Chapter 3

SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES

TAKING IN A CHILD

PEOPLE WITH AN unfulfilled longing for children are often told that they could have a child after all. Adoption appears to be a realistic and often the only way to start a family. In her book *Ungestillte Sehnsucht* (Unquelled Longing, 2012), the Berlin-based author and translator Millay Hyatt describes how after being diagnosed as infertile, the thought of having "someone else's child" initially seemed utterly daunting. As time went on, however, she came round to this idea until her longing gradually detached itself from her own body and shifted to a child in need.[1]

Based on the laws related to (in)fertility, it appears that in the medieval period this path must have been denied those wishing to have children. The consensus among legal historians is that between late Antiquity and the late Middle Ages, there were no forms that can be compared with today's adoption practice; would-be parents did not take young children in to live with them as a family. Although childless people sought to secure their property through legal agreements, the status of the heirs by law always remained precarious.[2] All agreements were subject to the proviso that no biological offspring were born. A look beyond medieval legal treatises and collections of laws, however, reveals a completely different picture. In early biblical poetry, legends, courtly verse narratives, late medieval *minne* (courtly love) and *âventiure* (adventure) romances, didactic collections, and early modern prose romances childless people take in other people's daughters and sons and bring them up. As in the narrative of the dangerous third party, this three-way relationship has the potential for conflict, although it usually only unfolds at a late stage due to the staggered timing. The triangle in the narrative of social alternatives is the relationship between children, their biological parents, and their social parents. When biological fathers and mothers disappear from their children's lives for an indefinite period, they are handed over to their social mothers and fathers. In narrative literature, all rights and obligations of those who conceived the child are transferred to those who care for that child.

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1 Hyatt, *Ungestillte Sehnsucht*, 154–59.

2 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 102–11.

In the ten stories that I analyze in this chapter, which were written between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, this practice is referred to as adoption only once.[3] The term is used in an early German humanist text, when ancient sources were increasingly being used and new attention was being paid to Roman legal practice. Albrecht von Eyb added to the *Ehebüchlein* (Little Book of Marriage, second half of the fifteenth century) that taking a child in as one's own is called *adoptinus* in Latin. But even in the Middle Ages, the long-term care, familial equality, and hereditary succession that are typical of the social alternative narrative correspond to today's understanding of adoption. Recognition as a fully-fledged family member is, of course, dependent on one crucial condition: the child's "true" parentage must be concealed, especially if adopted children are to enjoy the same inheritance privileges as children born in wedlock.

Genealogical Origin: Abandonment and Loss

Adopted and foster children have a history that their social parents do not know. In medieval literature, however, the authorial narrators are aware of these connections and report why, how, and with what feelings parents separate from their babies. The narrative of social alternatives usually begins with a conception that is not wanted by the biological parents or powerful third parties. Separation from the family of origin can not only save the child's life and enable social advancement but also protect other figures from danger and punishment.

Reasons for Separation

The biblical archetype of the narrative is sketched out in the story of Moses's childhood (Exod. 2). Pharaoh orders that all male newborns of the Hebrews are to be killed. In contrast to many other biblical stories of (in)fertility, the problem that is addressed is not a lack of children but an overabundance. The Egyptians see the high birth rate of the enslaved women as a danger and want to prevent further population growth by force. Moses's mother man-

3 Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 109. I use the following editions for the analysis: 1) Albanus: a) *Die religiösen Dichtungen*, vol. 3, 605–14; b) Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 108–18; 2) Gregorius: Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*; 3) Judas: *Passional*, vv. 34483–5028; 4) Mose: a) *Die altdeutsche Exodus*, vv. 141–268; b) *Vorauer Mose*, 32–34; 5) Fresne: Marie de France, *The Lais*, 116–43; 6) Beaflor: *Mai und Beaflor*; 7) Willehalm: Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*; 8) Lewe: *Herzog Herpin*; 9) Oleybaum: *Herzog Herpin*; 10) Fridbert: Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 679–810.

ages to keep her son's birth secret for three months, after which she abandons the baby. Although the biblical narrator does not comment on the characters' inner lives, the good intention is beyond question. The mother does everything in her power to save her child's life. In the *Altdeutsche Exodus* (Old German Exodus, probably between 1120 and 1130), she is explicitly praised as wise.[4]

In the oldest German-language verse legend—an extensive collection of lives of the saints in rhyming couplets—parents abandon a child in order to avert greater harm.[5] In the Judas legend in the *Passional* (late thirteenth century) Cyborea and Ruben are less concerned with the baby's life than with preserving the future of their tribe. An ominous dream warns Cyborea that her unborn son poses a great danger. The usual hopes of expectant parents are thus distorted. The one who was to continue the family line will ensure its downfall. The parents take the prophecy seriously and give up their child, who will one day join Jesus and betray him.

Other mothers give up their children because they want to avoid scandal and hide illicit behaviour.[6] According to their legends, Gregorius and Albanus are of high noble birth but were conceived through incest. The first is the son of princely twins from Aquitaine; the second is the fruit of a sexual relationship between a powerful king and his daughter. Marie de France also motivates the abandonment of a child with a noblewoman's concern about conforming to moral standards. In *La Fresne* (ca. 1170), a *lai*, or French verse romance, a mother wants to get rid of her daughter so that she will not be accused of adultery. Although she has not entered into an extramarital relationship, she fears that this is how others will interpret the birth of her twins. Because a man usually only fathers one child, she believes that two babies could imply two fathers. She therefore considers the birth of twins to be compromising and prefers losing them to losing her honour.

But sometimes children are separated from their parents without the latter's consent, even when the mother resists fiercely.[7] In the prose epic *Herzog Herpin* (Duke Herpin, first half of the fifteenth century) the Duchess Allheyt loses her son as soon as he is born. As she has to give birth to the boy alone in the middle of the forest on her way into exile, the robbers have an

4 *Die altdeutsche Exodus*, v. 215.

5 *Passional*, vv. 34499–567.

6 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 303–450; Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 108; Marie de France, "Fresne," in *The Lais*, vv. 73–94.

7 *Herzog Herpin*, 30–31, 419–20.

easy time of it. They kidnap the beautiful woman and forbid her to take her newborn with her. Many years later, a similar fate befalls Allheyt's daughter-in-law Florentyne. She is also forcibly separated from one of her twin sons after giving birth when her husband is not there, but in her case this is political. Another, but final, option for terminating a parent-child relationship is death. In the late medieval romances *Willehalm von Orlens* and *Mai und Beaflor* (both thirteenth century)—which deal with *minne* and *âventiure*—the protagonists lose their parents at an early age. Willehalm's father falls in battle, and his mother soon follows him to her grave. The French king first takes the orphan in himself before entrusting him to a would-be father. Beaflor lacks only a female parent. Her mother dies before Beaflor is ten years old. Her father is certain that he cannot bring her up alone, so a new mother figure must be found.

In Jörg Wickram's prose romance *Knabenspiegel* (The Boys' Mirror, 1554) biological parents give up their son.[8] The poor farmers Rudolf and Patrix have numerous children and are at a loss as to how they can feed them all. So, when they are able to leave their youngest with a rich childless couple, they do not hesitate. Everyone involved benefits from the adoption: the relinquishing parents are supported in their material need; the receiving parents have the child they longed for; the boy advances socially and acquires a very good education.

Abandonment Instead of Killing

In the stories considered here, abandonment is the most common form of separation. Seven out of ten boys and girls who do not grow up with their biological parents are foundlings. The frequency, unexceptional nature, and lack of criticism of the abandonments may surprise today's readers. In the ancient and medieval world, it was common practice to rely on others to take children in, as historian at Yale University John Boswell explains in *The Kindness of Strangers* (1988).[9] At least in the literary stories of (in)fertility, young parents rarely want to kill their children; instead, they see abandonment as an alternative to save them. The plot proves them right: no abandonment ends with the death of a child. The logic of the narrative demands a continuation that tells us about the child's fate in the new family.

A secret location is chosen to give up the child. The baby should be kept safe, found by kind strangers, and given a second chance in life. Even in the

8 Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 689–90. Cf. Braun, *Ehe*, 176–82.

9 Boswell, *Kindness*.

book of Exodus, the mother makes sure that the reed basket is well sealed before she abandons her son in the bulrushes on the banks of the Nile. It is no coincidence that the pharaoh's daughter is bathing in this very spot and discovers the basket. Hidden from view, Moses's big sister watches what happens. Not only can she bring the good news of his rescue back home, but she can even arrange for his biological mother to be his wetnurse. This motif of familial care is replaced by the hand of God in the early German translation of the Bible story. In the *Vorauer Mose*, the baby has to spend a whole night on the water until the next day, when, by God's grace, the basket is finally found.[10]

The legend literature follows this model.[11] The sea, which according to all the rules of probability should bring death to an infant, bears him to miraculous salvation. In the *Gregorius* by Hartmann of Aue (end of the twelfth century), the young mother has the faith to send her son across the sea in a basket. She wants to prevent him from being lost due to his parents' incestuous sin, and she hopes that he can start afresh elsewhere. The child spends a day and two nights travelling on the water until he reaches a monastery island. Divine grace and a favourable wind, as the narrator explains, bring him to shore to be discovered by fishermen. In the *Passional*, too, the story of baby Moses serves as a model for the new parents. Although Ruben and Cyborea are aware of the danger posed by their son, they cannot bring themselves to kill him. The only way out of their dilemma seems to be abandonment. Together, the parents place their child in a waterproof vessel and set it off on the river down to the sea, where it finally washes it ashore on the island of Scariot.

Killing by the biological parents is repeatedly averted at the beginning of the narratives.[12] In Albrecht von Eyb's story of Albanus (mid-fifteenth century) the father wants the child of their incest to die, but the mother ensures that he survives. She has a confidante take the baby out into the countryside. The choice of location owes more to practical life experience than religious tradition. The boy is abandoned on a road so that he can be found quickly. In Marie's *Fresne* however, it is the mother who wishes to kill her twin daughter. Only the protests of other women, who regard infanticide as a grave sin,

10 *Vorauer Mose*, 32, ll. 13–15.

11 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 699–788, 923–77; *Passional*, vv. 34550–79.

12 Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 108–9; Marie de France, "Fresne," in *The Lais*, vv. 95–210. In *Herzog Herpin* (423–24), a shield vassal is so touched by the child's smile that he puts the drawn knife back in his pocket, wraps the child in a shawl and places it under a tree.

prevents her from doing so. Her favourite lady at court suggests abandonment as an alternative and explains its implicit rules. Firstly, the fate of the child is in God's hands. Secondly, some good person will find the child and take care of it. Thirdly, the mother is freed from her worries, can preserve her honour, and never has to see the unwanted child again. Relieved, the birth mother agrees and puts her daughter's life in her lady-in-waiting's hands. With the utmost discretion, she sets off in the middle of the night, hurries to an abbey, and lays the child down near the gate on the branch of an ash tree. The plan works and confirms the rules she had set out. The girl, who was entrusted to God's protection, is found by the porter and cared for by his daughter. Neither of them is surprised by the incident or asks about the woman who gave birth.

Apart from Moses all the foundlings in the stories mentioned so far are of noble, if not royal, blood. John Boswell, who observes a similar pattern in a much more extensive corpus of material, warns against drawing conclusions from this about the historical reality. The fact that only aristocratic foundlings are mentioned has to do with the conditions of literary production and reception. It does not imply that the lower orders never abandoned their children, nor that this practice was disproportionately common among the nobility.[13] The literature mainly mentions male children—five out of seven in my sources—for similar reasons. Male protagonists are usually at the centre of medieval stories. In the end, age is more important to the social parents than class and gender. The younger the children are, the easier it is to disguise their origins.

Feelings and Gifts of Biological Parents

When attempting to explain medieval ideas, practices, and phenomena, one should beware of two hermeneutical traps: denying cultural differences and making them absolute. This is exactly what research has done with parents' feelings.[14] The French historian Philipp Ariès claimed in his *Centuries of Childhood* (*L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, 1960), that parental love was a modern invention. Elisabeth Badinter also took her attempt to historicize too far in *The Myth of Motherhood* (*L'amour en plus*, 1980) when

13 Boswell, *Kindness*, 39, 390.

14 Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*; Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood*. See also Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, 169–75. For criticism see, e.g., Boswell, *Kindness*, 37–38; Schultz, *The Knowledge*, 110. For an overview of the research, see Kehrel, *Möglichkeiten*, 16–33.

she argued that premodern mothers did not have an emotional relationship to their children. Medievalists rightly objected and drew attention to contrary representations in medieval literature. Even in my stories of (in)fertility, abandonment should not be misinterpreted as a lack of love. The feelings and gifts of their parents prove that they lack neither tenderness nor a sense of responsibility toward their children.

Allheyt in *Herzog Herpin* shows how a woman can suffer when she is separated from her child.[15] Desperate, the young mother begs to stay with her son in the forest or at least to be allowed to take him with her. But her kidnappers have no mercy and do not want to burden themselves with a screaming baby. The inconsolable mother is so overwhelmed by the pain that she faints. Her daughter-in-law's helplessness is also symbolized by her fainting when her baby is taken from her by force. Florentyne acts as if she were mourning her son's death. She wrings her hands, rends her hair, and wishes that the earth would swallow her up.

Mourning is not confined to women whose babies are forced from them. Mothers who deliberately give up their children still feel the pain of the loss.[16] Although Moses's mother sees no alternative, she still finds abandoning him difficult. In the *Altdeutscher Exodus*, she lays him in a reed basket, suffering greatly, and returns home devastated. The mother in Hartmann's *Gregorius* weeps hot tears as she bids farewell to her newborn. She lovingly places him in a small box, tucks him in with a precious silk coverlet, and encloses twenty marks and a tablet with the story of his birth. Through this written message, the young woman tries to do the best by her son. The receiving parents are instructed to have him baptized, manage the money for him, and provide for his education. Before abandoning her baby, the mother makes sure that he is protected from water, wind, and waves. She is terrified that her son may not survive.

Abandoned children are also sent off with a gift in other stories. Albanus is wrapped in a little cloak and has a pouch containing a golden ring hung round his neck. Fresne is given fine linen, a silk coverlet embroidered with rosettes, and a precious ring. As material witnesses to their origin story, these gifts serve several purposes: they manifest the love and care of the parents, especially the mothers, who give them up; show the finders the social status of the foundling and serve as an incentive to look after it; and shape the child's identity and enable them to identify their biological

15 *Herzog Herpin*, 30–31, 419–20.

16 *Die altdeutsche Exodus*, v. 219; Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 699–788.

parents later in life. As the only links to the foundlings' family of origin, the gifts have high emotional value. The foundlings keep them carefully and take them with them when they leave their social family. In the medieval adoption stories, when abandoned children find their biological parents it is not because "blood calls to blood." Cultural products are always decisive for such recognition: the fabric and the tablet for Gregorius; the silk coverlet for Fresne; the pouch and ring for Albanus; and the shawl in which Allheyt wraps her son.[17] The woven fabrics can be interpreted as metapoetic symbols for texts that the protagonists can only decipher with the help of their biological parents. Genealogical kinship is thus culturally reconstructed in the narrative of social alternatives.

It would be a mistake to automatically conclude that giving up a child means regretting becoming a parent. In the medieval narrative literature, women do not abandon their children because they refuse to bring them up and do not want to be mothers. Nor do they later question their actions and regret having separated from their child. The only one in my sources to feel remorse about giving up her child is Fresne's mother; years later, she still wants to reverse the decision.[18] When she recognizes her daughter, she is overwhelmed with emotion and confesses the birth of twins to her husband. All the other parents complain at the reunion not about the abandonment but about the resulting entanglements. None of the women becomes a mother again after abandoning their baby, which at least one of them regrets very much. Cyborea does suffer from giving up what turns out to be her only child. In her case, the voluntary separation results in involuntary childlessness.[19] She shares this loss with the parents who found her baby, whose loving behaviour shows even more clearly that parental love is neither a modern invention nor limited to biological family relationships.

Social Families: Care and Upbringing

Today, an unfulfilled longing for a baby is the most common reason why people want to take care of a child. In Germany, couples wishing to adopt must undergo a complex application process and prove their social, psychological, and financial suitability. Only after an official examination can they

17 Marie de France, "Fresne," in *The Lais*, vv. 121–34; Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 108–11; *Herzog Herpin*, 162, 164, 548–49.

18 Marie de France, "Fresne," in *The Lais*, vv. 445–84.

19 *Passional*, vv. 34886–99.

hope to be among the lucky few who actually receive a baby. In contrast, the assumption in medieval narrative literature is less complicated, less fraught with conditions, and even less predictable. Couples wishing to have children cannot apply to do so, but nor do they have to compete with other couples. In many adoption stories, childless people find their dream child without looking for them, by chance or by fate. The stories fulfill the cultural fantasy that a wish for children may suddenly come true. The literature scholar Sally Bishop Shigley has an apt term for when involuntarily childless people become parents after a long period of infertility; in *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility in History* (2017) she calls this a "baby *ex machina*."[20] Just as in ancient theatre all entanglements and tensions suddenly appear to unravel by the surprising intervention of a god—implemented by means of special stage machinery—the problem of childlessness is miraculously resolved by finding a foundling.

Finding Foundlings

In the narrative of social alternatives, the characters always respond positively when they discover an abandoned child. No foundling is left uncared for on the shore or in the forest.[21] In the *Passional*, the Queen of the Isle of Scariot is delighted when she spots the baby in the basket. The narrator explicitly explains her great joy with an unfulfilled longing for children. The queen has the misfortune of not having given birth. The foundling seems to solve all infertility worries in one fell swoop; the queen can present the beautiful baby as heir to the realm. In the Albanus legend, a would-be father makes the same decision. When the foundling and his precious gifts are brought before him, the Hungarian king believes it to be divine providence. He is convinced that he should be compensated and comforted for his childlessness. In the narrative of social alternatives, the idea that fertility is a gift from God is transferred from the conceived to the found child.

Besides an unfulfilled longing for a baby, other motives may be decisive for taking in a child. Medieval literature repeatedly emphasizes the beauty of the foundling, which arouses tender feelings and compassion. Realizing that the baby is of noble blood can increase others' willingness to help and take it

20 Shigley, "Great Expectations," 47. On adoption today cf. Hyatt, *Ungestillte Sehnsucht*, 161–63. Although the number of adoption applications has fallen, there are still more than seven times as many applications in Germany as there are placeable children.

21 *Passional*, vv. 34580–614; Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 109.

in. The abbot in Hartmann's *Gregorius* is so moved by the little one's radiant beauty and his sad fate that he takes him into his care. In *Herzog Herpin* the narrative is played out twice; both fathers of the foundling are repeatedly given the opportunity to state their motives. The widowed knight Badewin says he is persuaded by both his own childlessness and the boy's beauty, and the cowherd Elij likes the noble "nature" (*art*) of the newborn. On the one hand he feels pity; on the other, he hopes for a later reward. Adopting a child is therefore not always a purely charitable act, but also serves economic or feudal political interests.[22]

The possibility that the story of a foundling might not end well is at least hinted at in *Herzog Herpin*.[23] The cowherd Elij is initially undecided as to what he should do with the baby. He curses the parents for their unkindness in abandoning the boy and would like to take him home, but he is afraid what his wife Beatrix will react; her role is highly dubious throughout the story. Elij fears that she might not take pity on the little boy or—worse still—even suspect he is the father and beat him for it. He is torn for a while until finally, despite all his reservations, he decides to act in the baby's best interests. The initial encounter between wife and son goes much more smoothly than expected. Beatrix is so moved by the sight of the beautiful baby that she grows fond of him. She holds the little one in her arms, feeds him, and bathes him. However, the narrative alternative of rejection shows that spouses by no means always share an equal desire to adopt.

The *minne* and *âventiure* romances have a different starting point: not the childless couple who find the baby, but the parents in need who give it up. From the biological parents' perspective, childlessness is an ideal qualification for the social parents. In *Willehalm von Orlens*, Jofrit von Brabant himself asks to be allowed to look after the orphaned infant. He explicitly justifies his request with his own lack of children. He wants the child to be left to him because he has "no other child" ("Sit ich niht ander kinde han").[24] The advisers concur with this argument. If a childless man of honour wants to adopt a child, he should be allowed to do so. In *Mai und Beaflor*, the Roman king is advised to place his ten-year-old daughter in the care of a married

22 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1033–34; *Herzog Herpin*, 161, 680.

23 *Herzog Herpin*, 425–27. The childlessness of the herder couple is not explicitly addressed, but their own children are never mentioned. See also Herz, *Schwieriges Glück*, 136–44.

24 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, vv. 2498–500, cf. 2541–44. Taking in the boy serves as reparation and atonement for the killing of his biological father.

senator after her mother's death.[25] The fact that the loyal, good Roboal and his virtuous wife Benigna have no children of their own is discreetly left out of the advisers' discussion, but Benigna immediately sees a connection between her childlessness and her suitability to care for the young lady. She promises the king that she will take the girl in as her daughter because she has no daughters or sons. In the narrative of social alternatives, childless people are a stroke of luck for unwanted, orphaned, and needy children. The reverse is also the case: for would-be parents, taking in such children is receiving a gift.

It is rare for characters—like Jofrit—to be in a position to actively seek to fulfill their own longing for children. Rather, both social and biological parents have to wait for a higher authority—be it fate, God, or the royal council—to provide them with offspring. One such special case—in which people who long to have children plan, prepare, and then take in a child themselves—can be found in the *Knabenspiegel*. The fact that this is the most recent work in my corpus is no coincidence, as it reflects the development of German legal history. In the Freiburg town law of 1520, Ulrich Zasius describes for the first time various forms and conditions for the adoption of young people as children and uses the term "chosenness" (*Anwünschung*).[26] When Wickram's romance was published, this earliest German adoption law was a good thirty years old. Before Gottlieb and Concordia decide to have a child, they go through the typical stages of the best-known (in)fertility narrative. Three years after their marriage, the old, pious knight and his young, beautiful, virtuous, and rich wife are still waiting to conceive; there is a clear tension between material wealth and lack of offspring. Although Gottlieb's honour and possessions continue to grow, he is greatly troubled that his family does not.

As envisaged in the reproductive theological model, the couple seek their salvation in prayer and plead to God daily with great devotion. In the end, Concordia can wait no longer; she seeks comfort by taking in another woman's child. The structural similarity to the narrative of the dangerous third party is striking, but Concordia is not trying to get pregnant with strange, magical, or even diabolical help. Instead, she offers a poor, child-rich married couple the chance to have their unborn child cared for. The crucial point of this (in)fertility story is that it is about the care and upbringing of someone else's child, not procreation. Specific arrangements are made

25 *Mai und Beaflor*, vv. 574–99, cf. vv. 668–72.

26 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 110–11.

before the birth. The social mother pledges to accept the child regardless of its gender and supports the biological mother during pregnancy and childbirth. When, in a painful labour, she gives birth to a beautiful boy, Concordia is overjoyed. The narrator stresses that she is as happy about the child "as if it were her own flesh and blood" ("dann wann das jr eigen fleisch vnd blůt gewesen were").[27]

Promising Care

Discovering a foundling does not automatically mean that the finders will choose to take care of the baby. Making the child their own is usually done by means of a public declaration. Even in the Middle Ages, taking in a child was linked to ritual and performative acts. The decisive difference to the legally secured act of choosing in the sixteenth century lies in the secrecy about the family relationships.

In six out of the seven stories of abandonment discussed here, the parents feign a biological relationship; the biblical foundling Moses is the only exception. Concealment of origin is relevant for the social position of all family members. The parents who take in the child can hide the stigma of infertility by appearing to conform to the reproductive norm. The foundling becomes a relative and part of an intergenerational family history. The genealogical connection is so important that all foster parents feign kinship, even those who cannot be considered biological parents due to their vow of chastity.[28] The abbess in Marie's *Fresne* pretends that she is the foundling's aunt. She strictly forbids the porter to tell anyone how the little girl really ended up in the convent. The abbot in Hartmann's *Gregorius* demands the finders uphold absolute secrecy and leads everyone to believe that the boy is growing up with his uncle.

What the pretence of biological kinship can mean in practice and how motherhood can be staged physically is demonstrated by the stories of Judas

27 Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 690, ll. 14–15. The close relationship between the two women is finely balanced. Patrix is the "natural mother" ("naturliche[] Můter"), the baby is "the child of her own flesh" ("eigen leiblich kind"), but Concordia can declare that he is "my son" ("mine[m] Son"): 691, ll. 8.11–12.

28 On techniques of information control and covering a discredited person see Goffman, *Stigma*, 91–104. Boswell (*Kindness*, 369) considers feigned biological kinship to be a common feature of all abandonment stories but explains this only with consideration for the children's feelings of shame. Marie de France, "Fresne," in *The Lais*, vv. 222–26; Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1059–62.

and Albanus.[29] When the Queen of Scariot finds the baby on the beach, she conceals the discovery and feigns pregnancy. The news spreads quickly throughout the kingdom; everyone is full of joy about the longed-for heir to the throne. While in the Judas legend the would-be mother is depicted as the sole protagonist, in the first German Albanus legend the would-be father controls the events. The Hungarian king forbids the finder to say a word and orders his wife to lie in bed as if she were expecting a baby. The story grows just as the child would grow in the womb. The pregnancy is simulated to bring into the world a birth story. When the queen announces that she has had a son, the news is received with great joy. The public proclamation makes the foundling the king's son.

In the narrative of social alternatives, the family is always founded through a speech act, be it a birth announcement or a baptismal promise. Although baptism is only mentioned in passing in the stories analyzed here, it always marks the beginning of family life together—with the exception of the abandonment of Jewish boys. The foundlings Albanus, Gregorius, Fresne, Lewe and Oleybaum are baptized, as is Fridbert, the son Gottlieb and Concordia choose to take care of when the materially poor couple who are rich in children give him up. The religious ritual is so self-evident for Christian socialization that it does not need to be explained. From a theological perspective, however, the consequences are considerable: baptism is regarded as the second birth that gives access to the kingdom of heaven. By having their children baptized, the social parents give them new life and save them from eternal damnation.

Baptism institutionalizes the commitment to the parent-child relationship. While biological parents forge new relationships through godparents, social parents usually take on this role themselves. Before the highest Christian authority, they take on responsibility for the child. Therefore, a premodern baptismal vow is hardly less binding than a modern adoption contract. Criteria of social and religious parenthood are superimposed as the baptism ritual transforms the parent-child relationship into a new spiritual kinship.[30] In Hartmann's *Gregorius*, the abbot invokes his duty of care as godfather. Once he has his spiritual son, he wants to become his legal father. In Wickram's *Knabenspiegel*, Gottlieb also vows to look after the child entrusted to

29 *Passional*, vv. 34615–34; *Die religiösen Dichtungen*, vol. 3, 25–26.

30 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1138–43; Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 690–91. On the baptism and naming see *Herzog Herpin*, 36, ll. 13–16, and 427, ll. 3–4. On baptism as a form of adoption see Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage*, 194–221. See also Jussen, *Spiritual Kinship.*

him. Since God commended the baby to him as a spiritual father, he also wanted to become his worldly father.

Baptism is associated with naming, which documents the claim to parenthood; anyone who names a child bears responsibility and, at the same time, can demand obedience. In the abandonment stories, the names are narratively significant—usually metonyms that allude to how or where the child was found.[31] Pharaoh's daughter calls the baby she finds Moses, which is explained etymologically by the fact that she pulled him out of the water (from the base form in Hebrew, *mascháh*). The Queen of Scariot chooses the name Judas, as she suspects that her chosen child comes from the land of the Jews. The abbess and the cowherd Elij name the babies after the trees where they were found: Fresne (from the modern French, *frêne*, meaning ash tree) and Oleybaum (from the modern German, *Ölbaum*, meaning olive tree). The knight Badewin finds the baby in a lion's den and names him Lewe (from the modern German, *Löwe*). The fact that foundlings are not named like their social parents or their relatives is revealing. In almost all cases, the naming undermines the endeavour to disguise the baby's origins and indicates that it was found by chance.

While covert adoption is the rule with abandoned babies, there are overt forms for orphaned children. In *Willehalm von Orlens*, Jofrit endeavours to be allowed to take in the son of his fallen opponent. To this end, he reconciles with the followers of the murdered duke and the king, who has taken the child into his care, and makes a promise: "Whatever sincere loyalty a father has ever shown to his son shall be given to him by me; I will stand up for him with my life and property, this is my declared will." ("Swas rehter trúwen ie gephlac / Ain vatter gen dem sune sîn, / Das soll im von mir schin / Mit libe und och mit gůte, / Des ist mir wol ze můte.")[32] When the king approves the case, guardianship is transferred to the chosen father. Once again, he has to reaffirm his constant commitment before he can embrace the boy. Their new, long-term relationship is sealed with a kiss.

A half-page pen-and-ink drawing made in the workshop of Diebold Lauber (1419) depicts the adoption scene (Fig. 3). The two primary protagonists are flanked by two secondary figures who represent the court society

31 Only Gregorius is named after the father who takes him in, thus marking his belonging to the spiritual realm early on. His temporary return to the courtly world of his family of origin proves an incestuous aberration.

32 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, vv. 2508–13, cf. 2561–63. The fact that the protagonist continues to relate to his origins is demonstrated by his name. The boy is named after his biological father. Cf. Mecklenburg, "Kill the Father."

Figure 3. "Jofrit receives his chosen son." Miniature from the workshop of Diebold Lauber (1419) in Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB XIII 2, fol. 53v. Courtesy of the Württembergische Landesbibliothek. 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.

attending the ritual. A man with an eye-catching, multicoloured plume kneels devotedly before the king, holding a small boy in his arms. Jofrit asks permission to become a father. The posture of all three figures signals that the handover is imminent. The king has one leg stretched out mid-stride toward the petitioner, gazes directly at him, and holds the boy out to him. The unclothed child, whose nakedness indicates his need for help, greets the soon-to-be father with open arms. The way he holds the boy's hands is such that he can immediately receive him.

In the romance *Mai und Beaflor*, Roboal is officially designated as the second father. The Roman king does not simply entrust the senator with his daughter's upbringing but enquires about his readiness to do so. Roboal agrees without hesitation. After the king has entrusted him with the power to raise his daughter, he has Roboal call his wife and commends his daugh-

ter to her. Benigna lovingly attempts to comfort the grieving girl and makes her pledge to replace the girl's beloved mother and be her mother from that moment on ("ich wil gern ergetzen dich / der vil liben muter din. / ich wil nu dein muter sin").[33] It is symptomatic that the void created by the mother's death is initially filled by a man. In a patriarchal society, men are the first to be allowed to make decisions with legal implications. For this reason, the narrative of social alternatives primarily puts fathers in charge of parenting. Women can only take in children when they are in a powerful position to do so—like the pharaoh's daughter or the abbess.

If we compare the social mothers and fathers in medieval stories with today's adoptive parents, we can see another difference: only some of the parents who take in a child are part of a couple. Of the ten children whose stories I analyzed, four were taken in by individuals. Beside the pharaoh's daughter and church leaders (abbot and abbess), these include the widowed knight Badewin. The text never raises the issue that he is bringing up his son alone without a mother. In the medieval world view, a child does not need both a father and mother to develop well. It is crucial, however, that both boys and girls are raised by a parent of their own gender.

The Ambivalence of Social Parenthood

Children can be a blessing but also a burden, which is deeply reflected in the ethical discussions about ideals of life with (in)fertility.[34] This is why all parenthood evokes ambivalent emotions, which, in cases of adoption, can be particularly pronounced. Adoption fulfills an adult's longing to have children on the one hand, but, on the other, the desire to reproduce remains unmet. This tension determines the attitude of the adoptive parents in the *Knabenspiegel*. Concordia is overjoyed to embrace the poor farmer's son directly after he is born. But her joy is strangely disproportionate to her incessant striving to bear her own baby. Concordia constantly feels low and sad, compares herself to her son's biological mother—who had many children—and wrestles with God because of her infertility. Her husband is plagued by similar worries. When Gottlieb is carrying the baby to the christening, his first thought is of the happiness he has been denied. The couple continue to pray without ceasing for a biological child until, a year after the adoption, their wish is granted.[35]

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33 *Mai und Beaflor*, vv. 727–29. Cf. Rasmussen, *Mothers*.

34 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 167–205, esp. 176–79.

35 Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 690, ll. 15–29.

In several medieval stories, when they face problems in the family, the social parents doubt whether it was right to take in the child. In *Herzog Herpin*, Badewin's love for his son is so great that he does not want to be separated from him for a day and even refuses to eat or drink without him. No expense is spared on his education. Badewin sends Lewe to Latin school and makes him learn chess, games played at court, and horse riding. The child grows up to be a handsome young man who knows how to behave in courtly society, wins tournaments, is popular with the ladies, and proves extremely generous. The courtly virtue of generosity has a dark side, as Badewin comes to realize. Lewe spends much more money than his father can afford. Were his wealth ten times greater, he would still have got into financial difficulties, the narrator notes. The young man's lifestyle leads Badewin to regret his fatherhood for the first time. He complains that Lewe has plunged him into poverty and that he has to sell his land, castle, and inheritance for the sake of a foundling. Even after Badewin has parted with all his property, he is unable to pay off the debt in full. When he confronts Lewe, he meets with little understanding. But Badewin continues to stand by his son, offering him shelter and sharing his meagre meals. His remorse is rekindled more fiercely when Lewe proudly turns down the offer to become a squire. Badewin continues to conceal his negative emotions until Lewe makes new demands, asks for a horse, and wishes to fight only for his own honour. The narrator describes in detail how the social father's patience is tested to breaking point until he finally reveals the long-kept family secret and declares to Lewe: "You are not my son" ("du bist nit myn son").[36]

The second foster father in *Herzog Herpin* also feels remorse when his son leaves him with nothing but debts. Oleybaum's parents wait in vain for him to return from the pasture. Having searched for the boy for too long, Elij is forced to spend the night outside the city gates, hungry, frightened, and freezing. The next morning, he is dismayed to discover that Oleybaum has sold his whole herd to buy a knight's armour. At the loss of his livelihood, Elij deeply regrets that he did not leave the foundling in the forest. In his disappointment, he goes so far as to demonize his son because of his unknown origins. The devil himself seems to have planned the encounter for him.[37] The whole incident weighs so heavily on Elij that he falls ill. His wife, who has always defended her social son, also weeps. But Oleybaum is not concerned about the distress he has caused his parents. When he presents a

36 *Herzog Herpin*, 161, l. 8. On costly education cf. 52–56; on repentance cf. 56–58, 78.

37 *Herzog Herpin*, 641, ll. 10–13; 650, ll. 21–23.

tournament prize on his return, his carefree attitude and pride send Elij into a rage. Once again, an impulsive response reconfigures the family relationships. In an angry outburst, Elij reveals to the young man that he is not his biological son and curses the day he found him beneath the olive tree.

Emphasizing the child's outside origins is characteristic of the narrative of social alternatives. The social parents want their child to be fully integrated into their family but painfully experience that genealogical differences cannot be completely smoothed over. They cannot understand certain behaviours and do not share some preferences. Tensions in the medieval narrative literature are usually caused by differences in social milieu between childbearing and child-rearing parents. The abbot Gregorius cannot understand his son's longing for knighthood any more than the cowherd Elij can. The holy father is completely surprised to hear his spiritual son's heart's desire. At this point in the story, the young Gregorius has successfully completed several years of monastic training and excelled in every aspect of his studies. There was no indication that the model pupil was interested in anything other than grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, law, and theology, but he dreamed of competing in tournaments. In the course of a long conversation, the abbot realizes to his dismay that the boy speaks a different language and does not want to pursue a spiritual path in life. The cleric sadly admits: "I see clearly that in your heart, a monastic man you are not" ("dû bist, daz merke ich wol dar an, / des muotes niht ein klôsterman").[38] Although the abbot does his best, he cannot inspire his son to follow his own ideals.

In some adoption stories, such serious disruptions occur that the children jeopardize or even destroy the harmony of the family.[39] The boy in *Vorauer Mose* causes a scandal at the royal court. When the king honours him with a golden crown, he does not gratefully accept it but breaks it into pieces. The clash between the values of his Hebrew family of origin and the Egyptian royal family could hardly be starker. The hopes of the social parents are also bitterly dashed in the *Passional*. From a young age, Judas's violence causes consternation. His aggression is directed at his younger brother, who was unexpectedly born to the Queen of Scariot. The mother, who sympathizes with her biological son, responds to violence with violence: Judas is punished with blows to the head. The conflict escalates because Judas can no longer bear to live at home. He kills his brother and flees on a ship to Jerusalem. The queen's succession strategy is thus an abject failure. Although

38 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1635–36. Cf. Storp, *Väter und Söhne*, 220–26.

39 *Vorauer Mose*, 33–34; *Passional*, vv. 34662–79, 34718–28.

her dearest wish to have a child is fulfilled twice over, the social competition between them causes her to lose both sons at once.

Of course, regretted parenthood is not unique to social mothers and fathers. Biological children also disappoint their parents. Although the families take in children in a similar way, Gottlieb has very different experiences to Judas's mother. In the *Knabenspiegel*, it is not the adopted son but the son conceived later who develops into a spoiled and disobedient youth. He gets in with the wrong crowd and squanders his inheritance, driving his mother to the grave. Although Gottlieb has longed for a child of his own, he regrets his biological fatherhood. If his son had died as a child, it would have saved him a lot of grief.[40]

The attitude of both social and biological parents is ambivalent because they love their children despite all the effort, anger, and disappointment. In medieval narrative literature, mothers and fathers who take in a child find the separation process painful and are reluctant to let them go out into the world.[41] The abbot does everything he can to keep Gregorius close to him before he resigns himself to the inevitable. Badewin sheds tears of grief and falls severely ill after bidding farewell to Lewe. He misses his son so much that he has to stay in bed for a fortnight. Oleybaum's social mother is similarly grief-stricken at losing him as his biological mother had been. She faints from despair, desperately begs her son to stay, wrings her hands, and rends her hair. Beaflor's social parents, too, are so overcome by the pain of parting that they lose their zest for life and long for death. All their happiness depends on their foster daughter.

Tracing Kinship: Childhood and Identity

Adopted children have two sets of parents that influence their lives in many ways. In *Vertraute Fremdheit* (Familiar Strangeness, 2011) the Swiss journalist Eric Breitinger draws on his own family history to trace how early childhood loss can trigger lifelong trauma. Adopted children develop a fragile identity if they cannot see themselves as part of a longer chain of generations.[42] While covert adoptions are criticized today and people have a right to know their own ancestry, in the Middle Ages overt adoption was associ-

40 Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 782, ll. 11–16.

41 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1432–808; *Herzog Herpin*, 168, 652–53; *Mai und Beaflor*, vv. 1650–79.

42 Breitinger, *Vertraute Fremdheit*, 45–48.

ated with serious disadvantages. In *The Kindness of Strangers*, John Boswell argues that no parent or child wanted to know about non-biological family ties. When kinship and birth were emphasized, social children became second-class members of the family.[43]

The discrimination against adopted children is exemplified by the hateful tirade of the fishwife who brought Gregorius up for the first few years of his life.[44] His foster mother is beside herself when Gregorius injures her biological son while playing. In anger, she reveals his strange origins and even claims that the devil himself brought the boy to the family. The fishwife finds it hard to bear treating a foundling (*vuntkint*) like her own offspring. She believes Gregorius should be at the bottom of the domestic hierarchy and do menial labour. If the abbot had not taken him under his wing, he would be herding cattle and pigs. The foster mother has no idea that the person she is berating can hear her outburst because he is standing outside the door.

Identity Problems

Revealing non-biological family relationships is an integral part of the narrative. When parents take in children in medieval literature, this always comes to light in the course of the plot, but rarely in a calm, reasoned conversation. Rather, the child's unknown origin is often an issue in when questions of power, ownership, and rank are negotiated, and a longstanding conflict escalates. When Badewin hurls the news at Lewe that he is not his son, Lewe's horror can be seen as the colour drains from his face. The young man asks twice if this is really true. He slowly realizes that he has neither a father nor a mother. When Badewin sees how hurt Lewe is by the news, he takes it all back, but to no avail—his son no longer believes him.[45]

Children can also be confronted with their biological parentage by third parties. These figures do not realize the explosive nature of what they know.[46] The protagonist in *Willehalm von Orlens* only hears by chance that he is not Jofrit's biological son. A grateful minor character commiserates with him on the early death of his father, but Willehalm knows for certain that Jofrit is in the best of health. Willehalm soon puts two and two together, to lose both

43 Boswell, *Kindness*, 431.

44 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1306–58.

45 *Herzog Herpin*, 161–62.

46 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, vv. 2822–70; *Passional*, vv. 34705–14, 34729–37.

father figures at once: his supposed father through revelation and his birth father through the news of his death. In the *Passional*, instead, the rumour of the king's son's foreign origin spreads without naming a specific individual. Judas learns from an unidentified person how, when, and where he was found. He struggles greatly with the fact that he was not born into the royal family. If he has risen from nothing to the highest circles, he does not deserve any noble privileges.

The sudden realization that he is not his parents' biological son plunges each young man into crisis. In an instant, the family relationships by which they had previously defined themselves seem to fall apart. Albanus learns that he is a foundling and not the son of the Hungarian king. Gregorius laments: "I am not who I thought I was" ("ich enbin niht der ich wânde sîn").[47] Lewe also feels uprooted: "I know not who I am" ("Ich weyß nit, wer ich bin"). The foundlings' identity is defined by the gap in their genealogy. Because of the social norms they have internalized, they consider themselves to be less privileged. When Lewe explains, "I am a poor foundling" ("Ich bin eyn armer fundeling"),[48] he defines himself by his stigma. Gregorius even describes himself as a "miserable foundling destined for servitude" ("ellenden kneht / von einem vunden kinde").[49] Like his foster mother, he is convinced that he was not entitled to a good upbringing. Gregorius sincerely thanks the abbot for his undeserved favour, as he feels that his foundling origins are such a disgrace that all he wants to do is flee.

In my adoption stories, the fear of being devalued influences the protagonist's future path; it overshadows their relationship with others, and especially with women.[50] Long after he has been happily married and proven himself as a ruler, Gregorius fears his wife might despise him because of his unknown origins. For the same reason, Albanus tries to conceal from his wife the news that has so disturbed him. He is so burdened by the knowledge that he is not the king's biological son that he can barely look his wife in the face. For Lewe, knowing that he is a foundling prevents him from seeking the hand of a princess in the first place. The mere thought that the honoured lady might find out about his past and insult him as a foundling

47 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, v. 1403. Cf. Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 110.

48 *Herzog Herpin*, 215, l. 22; 163, l. 24.

49 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1398–99.

50 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 2575–88; Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 111; *Herzog Herpin*, 164.

arouses dread, disgrace, and anger. Lewe finds this idea so shameful he even fears that in the heat of the moment he would commit murder.

Searching for Parents and Fear of Incest

In premodern adoption histories, children do not seek their birth parents to find family similarities, individual preferences, or shared genetic traits but social status. Medieval society was structured into estates, to which people were assigned by birth. Foundlings who were not placed in this way were outside society. If they wanted to overcome this precarious situation, they had to reconstruct their genealogical origins and find their biological parents. While foundlings like Judas and Albanus—who were adopted by aristocratic parents—fear the loss of their privileges, Oleybaum and Gregorius wonder if they could raise their status.

Oleybaum is almost relieved by Elij's revelation that he only found him. He had long believed that he had been born into the wrong family. Time and again, he had been preoccupied by the contradiction that, as the son of a cowherd, he felt called to higher things.[51] Gregorius also hopes to become a knight as the scion of a noble family. While he is still on the monastery island, he reads the tablet that his mother gave him and the abbot kept for him, and he learns about his parents' high status and incest. This knowledge does not stop him but rather strengthens his desire to set off. He tells the abbot that he will not rest until he has found his family and knows who he is. Strangely enough, after the first stage of his journey, he seems to forget all about this plan. Gregorius abandons his quest and settles in Aquitaine. At this point, he does not realize that he has already reached his parents' country. Saying goodbye to the abbot is just a natural step in adolescence that is essential for the story to unfold. For Gregorius, separating from his spiritual father initially seems more important than finding his genealogical parents.

In the medieval adoption stories, abandoned children always meet their parents again, even if they are not (any longer) searching for them. Recognition is an integral part of the narrative but often turns out differently than expected. Children who were thought to be far away or lost are sometimes frighteningly close to their parents. In the three legends, mother and son only recognize each other when they are already married. Gregorius is happily married to the beautiful Princess of Aquitaine, who abandoned him as a baby. Albanus's bride is the daughter of the powerful neighbouring ruler who

51 *Herzog Herpin*, 650–53; see also 642, ll. 15–18; Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1799–805.

once gave birth to him. Unknowingly, both protagonists repeat the incest that their parents entered into knowingly. Judas commits several transgressions, culminating in marriage to his own mother. After his brother's murder, he flees to his unknown homeland, breaks into his parents' garden, is caught stealing apples, kills his father, and marries the widow—against her declared will.

Two other stories play with incestuous relationships but just manage to avoid consummation. Oleybaum learns that a captive lady is his mother just before he is about to rape her. Fresne's origins are also revealed in time so that her lover does not sleep with her twin sister, which would have fallen under the church's ban on incest. In both cases, the reunion with the parents is followed by a social revaluation and a happy ending.[52] But in the adoption stories that lead to incest, recognition does not lead to gaining in status or extend kinship but unleashes deep shock and social destruction. For some children, it would have been better if they had never met their birth parents again.

In four out of the ten stories examined here, the risk of incest between mother and son is remarkably high. Why do mothers who give up their sons so often find themselves close to sleeping with them? In the logic of the genre, the answer is clear: the narrators of these legends want to show that people unintentionally commit serious sins, but no guilt is so great that it cannot be forgiven.[53] The incestuous variant of the narrative can, of course, also serve other purposes. When the church fathers warned that a prostitute's clients could unknowingly sleep with their own abandoned children, they wanted to discipline believers in terms of sexual morality; Christians should not visit brothels.[54]

Readers and listeners are sensitized to a danger that is evoked in these stories of incest. An important narrative technique is the advantage of knowledge that the narrator and his listeners have. None of my protagonists ever fear that they might choose their birth mother as a sexual partner. But those who hear or read the story know the biological relationships, experience the incestuous entanglement, and foresee the self-destructive revelation. This has fuelled a fear of incest that has become ingrained in cultural memory and still dominates the discourse on reproductive medicine today.

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52 Marie de France, "Fresne," in *The Lais*, vv. 479–510; *Herzog Herpin*, 686–90, 695–97.

53 This is the heading in Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 108.

54 Boswell, *Kindness*, 3, 157–60.

Databases of donor children were created by those affected in order to prevent sex between siblings or fathers and daughters.[55] The potential danger is completely overestimated because the fear of breaking sexual taboos is deeply rooted in cultural history. In terms of concepts of family, incest stories fulfill the function of establishing and restoring hierarchical order. They demonstrate that traditional structures collapse when family roles are not clearly defined.

Stable Characters

In the stories I analyzed, daughters never set off in search of their biological parents; this has nothing to do with either lower mobility or limited scope for action of women in the Middle Ages. The narrative of social alternatives simply works differently when it does not centre around a male figure. In these adoption stories, young women do separate from their caregivers, but they do so for different motives than to clarify their genealogical origins: love for a knight, concern about a possible pregnancy, or fear of sexual violence.

The young women in my sources also do not get into an identity crisis. No adopted daughter asks herself who she actually is. This can be explained in terms of character psychology by the fact that these young women know their origins. Beaflor, who only joins her social family at the age of ten, naturally knows that the parents who care for her did not conceive her. Fresne also knows that she was a foundling because the abbess has told her about it. Both young women are thus spared the experience of realizing that their self-image is based on a deception. These differences between foundling sons and daughters are a general feature of gender-specific narratives. In *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991) Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out that the life stories of men are structured around climax, conversion, reintegration, and triumph. Women's biographies, on the other hand, are characterized by continuity and do not have turning points.[56] This does not mean that the lives of adopted sons and daughters were different in the Middle Ages, but that they were differently told.

Even foundling boys who doubt their identity quickly overcome their crisis as the plot unfolds. While adopted children today often find it difficult to form a stable identity, in medieval literature no child of social parents suffers such lasting effects. This is due to different ideas of childhood, as

55 Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 165–66.

56 Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 32.

James A. Schultz explains in *Knowledge of Childhood* (1995).[57] Today, stable relationships are considered the most important factor in a young child's life, whereas in the Middle Ages, mobility and changing relationships were not considered harmful. According to Schultz, there are two fundamental principles in the medieval literary world. Firstly, individual nature is innate and immutable, so even violent separations from parents do not have catastrophic consequences. Children can form new relationships without their development being inhibited. Secondly, a child's behaviour reveals aspects of its immutable nature. The innate nobility of the foundlings is recognized long before anyone around them is aware of their courtly descent. In *Gregorius*, everyone wonders how such a talented boy can come from a family of fisherfolk. In *Herzog Herpin*, Oleybaum behaves like a knight from a young age, fighting trees on a plow horse, inviting shepherds to dance, and handing out rings as gifts. Judas, on the other hand, is a traitor from childhood, whose disloyalty and dangerousness become increasingly clear.[58]

In the *Passional*, the narrator clearly answers the controversial question of whether natural endowment or cultural imprinting is decisive for humans giving examples of animal behaviour. Although Judas had the same upbringing as his adoptive brother, he is as different from him as a croaking scavenger or a simple-minded beast of burden from a noble, beautiful predator. Just as a raven cannot soar like a falcon or a donkey leap like a leopard, Judas cannot take on the attributes and skills of his brother. According to medieval authors, inner nobility can no more be suppressed than it can be acquired. Independent of external influences, the protagonists arrive at the place for which they are destined. It was not until the early modern period that this view changed, and education became increasingly important. In the *Knabenspiegel* the son who strikes out is not the foundling, but the birth offspring. Wickram repeatedly contrasts the behaviour of both brothers to show that virtue, education, and attitude are more important than noble blood.[59] The son of a knight can fail, and the son of a peasant can bring pure joy to his adoptive parents.

57 Schultz, *The Knowledge*, 252–54.

58 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1273–77; *Herzog Herpin*, 635–37; *Passional*, vv. 34648–704. Cf. Hammer, *Erzählen*, 349–450.

59 E.g., Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 695, ll. 23–28.

Comparing Social and Biological Parenthood

Most would-be parents' dearest wish is for a biological child. Eric Breitinger therefore takes the view that many adopted children have the painful experience of being second best and unable to fulfill the implicit ideal. In the medieval narrative literature, foster children do not have such reservations. In a systematic analysis of literary sources dated between 1100 and 1350, James A. Schultz concludes that social parents equal or even surpass biological parents in terms of their function and intensity of the relationship. "Not only do foster parents equal real parents, they become real parents."[60]

Original and Imitation

In legal historical research, adoptions are often referred to as "fictive," "artificial," or even "pseudo" forms of kinship and adoptees as "fictional heirs."[61] This formulation contains an implicit value judgment. The biological relationship between parent and child is seen as the original model that adoptive families imitate. Even medieval storytellers narrate an "as if" plot when family relationships are not based on reproduction. For instance, Jofrit recalls that he always treated his adoptive son "as if I had begotten him" ("Als ob er von mir wir geborn"). Oleybaum, however, credits his foster mother for always looking after him "as if I were her own child" ("als were ich ir eygen kint gewest").[62] The biological parents are regarded as the original and the adoptive parents as imitators. Here, the performative dimension is important. Jofrit wants to be called Willehalm's father because he always wants to stand by him faithfully like a father and commits himself to this with his heart, body, and possessions.[63] By declaring the boy to be his son and treating him in this way, he becomes the father. Jofrit demands that his liegemen accept his longed-for paternity and all its implications. Early on, he installs Willehalm as his successor and makes his subordinates swear allegiance to the young boy. Through their words and actions, parents by choice create family facts.

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60 Schultz, *The Knowledge*, 136.

61 Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage*, 75, 72. Cf. Jussen, *Spiritual Kinship*, 20–24.

62 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, v. 3378; *Herzog Herpin*, 847, l. 12.

63 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, vv. 2627–31: "Wan ich wil mit mûte, / Mit libe und ŏch mit gûte / Sin vatter iemer sin genant / Und vatters trúwe iemer tůn erkant / Mit getrúwelichen sitten." On troths (vows of fidelity) see, vv. 2641–43.

Only those with a greater knowledge of genealogy can distinguish between original and the copy.[64] When Lewe kneels before Badewin, the narrator uses the scene to differentiate between different forms of parenthood. He declares Lewe's behaviour exemplary with reference to the Bible. It is God's will that every child should honour their father and mother. In this context, the narrator remarks that the fourth commandment actually applies to birth parents. Lewe honours Badewin because he considers him to be his progenitor. Figures who know more also distinguish between biological and social family relationships. What Badewin would let a birth son get away with he finds intolerable in an adopted son. Lewe shares this view and excuses his ruinous behaviour by saying that he was unaware he was a foundling. After the revelation, he is deeply ashamed and wants to reimburse his foster father for all his expenses. The view that original parenthood is created through reproduction leads to a dialectical understanding of fatherhood. Due to his social role, Badewin is a father, but because he did not biologically conceive Lewe, he is a non-father. As the question of paternity cannot be answered with a clear yes or no, Lewe retells their shared story again and again. Their family relationship can only be adequately developed through narrative.

In the narrative of social alternatives, parenthood by conception provides an idealized benchmark against which parents by adoption are measured. Though the biological parents set the standard, however, there are cases where the social parents clearly surpass them. In *Mai and Beaflor*, the foster parents lovingly care for their daughter, whereas her birth father sexually harasses her. Horrified, Beaflor rejects his advances and berates him: "This is not fatherly behaviour" (*es ist wider vatersit*).[65] While the father who conceived her ignores the young woman's terrified pleas, the parents who brought her up are receptive to her concerns. They soon see that Beaflor is suffering greatly, repeatedly enquire about the cause, and want to help. Although the foster father has to answer to the king, he feels obligated above all to his daughter. Roboal promises to save her, even if it costs him his life. At this point, the narrator intervenes and contrasts the two men. The social father is presented as much better and more loyal than the biological father. In this case, the usual hierarchy is turned on its head; the imitation is better than the original.

64 *Herzog Herpin*, 71, l. 26; 72, l. 1; 161, ll. 1–4; on the dialectics of fatherhood, see 368.

65 *Mai und Beaflor*, v. 884, cf. 1551–56.

Chosen Affinity Instead of Instinct

Parents who take in a child deserve more recognition than parents who conceived them; this consensus crystallizes in the medieval narrative. The royal council argues in *Willehalm von Orlens* that the risk lies entirely with the adoptive father. Anyone who accepts a child will be held responsible. In the council's view, the social father can only lose out: he will be blamed if his child leads a dissolute life, but if the child proves virtuous, no one will thank him for it. As the effort is hardly worthwhile in others' eyes, parents must be highly motivated to take care of someone else's child. The voluntary nature of the commitment is important for assessing their actions. After all, parents decide to take in a child of their own free will, whereas reproduction can be an unintended consequence of a sexual act. Jofrit makes this explicit when he says that he has chosen Willehalm as his son.[66] In the *Knabenspiegel*, Gottlieb even makes a double decision in favour of his adopted son. As a childless husband he adopts a baby, and as a father of two he names the adopted son over his biological son as heir. In this early modern romance, chosen family supersedes consanguinity.

In the narrative of social alternatives, children owe their parents a great debt of gratitude because of their voluntary commitment. In the early New High German version of the Albanus legend, this idea of retribution moves the Hungarian king to confess on his deathbed.[67] Albanus's father tells him of his foundling past not because he has a guilty conscience or does not want to take the secret with him to his grave. Rather, he assumes that an adoptive father can claim special favour and wants to benefit from this in the afterlife. The king argues that his care would be of no merit in a genealogical relationship. Careful upbringing and passing on one's inheritance are a given of paternal love and "natural" instinct. But since he has raised Albanus out of mercy and elevated him to the status of king's son, he can demand a gift in return. The king therefore deliberately reveals this act so that his adopted son will pray for his soul.

Herzog Herpin emphasizes even more clearly that voluntary commitment surpasses the natural law of biological parenthood. Lewe and Oleybaum stress that, by rights, they should love their foster parents more than their birth parents.[68] The consequences of this are illustrated by the figure

66 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, vv. 3376–78; Wickram, "Knabenspiegel," 690–91, 730.

67 Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*, 110.

68 *Herzog Herpin*, 368, ll. 11–14; 691, ll. 6–7.

of the evil mother-in-law. Beatrix, who wanted nothing but the best for her foster son, does not consent to his choice of bride. She therefore initiates an intrigue that causes Oleybaum to lose his wife and child. When her betrayal is revealed, Beatrix ought to die at the stake as a murderer. Yet, Oleybaum spares her at the request of her husband and commutes the death penalty to life imprisonment. He even briefly finds himself in a conflict of loyalty between his social and biological father. While Elij begs for mercy and reminds him that Beatrix has always treated him like her own child, Lewe demands that she be burned at the stake. Oleybaum justifies his decision with the merits of the parents who took him in. He would not credit his biological mother with his birth and upbringing, because this is what nature intended. If the woman who plotted to murder his family had given birth to him, she would have been condemned to death. Yet his social mother had always looked after him though she did not have to do so, and for this she should receive clemency.[69] The selflessness of this love is therefore decisive, which is why Oleybaum favours his social mother over his biological one. This would make sense to the one who favoured the death penalty, who would recognize himself and the loving relationship with the foster father in the story.

In *Herzog Herpin*, the ties to the foster parents remain permanent. While Lewe and Oleybaum separate themselves from their social family in favour of their biological family, once their origins are revealed, they turn to their foster parents and address them respectfully as father and mother. With these intimate names, the sons create a counterpoint to their strange origins and revitalize the close family relationship.[70] Lewe stresses several times that he loves no one in the whole world more than Badewin. He unhesitatingly makes him his representative in his absence and even compares his intimate relationship to that of Jesus and his beloved disciple. Just as Jesus placed his own mother in the care of John, Lewe trusts his own wife with his social father.[71] In this way, adoption is brought close to friendship and charged with religious significance. Once again, the social relationship surpasses the biological relationship between parent and child because it is based not on "natural" instincts alone but on loyalty, love, and friendship.

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69 *Herzog Herpin*, 847, ll. 24–25; 848, ll. 2–3.

70 *Herzog Herpin*, on Lewe und Badewin see, e.g., 369–71; on Oleybaum and his parents see, e.g., 691, 765. Cf. Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 1433–35; *Mai und Beaflor*, vv. 1194, 1206, 1242.

71 *Herzog Herpin*, 408–9.

Prospects

Over the centuries, the core message of the narrative has remained the same: couples with an unfulfilled longing for a child can take one in, whether for fostering or adoption. What differs in different periods is the way couples choose to commit to a child and deal with its origins. In the Middle Ages, when would-be parents wanted to have children as young as possible, it was not to minimize the risk of psychological impact but to be able to pass off a child as their own. While couples wanting to adopt in Germany today turn to the youth welfare office or an adoption agency, the characters in medieval literature make a chance discovery that enriches their lives and challenges them. According to their religious worldview, they interpret finding the foundling metaphysically. Overjoyed, the new social parents thank God for the unexpected gift, but, sorely disappointed, they wonder whether the devil might have had a hand in it. As it is today, the relationship between social parents and their children is characterized by a tension between familiarity and strangeness, closeness and distance.

When normativity is approached critically, the narrative of social alternatives contributes to unbinding the binary between fertility and infertility. The adoption stories demonstrate that family life does not have to be dependent on the act of reproduction. On the one hand, there are biological parents who give away their offspring, so people can be childless even though they have conceived and given birth. On the other hand, there are social parents who do not have children through sex and yet become mothers and fathers. In my third narrative, people become parents when they voluntarily take responsibility for a child's wellbeing. In historical reality, social relationships between parent and child are probably not as exclusive as in the medieval literature. The Italian merchant couple Francesco and Margherita Datini, whose circumstances are exceptionally well documented, had several children in their household between 1376 and 1411.[72] Although Margherita never gave birth, she took on maternal responsibility for many years. She looked after her husband's illegitimate daughter by another woman, Ginevra, as well as her niece Caterina, and other children of friends and servants. Similarly, the childless Queen Sancia (1285–1345), wife of Robert of Naples, was "like a biological mother" to Robert's son and his granddaughters from his first marriage, providing for them without suffering any form of

72 Byrne and Congdon, "Mothering."

exclusion at court.[73] These historical observations on the diversity and complexity of family models fit perfectly with my basic thesis, which is confirmed by the narrative of social alternatives. Childlessness is not a biological defect; parenthood is a social way of life.

73 Andenna, "Kinderlosigkeit," 412.