Chapter 1

DIVINE HELP

WAITING FOR A CHILD

NUMEROUS ONLINE FORUMS exist for people with an unfulfilled longing to have children. Younger women in particular go online almost instinctively to find out about reproductive medical options and to exchange information with others who are seeking treatment, according to the brochure published by the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs entitled *Kinderlose Frauen und Männer* (Childless Women and Men, 2014).[1] Contributors to internet forums post about their sufferings, worries, and fears, encourage each other, and offer comfort when the longed-for pregnancy once again fails to materialize. Emotional sensitivities, reproductive measures, and the unbending will to have a baby dominate the digital dialogue. One rather unusual strategy, that nevertheless has a long tradition, was recommended on May 23, 2008, by a user of an Urbia.de online forum for would-be parents.[2] In a post to encourage others entitled "Mother Anne helped," she tells the story of how her eight-month-old son was born. After she had tried in vain for two years to get pregnant, able to think of nothing but her longing for a baby, her mother advised her to turn to St. Anne. Since theology of reproduction is little known in the forum, the writer clarifies her religious socialization and the kin relationships of the saints. She informs her readers that she comes from a Catholic family, and Anne was the mother of the Virgin Mary—that is, the "granny of Jesus." Because Anne had to wait until old age to have a baby, she knows exactly what women who long for a child go through. The fertility prayer is quoted word for word and its success is reported. The post, as the first-person narrator reveals, is part of a religious agreement. She is posting to keep her promise to thank St, Anne and to encourage other women. The author is so convinced of the effectiveness of intercessory prayer that she is already diligently asking "Mother Anne" for a second child and wants to include all would-be mothers in her night prayer.

This digital birth miracle narrative is one link in a long chain that extends back to the beginnings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A couple wishes for a child for a long time in vain, until finally—with divine help—

1 Wippermann, *Kinderlose*, 150–56, at 152.

2 rira, "Mutter Anna."

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they have a baby. The biblical stories about the late pregnancies of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, which the Hebrew Bible tells and which the New Testament repeats with Elizabeth and Zachariah, create a stable structure. The legend of Anne and Joachim, to which the post refers, is the Christian prototype of the best-known narrative of (in)fertility, which had a lasting influence on the culture of medieval piety. Through prayers, pilgrimages, alms, votive offerings, and other religious practices, infertile couples tried to bring about pregnancy. King Richard II of England and his wife Anna of Bohemia, for instance, made a pilgrimage in 1383 to Walsingham in Norfolk, a popular site for noble women struggling against infertility.[3] The religious narrative pattern is based on the duality of divine omnipotence and human impotence. The protagonists feel deep suffering without being able to change anything about their family situation themselves. Therefore, they place all their hope in a metaphysical instance and are rewarded for their devotion; their childlessness remains an episode in an ultimately positive story. The narrative remains timelessly popular as it promises that longing for a child will be fulfilled—against all odds. In medieval narrative literature, temporary childlessness serves various purposes: from a religious perspective, God is celebrated as the author of life; from a genealogical perspective, the child born later in the parents' lives is distinguished; and from a social perspective, the reproductive norm is affirmed.

Social Discrimination: Becoming Childless

People with an unfulfilled longing to have children ask one key question: How can I become a mother or father? The first and most important medieval narrative advises seeking metaphysical help and praying for a child. More than this specific recommendation, I am interested in the associated ideals and norms. Therefore, I start a little earlier and interrogate literary stories of what motivates and causes longing for a child. The legend of Anne and Joachim provides a pertinent example not only of how infertility can be overcome through religious means, but also of how social norms lead to stigma of nonparents and shape childlessness as an identity. Since the story of Mary's virgin birth is told in numerous variations, it is particularly well suited for examining the issue of infertility. In my analysis I consider three adaptations of this legend: the oldest version from the Greek Protoevangelium of James (second century CE), the first major life of Mary

3 Geaman, "Anna of Bohemia," 227; Toepfer, Infertility, 77–78.

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in the German, the *Driu liet von der maget* (Three Verse Tales of the Virgin, 1172) by Wernher the priest, and the adaptation by Wernher the Swiss (first half of the fourteenth century).[4] Other vernacular infertility stories of this narrative type are used to supplement my argumentation.

Childless Matches Made in Heaven

At first glance, in the medieval lives of Mary, Anne and Joachim appear as a Christian match made in heaven. Like most Middle High German authors, the two Wernhers tend to praise their protagonists as the best, most beautiful, and bravest people.[5] This is how Wernher the priest describes Joachim's piety and patience, his wealth and mercy. At a young age, Joachim marries Anne, who, like him, comes from David's line, is very pious, and is also extremely beautiful. Wernher the Swiss in turn praises Joachim as kind, just, and, above all, pious; no one equals him in virtue and blessedness. The ideal man is again associated with the perfect woman who is "alone of all her sex." Anne is characterized as humble, mild, pious, chaste, and completely spotless. Wernher the Swiss explicitly emphasizes how honourable, godly, and blameless the couple are. Only then does he come to the sensitive point that clouds their radiant happiness: after twenty years of marriage, Anne and Joachim still have no children. Nevertheless, this sketch of a perfect couple has a mitigating effect on popular valuations. If exemplary spouses remain without children, infertility cannot be a consequence of their own misconduct. The widespread religious interpretation of childlessness as a punishment seems to be invalidated from the outset in the narrative of divine help. The idealization of the protagonists in all these works leads to the moral exoneration of childless spouses.

Perfection and infertility are nevertheless in a tension that the medieval authors carefully balance. So, Reinfried von Braunschweig, in the eponymous romance (after 1291) of *minne* (courtly love) and *âventiure* (chivalry), is praised for his mildness, virtue, and courtly upbringing.[6] No one who sees

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4 The Protoevangelium was integrated into the Latin Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which most writers of vernacular Lives of Mary used as their main source. Cf. "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," 21–34, 59–66; Priester Wernher, *Maria*; Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*. For basic information on the works of the German Middle Ages, I am guided here as everywhere else by: *Deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters*; *Killy Literaturlexikon*. See also Toepfer, "Kinderlos werden."

5 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 259–348; Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 75–156.

6 *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, vv. 12921–15358, esp. 12950–12957.

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him or hears about him can imagine a happier person. The reason for this is his love marriage with Princess Yrkane, whom Reinfried has won as his wife with great effort. The narrator cannot find enough words to describe the couple's bliss. Their whole life seems to consist only of delight and joy, without a care. But then he admits that one tiny little thing is bothering the couple: after a decade of marriage, their intimate love still has not borne fruit. The husband and wife themselves do not see this as a trifle. They are deeply grieved and often complain fervently that God does not give them an heir.

In Otte's *Eraclius* (ca. 1230), too, the infertility of their marriage causes the pious and virtuous protagonists great suffering.[7] The noble, rich Roman citizen Myriados and his beautiful wife Cassinia find it extremely burdensome that, even after seven years of marriage, there is still no sign of pregnancy. The narrator shows understanding and considers their suffering a typical reaction of favoured but childless people: This is how it is with many people to whom God gives abundant blessings but withholds the gift a child. This contrasting of ideal conduct and infertility implies a clear value judgment: the lack of an heir is the only but crucial flaw in the lives of perfect couples. If even such privileged people suffer so greatly from childlessness, all the material and ideal advantages cannot make up for a lack of offspring. Thus, the narrative promotes the idea that a childless marriage is fundamentally deficient, and men and women only become complete human beings in fatherhood and motherhood.

For this reason, Konrad von Würzburg in the legend of *Alexius* (1275) concludes that, on balance, his protagonists' life is in the red:[8] on the credit side are virtue, reputation, and possessions; on the debit side, children. Once again, infertility stands out all the more in view of a couple's individual and sociocultural merits. The noble Roman Eufemian is famous for his generosity, piety, and honesty. As the emperor's confidant, he presides over three thousand servants in the palace, opens his own house to the needy, and feeds the poor every day. His every effort is free from blame, as he eagerly serves God and behaves honourably; likewise, his wife Agleis is characterized as charitable, pure, modest, and wise. But, according to the narrator, no couple can be completely satisfied with their lives as long as they have no children. Infertility weighs most heavily on the wealthy, he comments, emphasizing the pleasure aspect: for rich people, children are bliss and joy on earth. The

7 Otte, *Eraclius*, vv. 14–19.

8 Konrad von Würzburg, *Alexius*, vv. 57–121, esp. 100–103.

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general rule is confirmed by Konrad von Würzburg for Eufemian and Agleis, who often complain about their childlessness.

Suffering, grief, and sorrow are an integral part of all these stories of (in)fertility. The narrative of divine help thus reduces the individual life stories of infertile couples to an interpretive approach that has negativity inscribed into it: a life without children is perceived as a Passion story. This creates normativity and patterns of affects: those who do not have offspring have to suffer, cry, and lament. The narrative does not allow for positive or value-neutral reactions, other concepts of meaning, or competing models of life. In *Jüngerer Titurel* (Titurel the Younger, 1260–1272/73), Albrecht von Scharfenberg describes in lyrical metaphors the devastating effect of infertility on happiness in life: the fountain of pure joy is clouded by worry, cold frost breaks into the delight of the laughing month of May, and the blossom of joy fades.[9] In Albrecht's imagery, infertility is a violent natural event that occurs at an inopportune time, abruptly freezing spring as it unfolds, against which no one can protect themselves. Yet, the fact that the suffering of childlessness, unlike a natural disaster, has social causes can be observed in the legend of Joachim and Anne.

Anne's and Joachim's Stigma

In the Protoevangelium, the story of infertility begins *in medias res*. The rich Joachim wants to offer God a double sacrifice and is rejected. He may not perform his sacrifice first because he has not begotten any heirs.[10] The priest who stops Joachim's pious activity belongs to the majority society who have children, which places itself above the minority who do not. The fertile value hierarchy serves as a yardstick to measure people against. This binary model conceals the cultural construction and mutual dependence of fertility and infertility. Their connection is so close and intricate that cause and consequence influence each other. Suffering from infertility seems, on the one hand, to be a consequence of the reproductive norm, but, on the other, it helps to establish this norm in the first place. In other words, the devaluation of infertility leads to the valorization of fertility. Reproduction is established as the norm by stigmatizing childless people and declaring them a socially marginal group.

In *Driu liet von der maget*, the degree of discrimination is increased. Joachim is not only demoted but excluded. The priest interrupts the devout

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9 Albrecht von Scharfenberg, *Jüngerer Titurel*, stanza 146.

10 "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," chap. 1, para. 2.

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man in his burned offering and drives him out of the temple. He justifies his actions with Joachim's sinfulness, claiming to speak for God. That God has rejected a childless man is so obvious to him that he does not even need to make this connection explicit. Joachim's guilt seems too great for the priest to allow him to stay any longer. No one wants to associate with a sinner and tolerate him anywhere near the holy sanctuary.[11]

In the *Marienleben* (Life of Mary) by Wernher the Swiss, a further intensification can be observed: when Joachim places his offering on the altar, the priest angrily throws the gift to the ground. He deals with Joachim's stigma as if it were a contagious disease. What a barren man has touched is contaminated, and under no circumstances can it be allowed near the holy of holies. As in the other versions, the religious authority figure claims that God would not take pleasure in the offering of a childless man. Joachim is therefore asked to move away from the others and leave the temple. Not only for the moment but for all time, he is denied access to the sacred space.[12] The priest sees Joachim's infertility as a sign that he is cursed, which legitimizes—indeed demands—exclusion from the religious community. In both Middle High German versions, this view is in clear contradiction to the ideal image that the narrator initially sketched of the pious and virtuous Joachim. In the Anne tapestry from the Wienhausen convent, Lower Saxony (ca. 1480), the expulsion from the temple is depicted in all its drastic harshness.[13] The first sequence of images shows Joachim leaving the temple precinct with his head bowed as the priest literally kicks him out. In the late Gothic tapestry, religious discrimination culminates in physical violence, to which the childless man is helplessly exposed.

How Joachim reacts to the severe humiliation in *Driu liet von der maget* can be seen from the expression on his face: tears fill his eyes, indicating the severe disruption of the social order.[14] Joachim sees his expulsion from the temple as a terrible disgrace. Not wanting to cause a stir, he refrains from replying and secretly wipes the tears from his eyes. The rejection is such a drastic experience for him that Joachim abandons all other ties, withdraws into the desert, and sinks into his suffering. In the desert he leads the life of a penitent; he mourns, laments, watches, fasts, and prays without ceas-

11 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 385–92.

12 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 171–76.

13 Willhelm, *Die gotischen Bildteppiche*, 40–43; Schütte, *Gestickte Bildteppiche*, pl. 25.

14 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 393–96. On the symbolic meaning of tears, see Althoff, *Rules and Rituals*, 29, 113, 250.

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ing.[15] By this time, Joachim has internalized society's standards and considers himself a sinner. In the version by Wernher the Swiss, he implores God to remove the shame of infertility from him or let him die. To him, having to live on as a marginalized man seems a fate worse than death.[16]

The focus of the narrative shifts to Anne, who feels the effects of exclusion. From her perspective, Joachim's withdrawal is tantamount to a separation. Anne is abandoned by her husband, who had always stood by her before, because of the shame of infertility. In the Protoevangelium, she sings a twofold lament, for her childlessness and for her widowhood. No one has to explain to Anne why her husband left. She is aware from the start that her infertility is a deficiency in the eyes of others. In the *Driu liet von der maget*, Anne even wishes for death when she learns of the discrimination Joachim faced. She grieves so deeply for her own loss and for her husband's suffering that her much-vaunted beauty fades.[17]

Anne's relegation quickly affects the structure of the community. In the Protoevangelium, the maid Euthine at first tries to comfort her mistress. She asks her to stop grieving and wants to give her a valuable headscarf. Anne, however, sharply rejects the maid's advances. She feels deeply indebted to God, refuses to accept the gift, and even questions her servant's honesty. The situation escalates, as Euthine retracts her good intention and sees her mistress herself burdened with guilt. The maid confronts Anne with her childlessness and states it is such a terrible punishment that she need wish her no more harm.

Like Joachim, Anne is more marginalized in the *Driu liet von der maget* than in its ancient source text. When she confronts her delinquent maid, the maid resists, so the prevailing order is shaken. Because her mistress has been abandoned by her own husband, the maid argues she no longer has to obey. In her view, a woman's power derives essentially from her ability to reproduce. Since Anne has failed in this area, the maid unilaterally resigns from her post as her servant. Anne thus finds herself in a comparable precarious situation to that of her husband in the temple, which Wernher the priest marks conceptually: twice he speaks of a vituperative reprimand

15 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, D 754–56. The biblical role models of Elijah, John, and Jesus show that the desert can be visited both in an existential crisis of meaning and for repentance.

16 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 228–32. On marginalized masculinity in general, see Connell, *Masculinities*, 81–83.

17 "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," chap. 2, paras. 1–2; Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 419–22.

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(*itewîz*) that the spouses receive.[18] While Joachim has been forced to withdraw from the religious public sphere and excluded from the community of pious men, Anne has to defend herself in her own home and to a servant. The infertile spouses are discriminated against in different spaces, but each is central to gender roles and self-image.

Forming a Childless Identity

Anne and Joachim's suffering from childlessness has substantial social causes. Neither of them wants to be marginalized, devalued, or abandoned, but each seek to belong and be accepted, either as a full member of the religious community or as a wife and mistress of the household. Both protagonists go through a socialization process that is typical for people who face stigma. As Erving Goffman has shown, stigmatized people do not define themselves differently from others.[19] At the same time, they experience how they are defined by others as set apart. This leads to a "spoiled identity" and inner self-contradiction—a phase of self-isolation and distancing from society. Reading the medieval legend, we gradually understand how the experience of social exclusion changes one's own self-image.

In the *Marienleben* by Wernher the Swiss, Anne does not have a recalcitrant maid, and the couple's relationship is clearly more intimate than in the older versions. Anne and Joachim have a loving marriage and are not concerned by their childlessness. This only becomes a problem when the husband is excluded from society. In the version by Wernher the Swiss, Joachim does not immediately separate from his wife but returns to her deeply saddened. Anne recognizes he is feeling low but cannot make sense of it. So, she does not identify her own infertility as the source of all evil. However, when Joachim tells her about the humiliating incident, its negative effects on him are transferred to her. Anne is deeply ashamed of her childlessness.

Anne and Joachim experience a shift in status from being accepted as normal to facing stigma. They learn about society's identity standards and apply them to themselves, even though they do not meet these standards. Therefore, they ardently wish to be able to live in conformity with the norms. Thus, two phases of fertile identity formation can be distinguished: first Joachim is stigmatized because of his infertility, then he and Anne take on the judgment of the fertile majority society. The spouses do not long for a child because they are looking for emotional enrichment, to give their lives

18 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 393, 628; see also A 621–26.

19 Goffman, *Stigma*.

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a deeper meaning, or to secure their inheritance. Rather, their desire arises from the experience of social exclusion. They have learned that parenthood brings recognition and privileges, while childlessness is associated with shame (*scham*), disgrace (*spot*), and suffering (*laid*).[20]

As with other identity categories, a clear distinction must be made between an independent assumption of roles and an assignment of roles by third parties; between "doing infertility" and it "being done." In the *Marienleben* by Wernher the Swiss, Anne and Joachim by no means define themselves as unhappy; rather, they are forced into an outsider position and only made childless by the negative evaluation of others. More and more, the protagonists appropriate the role of the unhappy infertile couple assigned to them. Societal expectations and comparison with those who set the norm are crucial to the formation of this identity as childless. In the Protoevangelium, Joachim does not immediately accept his devaluation but checks its accuracy against the list of the twelve tribes. When he realizes that all the righteous in Israel have had children, his religious degradation seems retrospectively justified. Joachim internalizes his sense of sinfulness so much that he can hardly believe in his late redemption.[21]

As Joachim questions the genealogical tradition, Anne reads the book of nature and concludes that she has been rejected. All creatures, in their view, fulfill the biblical mandate to multiply. The birds of the air are fruitful, the beasts of the field give birth, the waters gush and the earth brings forth fruit; only she herself seems to deviate from the creative rule. Five times the protagonist asks herself desperately: "Woe is me, to whom do I now compare?"[22] As the answer is always negative, Anne becomes increasingly aware of her singular position. Conversely, if all creatures are naturally fertile, this means that infertility contradicts both the religious and the natural destiny of humanity. Also in *Driu liet von der maget*, Anne thinks she is the only one to fall out of the fertile order of creation. Through recurring phrases, she

20 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 313–15. Even today, people who are involuntarily childless often feel shame. They fear being reduced to their longing for children, and ashamed of their inability and/or the intensity of their longing. Cf. Hyatt, *Ungestillte Sehnsucht*, 46–47.

21 In the Protoevangelium (chap. 5, para. 1), the protagonist demands another sign and is only convinced that he has found mercy when he cannot read any sin on the priestly headband. Even with Wernher the priest (*Maria*, A 753–64) Joachim hardly dares to offer God a new sacrifice. For the register of twelve tribes, which is missing in the German versions, see "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," chap. 1, para. 3.

22 "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," chap. 3, paras. 2–3. Cf. Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 513–22.

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increasingly embraces the assumption of being abnormal and practices taking on the role of a rightly stigmatized, infertile woman. Her deep despair culminates in regret that she had ever been born.

Reproductive Piety: Invoking Fertility

For the narrative of divine help, it is crucial that childless people do not stay with their suffering but ask for redemption. Although fulfillment of the longing to have a child is not in their hands, they have a decisive share because the initiative must come from the would-be parents. Reproductive theological action is to be located in the tension between reproductive autonomy and divine grace, which is why characters in the narratives respond to their childlessness with increased religious activity.

Fertility Prayers

Anne does not resign herself to her role as a victim but seeks refuge in prayer. She anticipates the hoped-for result in the Protoevangelium in a symbolic way: Anne takes off her mourning robes, washes herself, and puts on her wedding garments. On a walk, she pauses under a laurel tree in the garden and pleads: "God of my fathers, bless me and hear my request, as you blessed the mother Sarah and gave her Isaac as a son."[23] Her prayer is a remembrance and renewed realization of the biblical salvation story. Anne firmly believes that the fertility miracle of the mother of all Israel can be repeated. She hopes to have the same salvation experience as Sarah and to join the group of wives of the patriarchs and mothers of prophets who gave birth late in life.

While in the Greek source text Anne asks for God's blessing of fertility, in the first German vernacular version she begs to be delivered from the curse of infertility. Both prayers are for fertility but place different emphases in the interpretive model of reward and punishment. In *Driu liet von der maget*, Anne fervently laments having to suffer too many afflictions. The fact that God has not given her any children and has even taken away her excellent husband is unbearable for her. Her *raison d'être* as a woman seems lost when she is unable to perform the role of either a mother or a wife. All her joy in life depends on having children. In the course of the prayer, however, Anne changes her attitude. Before the omnipotent God, who can even raise

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23 "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," chap. 2, para. 4. On coded dress in general, see Kraß, *Geschriebene Kleider*.

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the dead, she draws new hope. The limits of human life, in conceiving, giving birth, and dying, are surmountable from a religious perspective. On her knees, Anne asks for deliverance from the curse that would wither her and prevent her conception.[24]

For Wernher the Swiss, infertility is not a problem that each partner has to sort out for themselves. Before Joachim goes into the desert, the couple pray together that God will take away their shame and grant them a child. But Anne is also abandoned in this life of Mary and continues her prayer alone. She urges God to be able to bear fruit, to praise God's name. Anne interprets the birth of a baby as a pious act that contributes to the glory of God. Thus, childbearing is closely linked to the temple sacrifice made by men and interpreted as a godly task for women. After Joachim has been excluded from the religious rite, it is now up to Anne to honour God by fulfilling the mandate to multiply and to restore her husband's honour. However, Anne cannot deliver her husband from the disgrace of infertility on her own, which is why she begs for mercy.[25] The narrative of divine help does not provide for human self-liberation.

Anne's prayer for fertility is both based on and becomes a model. Like Sarah in the Hebrew Bible, Mary's mother Anne gives birth late in life and becomes the bearer of hope for infertile women in the Christian legend tradition.[26] Thus the childless female protagonist of the late medieval romance *Reinfried von Braunschweig* take Anne as a role model. Yrkane's desperate prayer of around two hundred verses begins with a confession of faith. Christ is praised as the almighty creator who has ordered the whole cosmos. Like Anne, Yrkane also thinks she is the only creature to fall outside the divine order: "Why has your sweet consolation left me the only one barren?" ("wie hât dîn süezer trôst allein / mich unberhaft gelâzen?").[27] Their prayers express the fundamental ambivalence of pious, childless people. On the one hand, they can find strength in faith; on the other, infertility presents a challenge to their faith. Both women interpret their childlessness as a deviation from the norm and nature. Yrkane sees her life without a child as forfeit and thinks she will never be happy again. But she has not yet completely given up hope of having a baby and appeals to God's mercy.

24 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 462–64. See also A 443–45.

25 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 191–96.

26 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 288–90. Cf. Dörfler-Dierken, *Die Verehrung*, 161, 236, 242; Geaman, "Anna of Bohemia," 227.

27 *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, vv. 12982–83.

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Yrkane draws on several stories in the Bible and legends of women who had a child late in life with divine help. In the first place she mentions Anne and Joachim, recalling the expulsion from the temple, Anne's desperate pleading, and the redemptive pregnancy. Yrkane combines various biblical narratives to create a story of women's salvation from (in)fertility, which includes the late pregnancies of Hannah and Elizabeth as well as the virgin birth. In metaphorical biblical language, she calls the gate of her fertility closed and asks God to open her womb.[28] Visualizing the miracle stories brings Yrkane comfort and security: she reasons with herself that if God delivered the Jewish women of the Hebrew Bible from their barrenness, how much more would God answer the prayer of a Christian woman. From the biblical narrative and the Christian hierarchy of religions, the protagonist positively derives a claim to fertility. Nevertheless, she is not content with offering one prayer, but prays without ceasing: in bed, at table, on the street—she begs incessantly for a baby.

In medieval narrative literature, not only women pray to be granted children. Anne's Joachim also turns to God for help, and Yrkane's Reinfried pleads for an heir. However, the great monologues are reserved for women characters, whereas the prayer of childless men is usually reported only summarily or in indirect speech. In their fertility prayers, Anne and Yrkane not only ask for a baby but also quarrel with God, explore their gender identity, and question the meaning of their lives. Infertile women thus become female Job figures who are particularly affected by childlessness. Their narrative mode is lamentation, while infertile men are left with various options for action. They can change their place of residence, escape the demands of society by fleeing, or try to encourage God's mercy through vows, offerings, and pilgrimages. The high level of commitment shown by male characters who face childlessness proves that longed-for parenthood is not perceived as a specifically female problem in either medieval narrative literature or the contemporary culture of piety.[29]

The Master of the Miracles of Mariazell (ca. 1520) impressively depicted the spouses' joint supplication in a woodcut (Fig. 1). The complex composition, which links two spatial and two temporal levels, is not easy to inter-

28 *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, vv. 12998–99 and 13081. On unceasing prayer cf. vv. 13173–79.

29 In evaluating late medieval miracle books, Signori ("Defensivgemeinschaften," 121) finds that religious means to prevent infertility were often initiated by men. Geaman ("Anna of Bohemia," 235, 237–38) cites several examples of European high nobles where childless spouses went on pilgrimage together.

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pret. In the right half of the picture, under a canopy, sits a woman with a tense expression. She is propped up in bed by a mountain of pillows, her hands clasped piously. The sheets are rumpled, the place beside her deserted. At the end of the bed, her husband kneels, hands clasped in prayer, eyes devoutly raised. His bare, cramped feet testify to the tension he, too, is under. The caption explains that the couple's marriage remained barren for three years. His attitude of fervent prayer suggests the husband is suffering no less than his wife. The view of a background scene played out beyond the bedroom walls reveals that this story of (in)fertility is not over yet.

Reproductive Journeys

Prayer alone does not always lead to a birth. So, infertile couples considered ways of increasing the chances that their reproductive theological efforts would succeed. Even in the Middle Ages, infertile couples travelled to places where they had greater hope of fertility and, on this quest, they were remarkably mobile. While today, would-be parents visit fertility clinics abroad, in the Middle Ages they made pilgrimages to specific sites, places of worship, or even the Holy Land.[30] Unlike modern ones, medieval reproductive travellers were not concerned with circumventing legal or professional restrictions in their country of origin, reducing treatment costs, or benefiting from a higher standard of medicine but with increasing their religious heft. They hoped to persuade God to hear their prayers or to win influential saints as intercessors.

The woodcut with the couple pleading for children bears witness to this fertility-related devotional practice (Fig. 1). It belongs to a cycle of images depicting miraculous healings around the Austrian pilgrimage church at Mariazell. The printed caption explains that this respectable married couple from the principality above the Enns River were married for three years without having a child. But when they made a vow before Our Lady at Zell in 1503, the woman became pregnant. In today's terminology, these medieval fertility pilgrimages could be called a cross-border reproductive theological practice.[31] It was not until the reformations that this tradition came to an end—at least in the Protestant areas. With the exception of prayer, all fertility-promoting devotional practices were declared ineffective. Moreover,

30 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 77–78.

31 Salama et al., "Cross Border Reproductive Care (CBRC)." On the loss of significance of pilgrimages and the humanist critique, cf. Geaman, "Anna of Bohemia," 236; Oren-Magidor, "From Anne to Hannah."

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Figure 1. “Prayer to be granted a child” by the Master of the Miracles of Mariazell (ca. 1520). Woodcut, 19.3 × 14.4 cm. Vienna, Albertina Museum, DG2014/16/13. Courtesy of the Albertina Museum. Further reproduction of this image without the copyright holder’s permission is prohibited.

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pious Protestant women were no longer allowed to turn to any intermediaries but only to Christ himself. Yet, Catholic believers continued to rely on the effectiveness of pilgrimages and intercessory prayer, as is still reflected in the post reporting that "Mother Anne helped" with fertility.

In *Jüngerer Titurel* (Titurel the Younger, 1260–1272/73) a married couple seeks advice on how best to overcome their infertility. Soon, Titurison and Elizabel are advised to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and bring a precious golden image to the Holy Sepulchre.[32] It is not clear whether this advice comes from another couple with fertility problems, a woman who knows about healing, a learned medical doctor, or a cleric. Titurison and Elizabel are prepared to make great financial and physical sacrifices to fulfill their longing for a child. In their grief and willingness to act, they are portrayed as a unit, so that their childlessness is always a shared problem, never gender-specific. Together they set out on the arduous journey and take with them an extremely valuable sacred image. Their voyage out goes without a hitch, and they reach their destination surprisingly quickly. The narrator reports that God was pleased with their sacrifice and gave the couple an heir. On the return journey from Jerusalem, however, a heavy sea storm swells, putting the lives of the would-be parents in danger. This threatening change in the weather can be understood as a metaphor. The road to having a child is a dangerous adventure with an uncertain outcome; it takes the travellers a long time to reach the safe harbour of parenthood.

Another noble who makes a reproductive pilgrimage is Duke Leopold in Johann von Würzburg's chivalric romance of courtly love, *Wilhelm von Österreich* (William of Austria, completed 1314). Leopold is well on in years and desires to finally provide his lands with an heir.[33] Compared to other fictional narratives of (in)fertility and the consequences of childlessness for feudal politics, the lines are drawn more harshly. Repeatedly, the Austrian duke fears that after his death war will break out over the succession to the throne. This reflects the historical situation of medieval rulers, whose ultimate duty was to produce an heir.[34] He is convinced that the only way to secure lasting peace is through reproduction. Therefore, the infertility of his marriage robs him of all joy, making him feel melancholy and grieve daily, seeming completely alone in his sorrow. Finally, Leopold decides to ask a

32 Albrecht von Scharfenberg, *Jüngerer Titurel*, stanzas 148–51.

33 Johann von Würzburg, *Wilhelm von Österreich*, vv. 173–539.

34 Cf. Toepfer, "Fertilität und Macht"; Ubl, "Der kinderlose König."

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saint for fertility help. He promises St. John he will make a pilgrimage to Ephesus in the hope that the Evangelist will intercede for him with God.

The duke immediately puts his plan into action, gets everything ready for his departure, and bids farewell to his wife. Unlike in *Jüngerer Titurel*, the reproductive pilgrimage in *Wilhelm von Österreich* is a matter for men only. The duchess is reluctant to let her husband go abroad but recognizes the necessity. For both of them to ensure an heir, pilgrimage seems the best and only option. The duke is confident that his attempt will succeed and speaks words of encouragement to his wife: "All will be well" ("ez wirt uns gůt").[35] The hot tears the duchess and her entourage shed as they take leave of Leopold indicate the risk involved in reproductive travel in the Middle Ages. Storms, shipwrecks, assaults, accidents, and diseases pose a threat to life. Despite this, the duke does not hesitate and is prepared to pay a high price to fulfill his longing for an heir. His chests are filled to the brim with gold, which is needed both to finance the journey and to make religious offerings. Indeed, on the voyage from Marseille to Ephesus, Leopold faces a severe storm at sea. Once again, the sea is an existentially threatening space in which a would-be father is in danger of drowning but is rescued.

Imitated Prayer Practice

Fertility therapies are readily imitated; this applies to medical treatments today as well as to religious remedies in the Middle Ages. On the Mediterranean, Leopold of Austria meets King Agrant of Zyzya, who gives him a warm welcome. The encounter between the two rulers is doubly relevant to the issue of (in)fertility. Again, the dangerous long-term consequences of childlessness are emphasized. The duke talks openly about his fears for the succession and the threat of war. At the same time, his religious fertility strategy is admired and imitated even before it has worked. When Agrant learns of the reproductive theological reason for the journey, he immediately decides to accompany Leopold. This willingness is all the more remarkable in view of their religious differences. Although Agrant is not a Christian, in his quest for an heir he wants to leave no stone unturned and to worship the duke's god.[36] The hierarchies of religious and fertility values are closely linked, as also shown in Yrkane's prayer. Infertility is presented as a

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35 Johann von Würzburg, *Wilhelm von Österreich*, v. 245.

36 The King of Zyzya does not speak of converting and later holds to his faith (Johann von Würzburg, *Wilhelm von Österreich*, vv. 608–11).

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problem that transcends space and religion to set the scene for the superiority of the Christian God.

The narrative of divine help thus encourages discipleship and owes its widespread dissemination to proclaiming this theology of reproduction. Stories of infertility, which tell of a divine miracle of birth, are repeatedly retold down the generations and depicted in a wide variety of media, from wall hangings to altarpieces to woodcuts.[37] Like Yrkane, would-be parents comfort themselves with stories of miracle pregnancies. Women whose longing for a baby was fulfilled late, like the author of the online post entitled "Mother Anne helped," told their stories to encourage others facing the same plight and to give thanks for being saved from it. How the religious narrative continues to reproduce itself and impact into the present can be observed on the forum for would-be parents.

Nine years after that post, a participant reported on July 12, 2017, that the "Mother Anne" method had worked.[38] After three years of trying, she and her husband had given up hope of conceiving when she was browsing the forum and discovered the fertility prayer to Anne. As was common in prayer practice from the Middle Ages, the would-be mother appropriated the text haptically, using it like an amulet.[39] She wrote out the prayer, put it in her purse, carried it around with her, prayed it twice, and firmly believed in it. A few weeks later, it had the desired effect. The author is overjoyed to report that she is nine weeks' pregnant. In this case, too, public transmission is part of a religious covenant. Twice the would-be mother mentions that she promised to tell her story "if it works out." Like the previous contributor who recommended Anne as an advocate for fertility problems, she wants to inspire others to do the same.

Fertile Grace: Promises of Salvation

Today, the religious path to conceiving is highly controversial, as the online discussion shows. Both posts gained a large number of comments in a very short time, with responses ranging from rejection and incomprehension to indifference or recognition.[40] One commenter thought it was pure coinci-

37 On the medial dimension in general cf. Signori, *Wunder*, 40–73.

38 Angelinarummer, "Mit Gebet Schwanger." In this post, the narrative framing and prayer are quoted verbatim from the post, dated May 23, 2008, but the years do not match.

39 Cf. Skemer, *Binding Words*.

40 The post dated May 23, 2008, has twenty-four comments, while the post

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dence that "praying and pregnancy" coincided. Another told secular birth miracle stories in which couples had conceived only after they had said goodbye to their longing for children. Several commenters dismissed the post writers' beliefs as "crap," "rubbish," "superstition," and "utter nonsense." For those who had "real biological barriers to overcome," pious prayers were no use. A would-be mother cynically commented that the author was welcome to pray for her, but that it would not do any good. For other contributors, pragmatism prevailed: prayer might be an option for individuals but was no panacea. Nevertheless, some women confidently professed their faith, wanted to try the fertility prayer, and hoped that "Mother Anne" would also help them.

Such fundamental doubts about the metaphysical cause of pregnancy have no part in the religious narrative. In the medieval literature, whether a protagonist becomes a mother because of a different psychological attitude or because of divine help is not a matter of interpretation. Rather, the connection between prayer and response is clarified by a messenger from God, announcing that the longing for a child will be fulfilled. The Master of the Miracles of Mariazell also provides a clear religious framework in his woodcut (Fig. 1). In the top left corner of the image, wreathed in clouds, is Our Lady, Queen of Heaven. In her arms she holds the Christ Child, who nestles lovingly against his mother and who seems to positively draw the gaze of the praying man. The obvious interpretation—that Mary helps the childless couple to have children—is confirmed and authenticated by the caption.

Sacred Reproductive Technology

As in the woodcut by the Master of Miracles of Mariazell, in Otte's *Eraclius* the centre of the action is the marriage bed. One night, on the very spot where Myriados and Cassinia have struggled in vain to conceive for so many years, an angel appears. He approaches the bed where both spouses are sleeping but turns only to Cassinia. He reveals to her that God does not want her to wait any longer and that she will conceive that very night. While most heavenly messengers of fertility focus on the child to come, the angel in *Eraclius* is concerned with reproductive technology. Admittedly, the sexual act is embedded in a religious interpretative framework and therefore justified per se. But the episode also testifies to childless couples' willingness to accept unconventional methods of procreation. Carefully, the angel instructs

dated July 12, 2017, has forty. Cf. rira, "Mutter Anna"; angelinarummer, "Mit Gebet Schwanger."

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the woman about the correct method of conception. Cassinia is to get up, put on her most beautiful dress, have the floor swept, spread out a rug, lay green and red silk bedding on it, and then call her husband. Procreation cannot simply occur in the marital bedchamber but requires a specific cultural setting that differs from the usual sexual practice: the spouses must have intercourse in a specially prepared place, as if in a solemn ritual. In the divinely assisted procreative act, sexual and liturgical ceremony form a sacred unity: early in the morning, the couple are to go to church, give the used garments and cloth to the poor, and have a mass said.[41]

Cassinia is unsure how to deal with these instructions. Terrified, she wonders how she can encourage Myriados to perform such a sexual act. She fears that her husband might accuse her of lechery or even lying but hesitates only briefly before following the angel's instructions closely, trusting in God. Dressed festively, Cassinia prepares the place for procreation and then reveals herself to her unsuspecting husband. He seems to have only been waiting for the divine mandate to multiply, without saying a word, Myriados springs into action. Despite the religious framing, this procreation is an inner-worldly, creaturely event. Cassinia, as the narrator comments, becomes pregnant in the usual human way.

Social Reintegration

In *Driu liet von der maget* the heavenly messenger appears as an analogy to the biblical story of the Annunciation. The angel of the Lord addresses Anne by name, encourages her not to be afraid, and announces the birth of an extraordinary child. The genealogical perspective even expands from the longed-for baby to the redeemer grandchild. Anne learns that her daughter will give birth to the saviour of the world, which fills her with unbridled joy. Wernher the priest shows what a burden infertility has been for Anne in her physical and mental weariness. After the angel's visit, Anne spends an entire night and the following day in bed, unable to eat. The narrator compares her condition to waking up from a bad dream.[42] Anne's experience is shown as like dreaming of being chased by enemies, with no hope of escape. Not only the relief on waking but also the content of the nightmare is revealing for its self-perception. The serious social effects of childlessness are implied when an infertile woman feels at the mercy of and persecuted by others. On the one hand, the imagined violence shows that this stigma can trigger

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41 Otte, *Eraclius*, vv. 34–74.

42 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 587–99.

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traumatic experiences. On the other hand, as soon as an infertile woman becomes fertile—however late in life—her view of her own social situation is transformed. In retrospect, the childless phase seems surreal, whereas real life begins with motherhood.

In the legend of Anne, Joachim is also visited by the angel who announces the birth of a daughter. For both spouses, the promise of fertility is followed by social reintegration. In *Driu liet von der maget*, Joachim's shepherds find their master prostrated in prayer, fear he has collapsed, and rush to help. Joachim is raised up, both physically and spiritually.[43] When they hear the news of the angel brought, the townsfolk praise God for the miracle and praise Anne as the best of all women. After months of separation, Anne sees her Joachim again at the Golden Gate. The city gate marks the transition that the meeting signifies for both: Joachim is readmitted to the social community and Anne is again acknowledged as a wife. Together, the couple crosses the line that has been drawn between nonparents and parents. Anne and Joachim are most welcome as a couple blessed by God who now belong to the fertile majority society and live in conformity with its norms.

The Master of the Miracles of Mariazell depicts this type of reacceptance ritual in a woodcut (Fig. 1). While he sets the scene for the couple's despair in the foreground, in the background their hopes have already been fulfilled: the young mother is shown going to church for the first time after giving birth. With her hair loose, holding a lit candle, she approaches the church steps, where a standing figure in a long robe—presumably a cleric—is waiting for her. The woman to be churched is accompanied by three other women, the first of whom holds the infant in her arms. In this image of (in)fertility, the key moment in fulfilling longing for a child is not the physical closeness of mother and baby but the religious purification ritual after birth.[44] This is when the young woman makes her first public appearance as a mother and is newly accepted into the church community. At this point the man, who also plays a decisive role in the pregnancy through his prayer, is not staged as the father.

43 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 796–99. On the encounter at the city gate, cf. A 861–907.

44 Cf. Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen*, 213–40; Rieder, *On the Purification of Women*.

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Divine Conditions

Concepts of marriage and family are linked to social values. The metaphysical addressee of all fertility prayers also has certain expectations and can set conditions for responding, as is explored in *Reinfried von Braunschweig* (Reinfried of Brunswick). Like his wife Yrkane, Reinfried prays fervently for an heir and tries to evoke God's mercy.[45] Even after he has promised a child made of gold as a votive offering, his prayers are unanswered. Reinfried's suffering is no longer a private matter but spreads to his entire dominion: Westphalia, Saxony, and Brunswick mourn with their prince. Reinfried is so distressed by his childlessness that he can hardly sleep. Restless with worry, he lies alone in bed, tossing and turning. He seems to have stopped all sexual activity and to doubt the religious strategy to solve his problem.

At this emotional low point, divine help swoops in with dramatic effect. In his trance-like state—half asleep, half awake—Reinfried sees a heavenly figure. As in the woodcut by the Master of the Miracles of Mariazell, in this late medieval romance the Mother of God appears with the Christ Child. In these stories of (in)fertility, Mary functions not only as messenger and intercessor, but also as the perfect mother. She embodies and represents the ideal image for childless people. Reinfried is so moved by the sight of the little child that he does not immediately recognize Mary. She quickly gets to the point and presents the prospect of fulfilling his longing for a child but makes her promise of salvation dependent on one condition: Reinfried is to go on a crusade to fight "heathens."[46] Once again, fertility and religious categories intersect with the effect of devaluing non-Christians. What is justified from a medieval Christian perspective seems all the more problematic today: for the birth of an heir, one can accept the death of many people. By going on crusade, the would-be father also knowingly puts his life at risk. Mary does not conceal the fact that Reinfried must endure many trials, but she comforts him with the promise of a joyful homecoming.

Like Cassinia, at first Reinfried does not know how to respond to the mission from on high. He is less concerned with communicating the good news than with whether it is truthful and binding. Was it all a dream, or was Our Lady really sending him to the Holy Sepulchre? When he finally falls into a light slumber, Mary appears again to repeat her promise and its condition. Reinfried's doubts about the vision give way to fear of the challenge ahead. For him, the prospect of having a child does not mean salvation, because any

45 *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, vv. 13180–496.

46 Cf. Neudeck, *Continuum historiale*, 130–43.

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joy is overridden by the fear of mortal danger. Full of horror, Reinfried wakes up in terrible pain, feeling as if he has been beaten to death. Mary has to appear a third time and comfort him until he is finally convinced of the mission and vows to go on crusade. Reinfried stands by this decision, even when he sees how severely it affects his wife. Yrkane is overcome with tears and expresses her grief so strongly that Reinfried wishes to retract his promise. But he considers the journey unavoidable because of his vows. In view of the impending separation, the value standards are shifting: having or not having children is no longer an issue for the couple, although previously their infertility worries dominated everything.

In this very situation, Yrkane's and Reinfried's lifelong wish comes true. After a decade of marriage, Yrkane becomes pregnant during her farewell act of love. Unlike the narrator, the characters do not know what is going to happen. But the very next morning, Yrkane suspects that she is going to be a mother. The reason for this is a prophetic dream in which an old lion vanishes, and a young lion appears to comfort her.[47] In medieval literature, such dreams have a symbolic function; in this case the animal symbolism can be easily deciphered as related to Brunswick, which is associated with Henry the Lion. Thus, the dream has similar significance to a pregnancy test. The prospect of a baby evokes new fears in Yrkane. What if she gives birth when Reinfried is away, and he doubts whether he is the father? Immediately she tells him about her dream and insists on writing down the date of the presumed conception. No one should ever be able to dispute the legitimacy of a future heir.

Religious Expectations: Theology of Reproduction

In *Reinfried von Braunschweig* the usual sequence of time and the causal logic of the reproductive journey is suspended. Yrkane is already pregnant before Reinfried has even set off. By the standards of the natural world, a reproductive journey would be unnecessary. The fact that Reinfried nevertheless goes on crusade shows an essential difference between reproductive medicine and theology of reproduction. This is not only a means to an end but is integrated into a complex system of powerlessness and grace, hope and redemption, which extends to the whole of life, in this world and the next. Believers are not patients who stop needing a doctor when fertility treatment works. Rather, potential or actual parents remain permanently

47 *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, vv. 14926–86.

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dependent on divine support. Overall, we can identify various moral, economic, and eschatological principles that form the basis for the remedy.

Fertility Morality

At first glance, the narrative of divine help seems to offer an alternative to the widespread devaluation of childless couples. The connection between infertility and punishment is broken when blameless and God-fearing protagonists do not conceive. Yet, the fertility-centred conclusion of the narrative destroys this impression; with metaphysical support, all biblical and legendary (in)fertility stories end with the longed-for pregnancy. At most, the value judgment is relativized by the fact the inhabitants of the narrated world do not know the outcome. Nonparents are discriminated against with the narrative caveat that they may still conceive late, which would be a sign of divine election rather than rejection. The narrator in the life of Mary by Wernher the Swiss discusses Anne's and Joachim's infertility in the subjunctive and distances himself from the general view of their plight. While their contemporaries think the couple is infertile, because he is narrating the story, he knows they will have a child.[48]

Divine redemption leads to a particular couple being reassessed, but the underlying values remain unchanged. Rather, the distinction between fertility and infertility is strengthened. When it is not a matter of course, pregnancy becomes a special grace. Because fertility contrasts positively with initial barrenness, it tends to distinguish the pious. Messengers from on high and grateful new parents explicitly confirm the cause-and-effect relationship of fertility as prefigured in the biblical birth miracle stories. Thus, Joachim is promised a daughter as a reward for his piety and Anne interprets her late pregnancy as a sign of divine blessing. In the medieval versions of the legend of Anne, narrators and characters consistently assume that an infertile marriage is cursed and a fertile one blessed.[49] The temple priest only changes his negative view of Joachim because he can read his innocence in Anne's now-pregnant body. This spiritual authority's position is clearly related to reproduction.

Because perceptions of it revolve around reward and punishment, (in)fertility can be instrumentalized to convey behavioural norms and to discipline people. In *Jüngerer Titurel*, Albrecht von Scharfenberg interprets

48 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 153–56.

49 "Protoevangelium des Jakobus," chap. 4, para. 4; Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 684–85, cf. A 354–56.

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the complications on the reproductive journey as part of being tried by God. When Titurison and Elizabel are caught in the eye of the storm at sea, the narrator draws a parallel to the biblical Job, who God tested to the limit. Titurison and Elizabel, too, had to endure terrible suffering. By drawing this parallel, the narrator expresses an opinion on why childlessness exists and warns readers against impatience and dissatisfaction. Whoever is angry with God, disputes with the divine will, or even rebels against it cannot count on support. This basic religious rule is illustrated by the (in)fertility story: Titurison and Elizabel survive and have a child because they hold on to their faith with "unwavering steadfastness and without any doubt" ("staete sunder wenken und alles zwivels gar").[50]

The moral of *Jüngerer Titurel*, like numerous other biblical and legendary stories of (in)fertility, is that piety, trust in God, and patience are ultimately rewarded. Readers who take a critical approach to normativity will thus find the narrative highly ambivalent. If God grants children to pious petitioners, those who remain childless throughout their lives cannot be aligned with piety. The sacralization of fertility goes hand in hand with stigmatization of infertility.

Human Investment

The theology of reproduction creates a logic that puts pressure—both social and religious—on childless couples. If God has not yet given them a child, they have to try harder. The divine help narrative suggests that, with God's help, any devout couple can have a child if they just have the right attitude, trust in God, and invest enough.[51] In Otte's *Eraclius*, Cassinia gets pregnant because she and Myriados do not cease their supplications to God until they are finally heard. Similarly, the Mother of God in *Reinfried von Braunschweig* confirms the reproductive theological link between cause and effect. Through their incessant pleas, Reinfried and Yrkane obtain what they otherwise would not have. The conviction that the practice of piety is linked to fertility success shapes sociocultural consciousness beyond literature. A proverb from Mecklenburg bears witness to this, calculating a formula for fertility: "Many children, many Our Fathers" (*Väl Kinner, väl Vaterunser*).[52]

50 Albrecht von Scharfenberg, *Jüngerer Titurel*, stanza 157, v. 4. For the Job comparison, see stanza 151, v. 3.

51 Otte, *Eraclius*, vv. 29–33, 65–74; *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, vv. 13272–76.

52 Kummer, "Kindersegen," 1378.

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In medieval narrative literature, noble protagonists rely not only on the power of prayer but also on financial donations. Konrad von Würzburg narrates the success of this strategy in *Alexius*. Eufemian and Agleis give alms generously because they hope that God will then grant them a child.[53] What appears to be an act of Christian mercy turns out to be a transaction for reproduction. Similarly to indulgences, people invest in their future without knowing for sure whether their investment will pay off. According to the logic of the most popular medieval (in)fertility narrative, investing in reproduction is always worthwhile.

If, like Duke Leopold in *Wilhelm von Österreich*, you knew the reproductive theological system, you could play it in a cross-border exchange. In return for making a pilgrimage to Ephesus, Leopold expected John the Evangelist to intercede for him so he could have the child he longed for. How much the church profits from the donations of would-be parents is at least hinted at in this romance: the Duke of Austria, with the King of Zyzya, makes many large and splendid offerings to the saint, which seem more important than sending up prayers. When the two rulers leave after their pious business, their gifts become the property of the church. The spiritual prelates at the pilgrimage church take the rich gifts in hand. This transactional side of the theology of reproduction is documented in numerous material objects, such as consecration images and votive tablets.[54]

The reasons why (in)fertility is related to a specific social status can be found in material resources. In medieval narrative literature, childlessness is predominantly a problem of the ruling class. This is partly related to the literature's conditions of production, reception, and transmission. Stories of (in)fertility that interest a courtly audience are told and recorded. Distributing the inheritance, securing the succession, and dynastic continuity are genuine concerns of the nobility. Another reason is that people of higher social status have the means to afford the expense of a reproductive journey, whether to a medical centre or to a religious pilgrimage site. Then and now, a key factor in fulfilling longing for children is financial means.

53 Konrad von Würzburg, *Alexius*, vv. 108–14.

54 Cf. Johann von Würzburg, *Wilhelm von Österreich*, vv. 444–53. See also Jasperse, "Visualizing Dynastic Desire," esp. 140–44.

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Divine Punishment

The answer to a fertility prayer is no guarantee for a permanently happy family. In the reproductive theological system, fertility remains prone to failure and depends on the would-be parents' lifelong piety. God can give a child to infertile couples but equally take this blessing away. The link between cause and effect is assumed not only at birth but also at a child's death.

Heinrich Kaufringer (in the decades surrounding 1400) tells an (in)fertility story which ends in catastrophe: a hermit who wants to explore the wonders of God's world meets an angel in the guise of a pilgrim. Together they spend the night at the home of a rich burgher who offers them his hospitality. The narrator creates an idyllic picture of the family consisting of a generous householder, an honourable wife, and a sweet baby. Nothing seems to be wrong at all except that the father, the mother, and the servants are almost too attentive to the infant. Their whole life revolves around the baby in the cradle.[55] This behaviour is explained by fact that the couple had to wait many years for an heir. The story of this family initially follows the narrative of divine help: both partners suffered greatly because of their childlessness, prayed unceasingly, and were finally given a child. It is explicitly emphasized that the pregnancy was a miracle—it defied the laws of nature. The woman conceived although that seemed physically impossible.

The happiness of the parents is abruptly destroyed by the guests. When the visitors are alone with the gently slumbering infant, the angel first admires its delicate beauty and then destroys it. Taking a pillow, he covers the baby's face, smothering it. The angel only explains his motive to the distraught hermit much later. He begins where the narrative of divine help usually ends: after the birth, the overjoyed parents thought only of their baby and forgot the One who had made the birth possible. Implicitly, the angel draws attention to a basic theological tenet of reproduction: if would-be parents finally conceive through divine help, God expects their lifelong thanks.

The mother and father in Kaufringer's tale are harshly punished for disregarding this principle. The logic of the argument is particularly perfidious because the angel claims to have murdered the child for the good of the parents. Otherwise, the couple would have squandered their salvation; their souls would have been lost forever. In this interpretation, punishment even appears as a new variant of divine help. The angel states that losing their child is a learning and chastening experience to encourage the young parents to return to

55 Heinrich Kaufringer, "Der Einsiedler und der Engel," esp. vv. 64–69, 345–68.

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God again and follow the divine commandments.[56] Thus, this tale is based on a peculiar variant of regretted parenthood, which differs from the phenomenon Orna Donath describes in her book on regretting motherhood,[57] but can still be categorized under the same term. The protagonists of Kaufringer's (in)fertility story do not realize it is not right for them to have children and wish to return to their childless state. Rather, God feels remorse for having made these people parents. The actions of the supreme being can easily be reversed in retrospect, so the longed-for baby dies. This chillingly cruel morality challenges readers today and makes them question the medieval image of God. The story of God's regret about their parenthood is better tolerated if it is interpreted not as a punitive action but as a critique of normativity: the heavenly messenger draws attention to the problematic nature of longing for children and questions the implicit teleology of the religious narrative. With a child, not everything is always good; rather, new problems can arise that put the previous value judgements into perspective. The angel's warning encourages us to rethink the priority of fertility. People should have more purpose in life than parenthood alone.

Prospects

Today, the most important narrative that shaped the perception of childlessness from antiquity to modernity has largely lost its significance. Medicine seems to have long since completely replaced theology as the leading science in the discourse on (in)fertility. These days, people who are longing to have children usually do not go to church but to a fertility clinic. Only in certain religious circles are specific prayers still offered for would-be parents and their relatives. Modern knowledge about the biology of procreation—especially the discovery of the egg and how it fuses with sperm—has revealed more and more secrets about the origin of life. Creating optimal conditions for conception in a Petri dish, doctors could be seen to be playing God, even replacing the biblical creator and saviour. But the belief in overcoming infertility has not diminished; it lives on in a secular variant. Remarkably, underlying the current capitalist fertility system are principles formed in premodern reproductive theology. Today's dominant narrative of medical help suggests that every longing for a child can be fulfilled—as long as would-be parents invest enough time, money, and energy.

56 In this version, the narrative also finds its way into sermon literature, cf. Geiler von Kaysersberg, "Trostspiegel," 228–29.

57 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*.

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