EPILOGUE

DO CHILDFREE PEOPLE Have Better Sex? Regensburg author, teacher, and activist Verena Brunschweiger posed this question in the title of her book, published in 2022.[1] The antinatalist caused quite a furor in Germany with her theories. Many found it unacceptable that a woman who teaches at a Bavarian grammar school has decided not to have children. Brunschweiger was not only criticized in the press and on social media, but was also taken to task by colleagues, parents, and her employer.[2] Women who confidently profess the advantages of childlessness or are relentlessly honest about the burdens of motherhood defy social expectations, provoking strong reactions. Brunschweiger points out the ecological disadvantages of reproduction and thus refutes the accusation often levelled at childfree women that they are putting their own interests before the common good. Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti stake similar claims to interpretative control over their own stories in *A Life's Work* (2001) and *Motherhood* (2018).[3] They no longer accept the social narrative that women only find fulfillment in motherhood and will regret deciding not to have a child; instead, they carefully explore the ambivalences, doubts, and questions associated with parenthood.

My method of comparative study in historical context reveals interesting similarities, but also differences, in how childlessness is negotiated in the past and present. Contrary to what the grand narrative of unhappy childless people would have us believe, medieval literature includes more ways of life than parenthood. Numerous social and religious relationships promise a fulfilled life: love for a partner, caring for a social child, or closeness to God and to the infant Jesus. What is historically specific about the medieval tales is that noble couples do not long for a child to complete their marriage or to prove their love for each other, but to leave an heir. In courtly literature, continuing the family line and securing the estate are always factors in the desire for a child. Unlike in the historical laws of inheritance, in fictional literature it usually does not matter whether a son or daughter is born; regardless of gender, the baby is very welcome.

The medieval narrative literature gives a completely different impression than previous historical infertility research, where—as the introduc-

1 Brunschweiger, *Do Childfree People*, 22–23.

2 Brunschweiger, "Rezeption."

3 Cusk, *A Life's Work*; Heti, *Motherhood*.

tion showed—reproductive medicine dominates. In the courtly literature, noble ladies never undergo a medical examination or try treatments to promote their fertility. Instead of turning to a doctor, barber-surgeon, or healer, they seek divine, magical, or even diabolical help. More men are involved in courtly stories of (in)fertility than in either medieval gynecological treatises or reproductive medical discourses today.[4] Would-be fathers play a decisive role and sometimes—as in reproductive pilgrimages—even shoulder the sole burden of securing offspring. Medieval authors also stress the joys of fatherhood—whether of biological or social children. Even if the physical cause is usually attributed to the female body, the social and emotional consequences of childlessness in the narrative literature affect men as well as women.

In the Middle Ages, having and not having children were motivated very differently. I have distinguished seven narratives in this book that can overlap and conflict. The interpretation of any (in)fertility story varies depending on whether it is told from an insider perspective, or viewed from the outside, whether by the affected person, social authorities, or an omniscient narrator. The first narrative can be reduced to the comforting message that would-be parents who trust in God and show religious commitment will eventually be rewarded with pregnancy.[5] Yet, a critical approach to normativity reveals that childless people may long for a baby because they are marginalized and stigmatized. Couples learn that they are deviating from the norms of the fertile majority, which devalues them as deficient. The Jewish and Christian grand narrative that with God's help, people can have children even in old age is still encountered in a secularized form today. As prefigured in religious birth miracle stories, modern couples share their joy at conception through fertility treatment. By fuelling the hope of late fulfillment, this narrative prevents would-be parents from coming to terms with their desire to have children.

Today, the second narrative has mostly merged with the first, so what it presents as a problem now appears to be solved. While third-party help to get pregnant was severely criticized in medieval literature, assisted conception is a largely accepted practice today. The dangerous influence of third parties is only a concern for critics of modern fertility treatment, who fuel

4 Historians of medicine have also paid increasing attention to the role of men, cf. Rider, "Men and Infertility"; Rider, "Men's Responses." On the uneven visibility of childless men and childless women, today see Toepfer, *Infertility*, 209–12.

5 On the ambivalent role of comfort for infertile women through early modern prayer see Toepfer, "Trost."

cultural fears that reproductive technology will go too far, with dangerous consequences for humanity.

Adoption differs in modalities and contexts, but in essence the third narrative of taking in a child has remained stable over the centuries. The fact that a parent-child relationship can be based not only on biology, but also on social bonds, is at least as clear in medieval homes and monastic communities as it is in modern patchwork families. The narrative of the social alternative can be told as a story of integration or conflict: it unfolds through love, care, and cohesion or alienation, provocation, and aggression.

In general, interpretations of (non)parenthood range widely, depending on where the (in)fertility story begins and ends, which phase in life is in focus, and which emotions are emphasized: both men and women face discrimination and suffer when they fail to fulfill societal expectations, but overcoming infertility brings redemption and liberation. A story that ends happily when a longed-for child is born or comes into the family serves to reiterate the high value of fertility. When the story continues, characters develop, and the fears, worries, and difficulties of parenthood are not ignored, things are less harmonious. The burden of family can be so high that it takes priority over all other interests and duties; children can cause their parents great distress if they lead a dissolute life and cannot be integrated socially, fall seriously ill, or perhaps even die. Children who are conceived in precarious circumstances or whose social parents do not know their origins also put a strain on family life. The joy of the long-awaited offspring turns into sorrow or even regret when a child does not fulfill parental expectations and perhaps even appears monstrous.

The fourth narrative centres on the child. The most vivid descriptions of intense and fulfilling maternal joys are found in the visions of women vowed not to have children of their own: for cultural historians, these nuns' revelations are remarkable. The merging of femininity and motherhood—including breastfeeding—can be traced back to motherhood mysticism, as can the idea that not having children is a prerequisite for a unique experience of happiness. The burning question of the relationship between nature and culture, original and imitation, raised repeatedly in gender studies, can be discussed anew in view of the mystics' vision of motherhood. Like people on any path in life, the nuns in the narrative of mystical motherhood need role models, and they find these in the Mother of God and in their sisters. While in medieval narrative literature, fixation on a biological baby is sometimes punished cruelly—to the point of losing the beloved child—a religious focus on the Christ Child is accepted and appreciated. In the reception history and research, this narrative reveals the greatest discrepancies between the

women's self-perception and how learned men perceived them. What the medieval mystics described as overwhelming grace, early modern humanists and reformers dismissed as playing with dolls or idolatry and modern psychoanalysts interpreted as indicating hysteria and sublimation of drives.

Anyone who is forced into a way of life to which they are not suited will regret it. This logic of the fifth narrative can be observed in both medieval stories and modern interviews with women who would rather not be mothers. Then and now, they are subjected to massive social pressure until they finally give in. More striking than the political differences between medieval feudal arguments and modern family policy is a gender difference: primarily, the ones who need to justify their choice for childlessness in courtly literature are men.

In the sixth narrative, however, committed nonparents remain steadfast and do not fulfill their social duty to multiply. They defend this position to the outside world or look for ways in which they can at least secretly live out this ideal in life. If both partners agree not to have children, chaste marriage can be told as a story of harmony; if not, a marriage breaks down in constant conflict. My sixth narrative differs from modern discussions of being childfree in one significant respect: in the Middle Ages, the religious motivation was decisive and not being a parent was a consequence, not a cause, of consciously renouncing sex. Today, people decide against having children for various individual, social, feminist, or ecological reasons. This is not associated with restricting one's sex life; with her book title, Verena Brunschweiger even suggests the opposite.

The seventh narrative recounts the happiness of people who are so deeply in love, they do not even think about parenthood. In courtly literature, those who have a fulfilling partnership are happy regardless of children. The narrative unfolds in three variations: lofty, passionate, and romantic love. In these stories, what matters is the beginning and the end. A child is only longed for or missed when happiness in love is over. In courtly literature, we thus encounter a completely different interpretation of parenthood than the modern inseparability of marital and parental happiness: people do not need to compensate for not having children, but having children does serve to compensate for the loss of a partner's love.

Literary narratives do not present a true reflection of childless people's lived reality in the Middle Ages. They draw on competing knowledge discourses and are medially, aesthetically, and rhetorically remodelled according to genre conventions. Yet, the influence of past and present narratives on (in)fertility perceptions and identities should not be underestimated. This book repeatedly shows how longing for a child is linked to speech acts

and follows predetermined narrative patterns. Childlessness is created verbally and negotiated in literature; in this creation and negotiation process, changes in perspective can lead to completely new interpretations. Precisely because narratives have such power and shape people's sense of self-worth and belonging, it is important to consider a variety of motivations, positions, and voices. The danger of a singular (in)fertility story can be averted by telling diverse stories of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood.