

6 Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 283. See also Bernard, "Die Leihmutter," 35–56.

7 Origo, *The Merchant of Prato*, 161–63; Byrne and Congdon, "Mothering"; Toepfer, *Infertility*, 74–75.

taken into the family household at the age of six, and lovingly cared for by Margherita as her own daughter.

Compared to surrogacy in biblical and historical practice, a lot has changed today. The disruptive influence of third parties is minimized by two factors: firstly, surrogates are not part of the would-be parents' household and, secondly, assisted conception is fragmented. As a rule, surrogates nowadays receive fertilized eggs from other women, whereas Hagar, Bilhah, Zilpah, and Ghirigora were directly involved in all stages of reproduction, from sex to pregnancy and birth. As in the past, however, the relationship between the birth mother and biological mother in the modern age remains hierarchical. Surrogates are often less privileged in terms of their status, origin, and property. In the book of Genesis, the enslaved women had to obey the commands of their mistresses, and in the Casa Datini the master of the house had the right to organize family relationships as he saw fit. Finally, in the present day wealthy people use reproductive services of women with a lower standard of living. In most European countries commercial surrogacy is considered immoral and prohibited, but it is permitted in Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia, as well as in India and some states in the USA, so many people seeking a surrogate travel abroad.

When surrogacy is criticized today, this is mainly due to the social, economic, and financial differences between the contracting parties. This rejection does not have to be as categorical as Sibylle Lewitscharoff's; she describes this practice as "[a]bsolutely horrific."[8] In her words, it "is the height of repulsiveness" that "women from poor countries have to be used as birthing machines." In retrospect, surrogate mothers have also regretted their work as "reproductive prostitutes," and academics have made a nuanced case against the "colonization of bodies."[9] The advertising language of fertility clinics conceals the underlying power relations and gives the impression that a woman is willingly and selflessly making her body available. The verb "donate" also suggests that both egg and sperm donors support childless couples out of pure idealism. This term conceals the economic conditions on which fertility centres, sperm banks, and surrogate agencies are based.

8 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede."

9 Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 276, 278.

Premodern Seed Donors

In medieval narrative literature, the fact that seed producers pursue massive, vested interests is clear. An unfulfilled longing for children offers men the opportunity to penetrate a marriage and a woman's body. By pretending to help, they can sleep with a woman who is otherwise unattainable. To mark the structural analogy—but also the historical distance from modern reproductive technology to premodern theories of reproduction—I use the term "seed donor." Unlike a sperm donor, the seed donor produces and donates the semen during sexual intercourse with the would-be mother. Reproduction and sexuality were increasingly decoupled only in the twentieth century. Artificial insemination allows sperm to be introduced into a woman's vagina without sex, which was decisive for the moral acceptance of sperm donation.

The complex intertwining of need and coercion, willingness to help and abuse of trust, assistance and self-interest is illustrated in the Hellenistic *Alexander Romance* by Pseudo-Callisthenes (third century), the Latin versions of the *Historia de preliis* (The Wars of Alexander, twelfth century), and the Middle High German versions.[10] The birth of Alexander the Great involves all sides of the triangle with a dangerous third party: a childless couple who need an heir, an unhappy woman who wants to get pregnant at all costs, and an outsider who demands sex in order to fulfill this wish. In most versions, Alexander's biological father is the Egyptian King Nectanabus—a scholar of astrology, mathematics, and all kinds of magic. He flees his home, arrives at the court of Philip of Macedon, and falls in love with his beautiful wife Olympias. His strategy of conquering the queen by impressing her with his knowledge pays off: in a one-to-one conversation, Olympias confides in him about her fears of infertility. Nectanabus comforts her that she will have a child with another partner. Concealing his own desire, he claims that one of the most powerful gods wants to sleep with her and give her a baby.

In the thirteenth-century German Alexander romances, the queen's inability to conceive upends the balance of power. Nectanabus is initially presented as a suffering lover, not as an overpowering helper. As is customary in the literature of courtly love, *minne* is depicted as a violent affect that bursts in on characters from without, leading to self-alienation and hugely limiting their ability to think and feel. Nectanabus in the *Alexander* by Rudolf

10 My analysis is based on the following texts: *Historia Alexandri Magni*; *Das Buch von Alexander*; Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*; Ulrich von Eschenbach [i.e., Etzenbach], *Alexander*.

Figure 2. "Alexander's conception." Detail from a miniature by Jean de Griese (ca. 1340) in the *Romance of Alexander*, 17 × 12 cm. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodleian 264, part 1, fol. 2v. Reproduced by permission of akg-images GmbH, Berlin. Note that this image is not covered by the book's CC licence. Further reproduction of this image without the copyright holder's permission is prohibited.

von Ems (before 1235, 1240–1254?) does everything in his power to free himself from his suffering and win Olympias. All his happiness, joy, and sanity depend on her.[11] The relationship between the lovesick man and the virtuous married woman only changes when the category (in)fertility enters the game. Once the queen has asked for help with conceiving, Nectanabus can exert power over her. He explains to her that she can get pregnant, and how. Rudolf von Ems emphasizes the ambivalent role Nectanabus plays in the sexual act, as both fertile saviour and sexual beneficiary.[12] While a woman who longs for a child chooses a female stand-in, or surrogate, she controls the reproduction process; but when a male stand-in, or seed donor, is involved, he takes the lead. Rudolf comments that Nectanabus's will steers the whole process—the queen consents, but the king does not know.

With his reproductive seduction, Nectanabus achieves in one night what Philip is denied: he and Olympias conceive a child. A miniature by Flemish illuminator Jehan de Grise (ca. 1340) shows the moment of conception (Fig. 2). The picture is one of a series of four images on a full page illustrating the legend of Alexander's birth. A crowned figure lies on a green-grey four-poster bed facing away to one side; above her, in the centre, hovers a pink dragon with outstretched wings. The pregnancy is symbolically announced by the ball of fabric pointing down from the canopy. New York art historian Susan Koslow (1986) notes that this motif is a sign of pregnancy and incarnation.[13] This "curtain sack" hangs directly in between the couple, contrasted clearly against the red background during Alexander's conception. The human nature of the seed donor cannot be seen because Nectanabus has transformed himself before his nighttime visit. Wearing an ermine-trimmed cloak and his crown, the king leads the group of figures on the right, but he is unable to make sense of what is happening. He points to the place of conception with his index finger but turns his head questioningly to his companions.

Priest Lambrecht, who wrote the first German *Alexanderroman* (ca. 1155/60) considered the ancient story of (in)fertility to be highly problematic. It cannot have pleased the cleric that Olympias is supposed to have conceived not with divine help but through the practice of magic. Lambrecht therefore rejected the narrative of the dangerous third party and severely criticized its mediators: "evil liars" (*bose lugenâre*) claimed that Alexander

11 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, vv. 505–6.

12 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, v. 822. On Nectanabus's wishes, see v. 845.

13 Koslow, "The Curtain-Sack."

was the son of a sorcerer. Lambrecht asserts that the hero was really the son of Philip of Macedon and creates an unbroken genealogical line; in his version, biological and social paternity coincide.[14] Parentage is so important to him that he later rails against the "evil liars" who claim that Nectanabus is Alexander's biological father. This attempt to erase the dangerous third party from history failed. Later German retellings of the story retain the questionable circumstances of Alexander's birth.

Throughout the medieval stories of (in)fertility, male assistance is viewed with ambivalence: on the one hand, a third party's virility is indispensable for reproduction; on the other, it is a threat to dynastic continuity, gender-specific honour, social order, and marital loyalty. The most important rule of this narrative is therefore: if you conceive with external help, do not talk about it. In the *Alexander* by Ulrich von Etzenbach (before 1290) the procedure is conducted with the utmost discretion. The seed donor himself ensures that his involvement remains undetected. Nectanabus only communicates secretly with Olympias and swiftly leaves her bedchamber. The narrator explicitly praises him for this cleverness.[15] On conception, the seed donor has fulfilled his function and must disappear from the story.

Such strategies of concealment and disguise also characterize the behaviour of would-be parents today. The eradication of the third party, as depicted in medieval narrative literature, became key to the business model of sperm banks. The sperm donor serves, as Andreas Bernard aptly phrases it, as an "agent in the secret service of reproductive medicine."[16] He provides material for procreation, sets life stories in motion, but himself remains invisible. Although sperm donation no longer carries the stigma of adultery, very few of those involved know the identity of their donor. It was only in July 2018 that a law came into force in Germany regulating the right to know one's own parentage through a central register of sperm donors. Since then, children have been able to obtain information about their biological fathers from the age of sixteen. For a long time, fertility clinics warned against making the conception process public for fear it would destroy the unity of the family.

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14 Lambrecht chooses a two-pronged defence strategy: First, he defames those who deny Philip's biological paternity. Second, he reinforces the family connections by tracing the genealogy from father to grandfather and from mother to uncle. Lambrecht, *Alexanderroman*, Vorauer Alexander, vv. 71–88, 231–34, at 71.

15 Ulrich von Eschenbach, *Alexander*, v. 764.

16 Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 77–123, esp. 81, 102, at 78. On the new legal regulation of sperm donation see Bundesministerium der Justiz, "Samenspenderregistergesetz."

The medieval heroic epic also shows that the appearance of a seed donor can threaten the family order. In *Ortnit* (before 1350), the eponymous protagonist only learns when he reaches marriageable age that he is not the biological son of the deceased King of Lombardy. When he meets the stranger who conceived him, he cannot categorize him biologically at all. Ortnit first thinks the dwarf King Alberich is a child and wishes to be the father of the beautiful little fellow. The imaginary reversal of the succession testifies to the danger posed by a seed donor. The disruptive third party is not easy to integrate into the family and shakes its foundations. The usual hierarchies collapse when Ortnit's would-be son turns out to be his biological father. Modern fears that sperm banks and surrogate agencies will speed the destruction of traditional family structures are imaginatively anticipated in medieval literature. Due to his small stature, the seed donor in *Ortnit* has the outward appearance of a different, monstrous figure that in no way corresponds to courtly ideals.

Ortnit soon sees that his counterpart is not a child who can be controlled. They fight, and during the struggle Alberich gets progressively stronger and heavier. He also intellectually betters the protagonist; he is able to defeat Ortnit and confront him with the dark family secret on his own terms: "However big you think you are, you are still my child!" ("wie gros aber ir euch dunket, so seit ir doch mein kind").[17] After revealing himself as biological father, Alberich temporarily takes on the role of social father. He accompanies Ortnit on a dangerous bride-quest and helps him to win a pagan princess as his wife. Yet, when Ortnit faces his most difficult battle against a monstrous dragon, Alberich leaves his son alone, which leads to his unheroic, tragicomic death: the exhausted hero falls asleep and is fed to the dragon's hatchlings, who suck him out of his armour. The seed donor is an unreliable father figure, as he withdraws his support from his son for no apparent reason. With Ortnit's death, the royal dynasty comes to an end. Assisted procreation is not enough to permanently secure the genealogical order.

The influence of the seed donor in medieval literature extends further than that of the sperm donor today. He incorporates two roles that have increasingly diverged in reproductive medicine: the superior role of provider of a medical remedy and the participating role of sperm producer.[18] In Niccolò Machiavelli's comedy *La Mandragola* (The Mandrake, printed

17 *Otnit*, stanza 164, v. 4. See also Störmer-Caysa, "Ornits Mutter," 305–6.

18 Comparable role conflicts can be found in the early history of sperm donation, when conception and sex had been decoupled, but medical assistance and sperm production were still intertwined. Until the 1960s, gynaecologists commissioned

1524) the dangerous third party poses as a doctor.[19] By including this work, I expand my corpus of narrative literature to include the genre of drama due to its relevance. While in most of my literary sources (in)fertility is a side issue, limited to one episode and often affecting marginal characters, the entire plot of *La Mandragola* revolves around longed-for parenthood. Callimaco has fallen in love with the beautiful Florentine Lucrezia, who is married to Nicia, a rich lawyer. Once again, a couple's childlessness provides the decisive weak point for manipulating spouses and satisfying sexual desire. While medical knowledge plays no role at all in courtly narrative literature, Machiavelli incorporates contemporary remedies into his drama for comic effect. Nicia first wants to take a healing bath so that, after six years of marriage, his wife can finally give birth to his longed-for sons. The attempt fails because the doctors cannot agree. Everyone recommends a different type of bath, so Nicia doubts their competence and compares the doctors to a cawing flock of crows.

The lawyer's ardent wish for heirs gives his rival intimate access to the woman he desires. With Latin phrases, possibly healing potions, and assurances his remedies will work, Callimaco gains Nicia's trust. A concoction made from mandrake is said to provide a remedy for infertility that has helped countless other noble ladies to become pregnant. According to the self-proclaimed doctor, the effective fertility potion has only one disadvantage: whoever next sleeps with the woman who takes it must die. Nicia is so desperate for a child that another man's death is no obstacle, so Callimaco is able to betray him. With the knowledge and even express wish of her husband to divert the side effects of the mandrake, Callimaco is allowed to sleep with Lucrezia. The clever lover poses as a selfless helper and is rewarded for the fertility treatment.

The wonderworker Nectanabus, the dwarfish King Alberich, and the quack doctor Callimaco differ from the biblical maidens Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah not only in that they belong to different genres and narrative traditions. In the fertility hierarchy, the power of men and women is completely different. Anyone who has a female body at their disposal—regardless of gender—is in a superior position. Potent men take on the task of procreation voluntarily while fertile women are forced to reproduce. (In)fertility is a category that reinforces hierarchies within and between genders.

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medical students or junior doctors to produce sperm. See Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 208–9.

19 Machiavelli, "Mandragola,". For the mandrake's role in fertility, see 197, and Gen. 30:14–16.

Distressed Women: Moral Standards for Would-Be Mothers

Women with infertile husbands face a dilemma. On the one hand, they are expected to be fertile and bear children. As in historical reality, female medieval rulers in fictional romances are threatened with dismissal if they fail to reproduce. So, Olympias fears that Philip will cast her out and make someone else his queen.[20] On the other hand, women are expected to be loyal to their husbands and not commit adultery. In the narrative of the dangerous third party, the duty to reproduce and the ideal of fidelity inevitably collide. The authors of the Alexander romances resolve this conflict differently, but all endeavour to exonerate the queen. They either portray Olympias as a victim of deceit and deception or emphasize her virtue.

Guilt and Desire

The Queen of Macedon adheres to the courtly ideal in many respects: In Rudolf von Ems's *Alexander*, Olympias is famed for her nobility, beauty, courtly manner, and chastity.[21] The narrator stresses the latter virtue above all and thus writes against literary tradition. By repeatedly mentioning that the queen strives to preserve her purity, he removes the basis for the accusation of adultery: Olympias is above suspicion that she might get involved with another man out of base, sexual motives. Ulrich von Etzenbach also praises the protagonist for her noble origins, outstanding beauty, feminine virtue, and chastity. Further, he emphasizes her close bond with Philip; never was there a woman who loved her husband more.[22] In both German romances, Olympias proves her loyalty by exemplary behaviour. When Nectanabus declares his unexpressed love for her and begs for release from this agony, the chaste queen rejects him. In Ulrich's version, she confesses to her husband and would rather die than commit adultery. She accuses her suitor of abusing his position as a guest, betraying the king, and trying to steal her honour. Olympias only departs from these moral principles when Nectanabus reframes his argument. In view of her infertility problem, she

20 In the *Historia de preliis*, the queen refers to the rumour of an imminent separation without justifying this with her infertility. It was not until the Middle Ages that this motif was developed. On the precarious situation of infertile women in Germanic marriage law cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 92.

21 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, vv. 430–33, 445–50. On withdrawal, see vv. 567–68.

22 Ulrich von Eschenbach, *Alexander*, vv. 414–6245. On the declaration of love and Olympias' rejection see vv. 414–624.

no longer sees sex as a violation of the principle of marital fidelity, but as a legitimate way to conceive.

The queen's behaviour is excused by Nectanabus' deception; she can barely see through his reproductive seduction strategy. Nectanabus presents sex as an act of heavenly grace solely for the purpose of conception. The decisive criterion for distinguishing assistance with procreation from ordinary infidelity is therefore the nature of the desire: is the would-be mother's motivation sexual or reproductive? The medieval stories of (in)fertility precisely plot the boundaries between guilt and innocence. Despite all attempts at differentiation, the presumably male authors find it difficult to approve of a stranger assisting in procreation. Rudolf von Ems excuses Olympias by saying that she is only undergoing this reproductive procedure for her husband's sake; but the price she pays for Philip's favour is too high. Rudolf's critical stance may well reflect the fact that separating reproduction, sex, and desire is far from easy. In his version, Olympias quickly discovers who has tricked her into having sex and falls in love with the "heart stealer" (*Minnedieb*).[23]

For Ulrich von Etzenbach, the queen's choice is even more problematic. Although his Olympias neither laments her childlessness nor has reason to fear for her crown, she is prepared to commit adultery in order to get pregnant. Jupiter's offer to make her a child leads to a change of heart. What the queen denied a human lover, she permits a divine procreative partner. Olympias also loses moral integrity in Ulrich's romance because she finds sex pleasurable. While she is initially completely passive and sleeps through the first penetration, the promise of fertility arouses her. As soon as the seed donor announces that she has conceived a son, she enters into the lovemaking. Reproduction becomes not only the cause and consequence of a sexual act but also awakens sexual desire. This connection is not insignificant for the success of this sex treatment: "The lady falls pregnant through love and the power of true affection" ("von minne und rehter liebe kraft / wart die frouwe berhaft").[24] Overlaying the reproductive act with love motifs corresponds to both the ideal of courtly love and medical discourses on (in)fertility. In the gynecological literature of the Middle Ages, the woman's pleasure was regarded as a condition for conceiving.[25]

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23 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, v. 867.

24 Ulrich von Eschenbach, *Alexander*, vv. 747–48, cf. vv. 680–88.

25 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 58–61. Even in the early history of sperm donation, female orgasm is considered indispensable for conception, which sometimes makes the doctor's involvement seem questionable. Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 178–90.

In all the Alexander romances, his conception becomes a problem. While in the narrative of divine help pregnancy releases unbridled joy, in the narrative of the dangerous third-party women find themselves needing to offer an explanation. Olympias does not know how to explain her sudden fertility to her husband. Philip's absence was a prerequisite for Nectanabus to take his place in the marital bed. But now it is evidence of adultery. Once again, it is clear that fertility and infertility are not absolute values but vary according to context. What the queen welcomed as a reproductive strategy is later seen as a grave error. Extramarital fertility is worse than marital infertility. Rudolf has Olympias bewail her great distress and declare herself guilty.[26]

In contrast, Ulrich has her confirm her innocence in an emotional prayer. Despite the fact that no one knows about the affair, Olympias finds the situation unbearable and fears that she has forfeited her marital rights. Looking back, she feels that she has been controlled by others. She would never have consented to a third party helping her to conceive of her own free will. She even compares her fate to that of Susanna in the Bible and hopes that God will also deliver her from her plight. At first this comparison does not seem very apt. While Susanna was wrongly accused and tried in court (Dan. 13), Olympias has actually committed adultery and has to answer only to her own conscience. But there is a structural parallel in the sexual assaults committed by the men. Both women are harassed and blackmailed into violating their principles. Olympias therefore curses the seed donor and begs God for mercy. She does not openly say that she wants to abort the fetus; however, it makes sense to relate her desperate plea for redemption to a miscarriage. Olympias is convinced that she will never find joy in another man's child.[27] By narrating her fervent remorse, Ulrich implicitly warns against involving dangerous third parties in reproduction; the example of the unfortunate queen teaches us that offers of a child at any price should be firmly rejected.

Sexual Violence

An effective strategy to morally exonerate would-be mothers is to present the person with whom they conceive as acting without their consent or even against their declared will. As early as the ancient romance, Philip uses the argument of sexual violence to justify Olympias's pregnancy to himself. Having learned about it in a dream, he adds the element of violence to the story of (in)fertility, which makes it easier for him to bear the fact that his

26 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, vv. 882–83.

27 Ulrich von Eschenbach, *Alexander*, vv. 809–10, cf. vv. 768–843.

wife is expecting someone else's baby. In Rudolf von Ems's *Alexander*, too, the King of Macedon emphasizes that Olympias was a defenceless victim. He declares his wife innocent because the gods always have their way and human resistance is futile.[28] The Flemish illuminator also took care to depict an involuntary conception (Fig. 2). The dragon symbolizes the danger of adultery, but the lady's complete passivity is proof of her innocence. The queen lies on her side and turns her back to everyone. She does not welcome the dragon but is surprised in her sleep. Her bed is so narrow that it is hardly suitable for lovemaking. The strongest visual argument in favour of her innocence, however, is her posture, which expresses firm rejection. The crossed legs signal that this woman is not pursuing any sexual interest, but rather seeking to protect herself.

While the violent assault in the Alexander romances is the cuckolded husband's fiction, in *Ortnit* the queen is in fact forced to reproduce. The hero's birth story begins like many stories of (in)fertility: A childless royal couple desperately longs for an heir. The would-be parents initially follow the narrative of divine help. In pain, they ask God to give them a baby. But as is typical in the narrative of the dangerous third party, their prayers go unanswered. The narrator soberly states that the lady could not have a child with this man. The protagonist in *Ortnit* firmly rejects the proposal to choose another sexual partner. She wants to remain faithful to her husband and does not want outside help to conceive. The tale would have ended as a Passion narrative if a third party had not intervened and transformed infertility into fertility. According to the concept of the character and the ideal of loyalty, this can only happen against the would-be mother's will.

The seed donor Alberich presents himself as altruistic and willing to help. He merely wishes to prevent the beautiful lady from being cast out after the death of her lord. Yet, he is so struck by the queen's beauty that pity may well not be his only motive. If he had committed no offence, he would have had little reason to ask God for forgiveness. The ambivalent Alberich tells us how he surprised the queen with his attack. She had locked herself in and sat on the bed weeping tears of grief over her childlessness. In the light of her despair, Alberich's actions once again appear to offer relief, but the queen resists fiercely, exposing the alleged rescue attempt as rape. Looking back, Alberich admits that the conditions in this battle of the sexes were

28 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, vv. 1052–61. From the narrator's perspective, the situation is not quite so simple. He declares Olympias guiltily guiltless (vv. 1071–72) because, although she had only become involved with the seed donor for the sake of her husband, she had nevertheless been unfaithful.

unequal. He was able to overpower the queen and even force her into intercourse several times, because he was invisible.

With this violent story of (in)fertility, the seed donor is pursuing a specific goal: he wants to exonerate the would-be mother and clear her name of adultery. "You must not be angry with her; it happened without her consent!" ("du solt mit ir nicht zürnen, es geschach an iren dank"),[29] Alberich begs his son. Ortnit's emotional outburst shows just how necessary this defence strategy is. When he discovers that he is not the biological son of the King of Lombardy and that his beloved mother was involved with another man, he is filled with rage. He takes it upon himself to avenge his social father, the deceased king, and wants to punish the queen's adultery with death; his mother is to burn at the stake. Ortnit's extreme reaction makes it clear that he cannot accept any other interpretation than that of a defenceless victim. The royal couple's long years of childlessness and its severe social consequences in no way legitimize their recourse to a third party's help. Only the queen's role as a victim prevents her death by fire. (In)fertility stories follow a male narrative and justification logic that demands meekness and modesty of women. Would-be mothers are not permitted to act on their own authority. They are closely scrutinized, and their sexual and reproductive actions have to be morally judged. Only when the wives of infertile men are coerced into conception does their motherhood seem acceptable.

The female lead in Machiavelli's *Mandragola* also corresponds to the ideal of a pretty, chaste, and virtuous ideal wife. Lucrezia honours her ancient namesake, who strove for virtue and whose rape drove her to despair. Although she desperately wants sons, she has long since lost her desire for sex and is extremely careful in her choice of methods. Her attempt to get pregnant by the tried and tested religious route fails. Lucrezia is unable to fulfill her vow to attend morning prayer forty times in a row because she is indecently assaulted by a clergyman.[30] Lucrezia is skeptical about all other fertility remedies and is suspicious as soon as her husband even broaches the subject. She would rather live a secluded life than travel to try healing baths; she considers a urine test to be nonsensical and mandrake treatment immoral. Lucrezia radically rejects the idea of fulfilling her longing for a child by sleeping with another man, which would kill him: "I wouldn't

29 *Ortnit*, stanza 168, v. 4.

30 Machiavelli, "Mandragola," act 3, scene 2, pp. 202–5. The incident is not only explicable by the context of the drama, but also testifies to the early modern criticism of the reproductive theological system and the churchmen who profit from it.

have thought, if I were the last woman left in the world and the human race depended on me for survival."[31]

Lucrezia holds out for a long time, against the wishes of everyone around her. Her husband demands that she stop being so coy, calling her a "bird-brained bitch."[32] Her mother advises her to take her only chance and paints a stark picture of a childless woman's future: "Don't you see that a woman without children is a woman without a home? If her husband dies, she is left like an animal, abandoned by everybody."[33] Lucrezia's confessor asserts his authority, demands obedience to her husband and declares sex that kills a venial sin. Faced with mounting pressure from all sides, Lucrezia finally gives in. Her renewed protest when she is told to go to bed shows how strongly she resists the procedure. With desperate cries of "I just can't!" and "What will I do!?" she defends herself against her mother and husband until she resigns herself to returning to the role of a little girl: "Oh dear!" "Mamma mia!" Her worries and fears are soothed late that night. The stranger Lucrezia fears to kill reveals himself to be a lover who has only staged everything. When Lucrezia finally accepts his advances, her behaviour does not provoke indignation but understanding. Her husband has forced her into extramarital sex himself and no longer deserves her fidelity.[34]

Fortunately, the moral standards for would-be mothers have changed, or so one would think. Sexual violence no longer serves as the best argument to justify pregnancy out of wedlock. Today, women who use help to reproduce no longer face judgment of character or in court. Yet, as Lewitscharoff's speech in Dresden reveals, the effect of the premodern morality of reproduction continues to be felt. The writer fears the "self-empowerment of women" and condemns the view that men's influence should be "reduced to the bare minimum, to their semen."[35] So the idea that women can have children on their own still causes unease and raises hackles. Legal and professional restrictions in Germany—as well as health insurance guidelines—mean that not all would-be parents have the same access to fertility treatment. People

31 Machiavelli, "Mandragola," act 3, scene 10, p. 221.

32 Machiavelli, "Mandragola," act 4, scene 8, p. 249.

33 Machiavelli, "Mandragola," act 3, scene 11, p. 225.

34 In *Mandragola*, whether this reproduction strategy ever achieves its goal remains an open question. Lucrezia's pregnancy is only reported in a later comedy. Machiavelli, "Clizia," act 2, scene 3, pp. 314–17.

35 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede."

who do not conform to the heteronormative ideal of a relationship between a man and a woman are at a disadvantage.

Marginalized Men: Devaluation of Would-Be Fathers

(In)fertility creates specific power relations. Childlessness affects not only the relationship between the individual and society, and between individual men and women in a couple, but also the relationships individual women have to other women and men to other men. Raewyn Connell clearly demonstrated in *Masculinities* (1995) that the gender binary is inadequate and that there are different forms of masculinity. In her study of male gender relations, she distinguishes four types: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization. Connell uses these types to determine what position a man occupies in a given gender relation, even if this can be questioned again at any time. She defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees [...] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."[36] Men are supported by other men who choose to become complicit with this hegemony without themselves committing fully to defending patriarchy. If other categories such as sexuality, class, or race come into play, the dominance of hegemonic masculinity has a negative effect within the gender relation; for example, when homosexual men are subordinated or Black men are marginalized.

Connell's distinction between hegemonic and marginalized masculinities is helpful in more precisely defining the position of would-be fathers in the narrative of the dangerous third party. Every writer who has reworked the Alexander material has had difficulties narrating the story of (in)fertility. This is crucially linked to an idea of hegemonic masculinity that is based on (hetero)sexual virility. How can Philip's position of power as king be maintained at all if someone else fulfills his duty to produce an heir? The authors of the Alexander romances struggle to find a plausible explanation to reconcile fertility and the ruler's power. Their narrators represent Connell's type of complicit masculinity, insofar as they willingly recognize the dominance of fertile men. They presuppose fertility as an unmarked norm, subtly devaluing the King of Macedon and with him all men who are unable to procreate. Thus, the medieval authors also profit from the "patriarchal dividend," as

36 Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

Connell calls the advantage men in general gain from the subordination of women but also from domination over other, marginalized men.[37]

Precarious Fatherhood

In the *Historia de preliis*, Nectanabus and his sorcery do much to persuade Philip to accept the unborn child. In a dream, Philip sees how the god Ammon sleeps with his wife and then assigns him the fatherhood. In Rudolf von Ems's version, Ammon even claims that Olympias is expecting Philip's child.[38] The differences between social and biological fatherhood are becoming increasingly blurred on the level of the plot. First of all, an interpreter of dreams makes it clear that this baby cannot be Philip's biological child. But a little later, wise men prophesy that the king will have a son of his own who will conquer the whole world. While there is hardly any doubt about Alexander's parentage in the world of the narrative, Rudolf contests this. The King of Macedon was no more related to the unborn baby than to an egg that a bird might lay in his lap. Only sorcery makes him feed another's brood. Rudolf clarifies the roles in the family triangle by distinguishing between genealogical fact and magical fiction: the child that Philip accepts, believing in a divine miracle, actually comes from the sorcerer. The narrator is very critical of procreation by a third party, drawing a parallel between ancient literature and contemporary cases. He knows many men who hold such behaviour against their wives. Rudolf finds it all too understandable that cuckolded husbands refuse to take on paternity: nobody could blame them if they did not want to risk their lives for another man's child. At the same time, the narrator implicitly criticizes his character for accepting someone else's son in good faith.

In the *Historia de preliis*, the means of reproduction are not forgotten even within the family; the king never completely comes to terms with his son's dubious origins. When the boy is twelve years old, Philip is affronted by his lack of resemblance to him. Although he praises Alexander's talent, he is deeply wounded that he cannot recognize himself in him. The social father makes several unsuccessful attempts to free himself from this difficult family relation: First he plans to murder the baby but refrains from doing so himself; then he wants to marry another woman and is prevented from doing so by Alexander. When Philip tries to chastise his violent son, he

37 Connell, *Masculinities*, 79, 81.

38 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, vv. 921–94. On narrative criticism, see vv. 1075–83, 1175–204.

fails. He stumbles and soon faces Alexander's mockery. Philip's fall exposes the shifted balance of power. A king who can provide neither an heir nor order loses his claim to rule; the guests flee, the bride vanishes, Philip falls ill, and Alexander forces him to reconcile with his mother. After his disempowerment within the family, Philip does not have much longer to live; he dies trying to quell a conspiracy. The barren king is a multiple failure.

Age Stigma

Ulrich von Etzenbach makes the idea of a weak and frail king the leitmotif of his story of (in)fertility. In contrast to other versions, childlessness in Ulrich's romance is primarily a man's problem.[39] Philip worries about what will happen to his country, his people, and his beloved wife after his death. His longing for an heir is founded in a ruler's sense of responsibility for his subjects. In a departure from the pre-texts, Ulrich emphasizes the king's advanced age, which he only mentions after the rival appears. When Philip grants the enamoured Nectanabus access to his wife, for the first time he is referred to as "the old man of Macedon" ("der alte von Macedô"). This category is relevant again when Olympias asserts her desire to remain faithful to her old husband. She prefers a virtuous old man to a vicious young man. With the motif of age, Ulrich provides a possible explanation for the royal couple's childlessness and follows up leads in the Alexander material. Olympias falls pregnant as soon as she has sex with another partner, so the physical cause must lie with Philip.

The king's advanced age is significant in terms of cultural history and gender. While infertility in the female body is regarded as a general deficiency, in the male body it is seen as a lost ability. In contrast to women, men in medieval narrative literature lose their fertility only later in life. The link with the category of age makes it possible to distinguish between absolute and life-stage-related infertility. Virility is indispensable for the concept of hegemonic masculinity. My approach of comparative studies in historical context draws attention to how, compared to modern debates, the gender positions are reversed. While today women are most likely to fear getting too old to have children, in medieval fiction—but not the medical litera-

39 Philip is introduced as an exemplary ruler of exceptional power, prestige, lineage, and charity. As is typical of medieval stories of (in)fertility, ideal life and inability to reproduce are contrasted. See Ulrich von Eschenbach, *Alexander*, vv. 173–202. On the queen's confession to her husband, see vv. 507–12. On the motif of age, see vv. 402, 509, 511, and 855.

ture[40]—increasing age is a men's problem. What at first glance appears to be an objective biological fact turns out, on closer inspection, to be a subtle insinuation. Is Philip really infertile because of his age? Or is he declared old because of his childlessness? If one deconstructs the meaning of the age motif, cause and consequence can barely be distinguished. The narrator does not simply propose an explanation for the royal couple's childlessness but assumes that an infertile man must be old, decrepit, and weak. In these stories, old age is not the reason for discriminating against someone but the narrative means of doing so. Infertility thus becomes a stigma that is immediately recognizable from the outside. Typical age attributes such as white hair and limited mobility indicate impotence and make the lack of fertility publicly visible.

The Flemish miniature follows this pattern and depicts Philip as an old man (Fig. 2). His white beard and hair contrast with the queen's chestnut hair and indicate the couple's age difference. The king is merely a spectator at the conception, although he seems more interested in the judgment of his entourage. His left foot sticks out from under his robe, the red colour standing out clearly against the dark green carpet and the grey-green bed sheet. The red tip of the shoe, at the intersection between the king's cloak and the marriage bed, symbolizes the crossing of sexual boundaries. Of course, not only the queen is under observation but also the king. While he is still conversing with the smaller man next to him, the two figures behind him are already whispering and putting their heads together.

In Ulrich's *Alexander*, the old king is all too easily deceived. After Olympias falls pregnant, Nectanabus's sorcery is no longer needed; Philip never wonders how she was able to conceive without him. Instead, he interprets the events according to the narrative of divine help and is overjoyed. Ulrich contrasts the unequal emotional state of the parents-to-be. While the queen is burdened with worry and plagued by feelings of guilt, her husband feels unbridled joy. He gratefully praises his wife for the fulfillment of his most fervent wish. Philip's positive attitude does not change even after the birth; he always sees Alexander as his own son. In a smug commentary, Ulrich points out that in this misjudgement, the king is not alone: many men do not realize that they are being played for fools.[41] They are raising children that they did not father themselves. Ulrich trivializes the problem of (in)fertility

40 On medieval physicians' understanding of women's and men's reproductive ageing, see Rider, "The Medieval Biological Clock?"; Rider, "Gender."

41 Ulrich von Eschenbach, *Alexander*, vv. 1251–53.

by paralleling Alexander's birth story with an ordinary love affair. All members of the family are devalued by this analogy. Olympias becomes an adulteress, Philip a cuckolded husband, and Alexander the illegitimate heir to the throne.

Being Ridiculed

That marginalization of a man who cannot conceive is not an isolated case. Machiavelli's *Mandragola* also centres round the figure of a foolish old man. Even in the prologue, Nicia the lawyer is characterized as not being particularly bright. As his adversary Callimaco knows, he overwhelmingly longs for a son. The plight of childless married couples becomes a comedy because Nicia fails to see through his rival's double-cross and is overenthusiastic. What is factually appropriate in medical and legal contexts comes across as downright comical in drama: a man selling remedies for impotence approaches a husband, who readily divulges details about his unfulfilled sex life.

Callimaco never misses an opportunity to expose the husband's stupidity. He demands a urine sample, which Nicia has trouble wresting from his scolding wife. The lawyer makes a complete fool of himself when he hurries through Florence with her used chamber pot, rejoicing at the opportunity to get involved in a deadly treatment. The possibility that the potential victim of the mandrake could also be the father of his longed-for child or the lover of his wife does not occur to Nicia. At the end of the second act, his blind folly is revealed in a song: "Our lawyer's such a guy, mad for begattin'; / He'd think an ass can fly, if told in Latin. / No other riches count, despite the bother: / He'll gladly trade his mount, to be a father."[42]

The virtuous Lucrezia can only wonder at her husband's behaviour. She always feared that his longing for children would lead him astray one day. Of all the proposed treatments, to her mandrake therapy seems the most outrageous. Nicia is prepared to cross religious, ethical, sexual, and physical lines to fulfill his longing for a child. He has no sympathy for Lucrezia's concerns and can hardly wait for another man to finally take his place. His fixation on having an heir makes him overlook the fact that the young man he has intercepted is Callimaco in disguise. When he does not undress quickly enough, Nicia helps him out, tucks the naked man into bed with his wife and even checks that he is erect before locking the bedroom door. While he leaves Lucrezia alone with his rival, he dreams of holding a baby in his arms during a fireside chat with his mother-in-law.

42 Machiavelli, "Mandragola," act 2, scene 6, p. 201.

A critical approach to normativity reveals two levels in Machiavelli's comedy. On the surface, the text explores the behaviour of a man who obsessed with becoming a father. The drama shows what happens when the dream of parenthood becomes the main goal in life. Those who fixate on their longed-for child can forget basic values, lose their judgment, and fail to see the needs of others. The negative example of Nicia helps to put an unfulfilled longing for children into perspective. On the deeper level, however, the text does not upend the (in)fertility hierarchy but rather assumes and confirms it. Fertility forms the unmarked norm that raises or lowers the characters' status. Because Nicia does not fulfill the norm of reproduction, he can be ridiculed through the literary technique of exaggeration. The play depicts the distorted image of an infertile man whose entire thought and action revolves around longing for a child. Callimaco is the laughing third party who profits from the childless man's misfortune.

Conspicuous Children: Postnatal Consequences

The question of how unconventional conception affects a child is asked time and again. In terms of the intended consequences, real and fictional fertility treatments differ fundamentally. Since its beginnings, the declared aim of reproductive technology has been to produce "normal" offspring; every new method has been subjected to strict medical scrutiny to ensure that the children conceived in this way do not show any abnormalities.[43] Narrative literature, instead, is not interested in norms but in exceptions. The narrative of the dangerous third party, like the narrative of divine help, serves as the back story for a hero. If a baby can only be born by heavenly grace or through great human endeavour, that child is different from its peers. From the moment of conception, this child deviates from what is considered normal and thus stands out. While overcoming infertility by religious means always has a positive connotation, the involvement of a third party can have very negative consequences. According to this narrative, the longed-for child is both endangered and dangerous.

Alexander's Otherness

A last look at the miniature (Fig. 2) shows what the role of magic in his conception means for Alexander. In medieval iconography, conception is often depicted by a small, naked figure flying toward the childless couple. In the

43 Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 189, 223.

miniature, the dragon hovering over the queen's side can be read in two ways: it refers not only to the magical seed donor but probably also to the conceived child, showing that they belong together. The dangerous potential of the third party is transferred to the offspring during conception. To his parents, and especially to his social father, the child must seem strange.

The authors of the Alexander romances usually interpret this deviation from the reproductive norm as an honour. Alexander is described as an exceptional child because he was conceived and born in extraordinary circumstances.[44] How people perceive the longed-for child, however, greatly depends on how people perceive the seed donor. If Nectanabus is regarded as a powerful sorcerer, an Egyptian king, or even the messenger of a fertility god, conception out of wedlock raises Alexander's status. The birth miracles in the material are interpreted in this positive light. When Olympias is in labour, the earth shakes and a terrible storm rages. In the *Historia de preliis*, these natural portents prompt Philip to change his attitude toward the newborn baby. As the king confesses to his wife, he wanted to do away with her son, but the hail, lightning, and thunder had convinced him of his divine descent. Rudolf von Ems retains this desire to kill Alexander but barely offers a motive for it. Nevertheless, the theme itself can be understood not only as a literary relic but also as indicating a deeper problem: the life of a child conceived illegitimately is at risk. Rudolf glosses over the precarity of the newborn's life by hymning his praises: Alexander is a wonderful child prodigy who behaves wondrously, experiences wonderous things, and works wonders.

In the *Historia de preliis*, Alexander only learns of his biological father when he pushes him to his death. In his death throes, Nectanabus reveals the secret of his son's origins. This knowledge does not trigger an identity crisis in Alexander, who seems unmoved until he is publicly confronted with the circumstances of his conception. At Philip's second wedding, a guest wishes the royal groom a son who looks like him. This wish is revealing: not everyone recognizes Alexander as the legitimate heir; a biological son yet to be conceived is to inherit Philip's crown. Alexander can only defend his claim to the throne through extreme physical violence. Priest Lambrecht saw this problem and opted for the narrative strategy of denial. By claiming Alexander was conceived within wedlock, he averted all further disputes concerning the politics of power and inheritance law. His hero has the same birth story as other royal children.

44 Rudolf von Ems, *Alexander*, vv. 1260–73, 1327–44.

Robert the Devil's Son

A woman who will do anything to have a child brings about even more devastation; the tale is told in an Old French verse romance (thirteenth century).[45] The protagonist, the King of France's son, bears his dark origins in his name. *Robert le diable*, or Robert the Devil, owes his existence to the devil and can only free himself from his family's hereditary guilt through extreme penance. The fifteenth-century German prose adaptation of the French romance, in which all the characters remain nameless, initially follows the typical narrative pattern of (in)fertility stories: a royal couple has no heir, which causes them great pain. The narrator carefully distinguishes between their griefs. The king is burdened by the fact that he cannot leave his country an heir to the throne. The queen's grief is different; it stems from her husband's suffering. When she hears how much of a burden the unsecured succession is to her husband, she fears for her position. Like countless others who long for children, the queen initially resorts to the reproductive theological method. She prays and makes many vows so that God will give her a child. Although she acts according to the principle that "more is more," her efforts are in vain.

In her deep despair, the queen no longer believes in divine redemption. Because she does not want to resign herself to her fate as childless, she changes tactic. She turns to the devil and asks him for an heir. Completely fixated on her desire to have children, the queen forgets to reflect on what she would be doing to everyone involved. In the Christian imagination, it is unthinkable that the devil can fulfill a longing for motherhood if God denies it. The narrator therefore makes it clear that the devil is helping the lady to have a son with divine consent. The king and all the people are delighted with the birth, unaware of the specific circumstances. Of course, the devil's support has a devastating effect on the baby's behaviour.

From the very day he is born, the longed-for son is a true Satan. The royal heir screams incessantly, giving no rest to anyone around him. When the baby cuts his first teeth, he bites off the wetnurse's nipples, so that no one dares to breastfeed him. At the age of four to five, the boy curses and swears constantly. He is such an aggressive playmate that prudent parents keep their children away. He is never moved to pray and never heard to say a good word. Due to his innate nature (*art*), the boy cannot be integrated into courtly society. When the young prince ascends the French throne after the

45 Borinski, "Eine ältere deutsche Bearbeitung." On the source text, see *Robert the Devil*.

king's death, he continues to cause nothing but trouble. He hurts his partners so badly at tournaments and dances that nobody wants to have anything to do with him.

At a court banquet, Robert has a revelation. Seeing how he is excluded from society, he begins to reflect on and question his behaviour. Ashamed of himself, the young king admits that he has only ever caused damage without ever intending to do so. The question of the origin of this evil becomes the impetus to search for his own identity. The young king reconstructs his life story to find out why he is the person he has become. His advisers can only confirm that he has always insulted, harmed, and hurt others without giving a reason. So, Robert confronts his mother. He says that he knows he has led a diabolical life from an early age. He demands that she explain from whom he has inherited these character traits.

The startled queen is at a loss for words. On the one hand, she seems inclined to reveal her secret, but, on the other, she fears the consequences. Only when her son promises not to punish does she tell him how, to conceive the child she so longed for, she asked the devil for help. His mother's confession shakes the young king to the core. From his birth story, he concludes that he is "a child and a son of the devil" ("ein kint vnd ein svn des teuffels").[46] What is decisive is not the physical or social origin but the spiritual. This is why Robert breaks away from his worldly family. Symbolically, he gives the royal sword back to his mother and demands that she protect the realm herself. This shatters all the family hopes that were pinned on the devil's aid. Robert does not want to stay a day longer at court but wants to fight for his status as a son of God. He secretly leaves the country, seeks refuge with a hermit, and performs an exorbitant penance by living like a dog for six years. With his piety, he manages to erase the stain of his birth. Robert never returns to his mother, who was responsible for his diabolical disposition. Instead, he stays with his chosen spiritual father so that he can live as a child of God for the rest of his life.

46 Borinski, "Eine ältere deutsche Bearbeitung," 49, l. 5.

Prospects

In places, Sibylle Lewitscharoff's speech *Von der Machbarkeit* reads like a commentary on the story of the son of the King of France, although she is talking about modern reproductive medicine. In her view, pregnancy through "means truly invented by the devil" is fraught with danger.[47] She asks rhetorically how disturbing it must be for a child to find out they were conceived in this way. Lewitscharoff does not stop at referring to the "psychological significance of origin constructions" but transfers her "abhorrence" of the technical process to the children conceived through fertility treatments. The "current reproductive mess" seems "so repugnant" to her that she calls longed-for children "dubious creatures, half human, half artificial goodness-knows-what."

The fierce criticism of Lewitscharoff's speech makes it clear that a significant proportion of the population no longer subscribes to the narrative of the dangerous third party. Assisted conception is now generally seen not as a danger but as a release. Under medical supervision, surrogates and sperm donors help infertile couples to have the babies they so painfully long for. The comparison between medieval and modern stories of infertility shows how narratives are retold, reshaped, and changed. In today's dominant (in)fertility narrative of medical treatment, two narrative patterns that were carefully separated from each other in medieval literature overlap: the narrative of divine help has been secularized and combined with elements of the narrative of the dangerous third party. The people who help others to conceive are no longer seen as such a threat, because their key functions are distributed across several instances and are controlled and monitored by a higher authority. However, the narrative of medical help, as propagated by fertility clinics, is only partially consistent with personal experiences.[48] Would-be parents repeatedly complain that medical professionals lack sensitivity and feel they are at the mercy of others. At the same time, donor children are calling for us all to think harder about the consequences of reproductive technology. They find donor anonymity, the lack of information for children, and feelings of shame and guilt among social parents unacceptable.

47 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede."

48 See We Are Donor Conceived, "Voices"; Spenderkinder, "Meinungen und Geschichten."