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NEGOTIATING CHILDLESSNESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

STORIES OF DESIRED, REFUSED, AND REGRETTED PARENTHOOD

by
REGINA TOEPFER

Translated by
KATE SOTEJEFF-WILSON

ARC HUMANITIES PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

"SHE ISN'T ABLE to have children. Isn't that sad?" my mother-in-law said about a friend's daughter. Her question to me shaped my own perspective on the young woman—let's call her Sally—and on the lives of women who do not have children. Decades later, when I was researching childlessness in the Middle Ages, I remembered this exchange and found it significant. Intimate conversation between women is typical of how, for centuries, ideals of fertility and motherhood have been passed down the generations. Whether Sally shared my mother-in-law's view, whether she even wanted to become a mother and suffered from the prospect of a life without children, I did not know. We hardly knew each other and would never have talked about such a personal issue. Although women, especially, are asked whether they have children as a matter of course, when the answer is negative, the conversation falls silent. Even today, infertility is still a taboo that is talked about behind closed doors and evokes insecurity, consternation, and pity.

Infertility is not "a deviation from a natural, normal state, but as a social category shaped by discrimination." This is what I argued in *Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2022), pointing to the crucial role of language.[1] People do not become childless through sexual acts but through verbal ones. To become so, they must be compared with others, confronted with a failure to conceive, and have their life circumstances classified as deficient. The Hebrew Bible tells some of the earliest stories about how much women suffer from not having a child.[2] Rachel feels so inferior to her fertile sister Leah that she wants to die (Gen. 30:1), and Hannah sheds bitter tears because she is mocked for not conceiving (1 Sam. 1:8). Longing for a child cannot be separated from the countless tales of marginalization that have been told about childless people from the beginnings of written tradition to the present day. Therefore, narrating can be seen as "the origin of childlessness,"[3] as I noted in the epilogue to my previous book.

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1 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 9.

2 Cf. Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*.

3 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 216.

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Even in the modern age of reproductive technology, the medical diagnosis of infertility is made manifest in the words of a gynecologist, which, given society's high regard for motherhood, can lead those affected to take on a childless identity.

Literary Infertility Studies

As a German medievalist, I am never interested only in current aspects of anthropology but also in the past. What value was attributed to childlessness and parenthood in earlier eras? Were people without children already considered pitiful in the Middle Ages, and was infertility mainly seen as a women's issue? Other researchers besides myself are interested in the historical perception and interpretation of childlessness. In *How to Be Childless* (2019), the modern European historian Rachel Chrastil argues convincingly that the voices and experiences of childless women from the past five hundred years can help us to re-evaluate the lives of childless individuals today.[4] Especially in medical and sexual history, recent publications include first monographs, two journal issues, and *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility* (2017) with contributions on the medieval and early modern periods, staking out a new field of research in infertility history.[5] Organized by Catherine Rider and Sarah Toulan, the international VivaMente Conference, entitled *Fertility, Medicine and the Body: Theory and Practice across the Premodern World*, in May 2023 impressively demonstrated how many studies are currently emerging in medical history research.[6]

For the category of fertility, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* and Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* established that, in conceptions of the body and sexuality, the biological and supposedly "natural" cannot be separated from cultural and sociohistorical factors.[7] While infertility undoubtedly has a physical dimension, our perceptions and experiences of the body, sexuality, and fertility are decisively shaped by cultural frameworks. This is why I do not consistently distinguish between childlessness as a social phe-

4 Cf. Chrastil, *How to Be Childless*.

5 Cf. Evans, *Aphrodisiacs*; Loughran and Davis, "Introduction"; Oren-Magidor, *Infertility*; Oren-Magidor and Rider, "Introduction," 215–16; Toepfer and Wahrig, "Kinderlosigkeit."

6 Cf. "Fertility, Medicine and the Body," *VivaMente Conference in the History of Ideas*, May 22–23, 2023. The conference volume will be published in the Palgrave Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Medicine series.

7 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, esp. 151–52; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii–ix.

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nomenon and infertility as a biological term, as this would suggest that the two concepts are distinct and blur how both are shaped by culture.

If one examines how infertility and childlessness were dealt with in the past, the supposedly purely physical phenomenon is found to have a history of changes, continuities, contingencies, and contradictions. Today, infertility is predominantly understood as a medical phenomenon and conceptualized as a disease, whereas before the modern era, religious and moral didactical perspectives dominated.[8] Fertility was interpreted as a sign of divine grace, while infertility was interpreted as a sign of sacrilege and condemnation. But in some medieval contexts, childlessness was valued completely differently. Someone who had chosen both not to start a family and to renounce sexual activity was regarded as particularly pious. Such alternative meanings and values in the cultural history of infertility are revealing. They should discourage us from seeing our own understandings as absolute, as they show that interpretations can change across space and time.

In my earlier study, I examined how fertility and infertility were talked about in premodern learned discourses and how the biblical mandate to multiply, the Pauline ideal of chastity, ancient theories of procreation, medieval health doctrines, canon law on marriage, restrictions on inheritance, philosophical longing for freedom, and Protestant ideals of the family influenced notions of (non)parenthood. The extent to which these discussions are incorporated and the emotions and experiences of childless people are portrayed in German medieval narrative literature is the subject of this second book. Not only in normative texts and historical reality but also in fictional literature, infertility has serious consequences. It can cause social exclusion, dynastic conflicts, breaks in genealogical lines, and emotional distress. Infertility functions as a catalyst in narrative literature because people who long for a child seek healing and alternative courses of action. Likewise, committed nonparents seek to live out their ideal of life without starting or bringing up a family, and defend it to the hilt.

Even if their functions differ, pragmatic and aesthetic text genres intersect closely. While nonfiction provides authoritative knowledge and formulates norms, narrative literature is less goal-oriented. It has aesthetic value in itself, does not have to represent real conditions, and can test different models. The greater freedoms that this medium offers do not mean that fiction is irrelevant to a cultural history of childlessness. On the contrary: tales

8 Cf. Sandelowski and Lacey, "The Uses of a 'Disease'"; Loughran and Davis, "Introduction," esp. 29; Toepfer, *Infertility*, 6.

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are no less relevant to historical anthropological concepts than laws, sermons, or tracts. They reflect common values and are guided by theological, medical, legal, and ethical principles. But they can also counteract these principles, combine different strands of discourse, and develop their own positions.

Literary stories do not—at least not only—want to inform readers about how childless people did or should behave, but also to explore how they could behave. They narrate both the real and imaginary, fictitious experiences of nonparents, whether these seem desirable, exemplary, and ideal or pitiful, daunting, and dangerous. (In)fertility stories help to create normativity and reinforce differences between people who are and are not parents. It is no coincidence that preachers, demonologists, and ethicists like to use exemplar narratives to lend credibility and persuasiveness to their arguments. Yet stories of childlessness can be read to critique norms by analyzing how power relations are generated and strengthened or undermined by those who resist the social demands to reproduce.

The young discipline of infertility history has so far focused heavily on historiography, leading to a neglect of fictional narratives. Indeed, childlessness in the narrative literature of the German Middle Ages often remains an episode and primarily concerns secondary characters, whereas other social ties are foregrounded. Yet stories of fertility and infertility are encountered in countless literary works: in heroic epics, legends, novellas, and romances.[9] Even in the medieval German classics—in the Arthurian novels of Hartmann von Aue, in the *Nibelungenlied* (The Song of the Nibelungs), in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Parsifal), and in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*—forms of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood are negotiated. Therefore, narrative literature forms a unique source for examining what thoughts, feelings, and experiences childless people might have had in the Middle Ages. In literary infertility studies, the people who are always talked about in normative literature without having their own voices heard move to the centre. Statements and reflections made by childless people themselves as well as comments by other characters and omniscient narrators are examined, as are actions and interactions within the narrated world. How do people with children in that narrated world deal with couples without issue? Do they stigmatize and exclude them or show compassion? Or are they neutral and even consider reproductive behaviour secondary? Instead

9 Literary analyses include Samaké, "Erfolgreiche Strategien"; Sliepen, "Erzählen vom Un-Gefügten."

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of asking what it was "really" like not to have children, literary infertility studies are about deconstructing explanatory contexts, analyzing situation- and position-dependent valuations, and working out narrative patterns.[10]

For a cultural historical study of childlessness, I find the narrative literature even more informative than theological, medical, and legal treatises for two reasons. Firstly, it reflects different discourses of learning. A metadiscourse of childlessness is constructed through the literature, insofar as medieval authors draw on various, sometimes conflicting, fields of knowledge in their romances and stories, linking different teachings but also contrasting or parodying them. Secondly, the ideals and narrative schemes conveyed through this literature cast a long shadow. Some premodern narrative patterns still shape our ideas of childlessness today, whereas many norms have long since lost their significance. Narratives are more durable than legal texts and exert an unnoticed influence beyond literature on the way people think, feel, speak, and act. Therefore, comparative studies in historical context enable us to observe striking parallels between medieval and contemporary narratives about childlessness and parenthood.

The Danger of a Single Infertility Story

Not all people who are childless want to become parents. How would my mother-in-law have commented on her friend's daughter's story if Sally had not intended to have children? If one is physically able to have children but decides not to, the interpretation of one's story of childlessness changes fundamentally. But women who do not want to become mothers often receive even less social recognition than those who cannot. Two competing interpretations determine the public debate about childlessness today. The first view corresponds to the genre of the complaint, although it is not presented by an individual but by a collective from politics, business, and society. This lament insinuates that too few children are being born in nearly all European countries[11] and can go so far as to accuse childless people of undermining the social security system and even social cohesion. The second view is convinced of technical progress and implies that infertility can be cured by reproductive medicine. Both interpretations converge on blaming people without children as either selfish or lazy for not seeking medical help.

10 For similar approaches in recent historiographical research, see Andenna, "Kinderlosigkeit"; Foerster, "Die Witwenschaft."

11 See Statista, "The Total Fertility Rate in Europe 2023."

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In her famous TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie pointed out how devastating it is to permit only one narrative.[12] This creates and reproduces stereotypes that are not necessarily false but incomplete. Citing her own experiences, she establishes how colonial interpretations continue to impact the stories of Black people on and beyond the African continent and to influence their own self-understanding and identity formation. The issue that Adichie raises regarding narratives of people of colour applies equally to other people who face discrimination based on aspects of their identity or on the groups to which they are seen to belong. If stories about childless people focus exclusively on suffering, women who are medically diagnosed infertile are more likely to take that perspective. Adichie points out that, from another narrative point of view, stories can evolve or take on a completely new interpretation. Different stories can be told about childlessness, depending on who is allowed to present their version, to whom, where, how events are motivated, and when the story begins and ends.

Sally's infertility story sounds utterly different if it is continued, depending on the temporal and personal focus. To the surprise of everyone who knew her and her husband, they had twins. The couple's Passion narrative was thus transformed into a story of redemption, the joy of parenthood, and the success of fertility treatment. If instead, one chooses to focus on a later period, the burdens of parenthood come into view. The double addition to the family had negative effects on the marriage. Caring for both babies put an enormous strain on the couple, and they divorced. It is possible that during this difficult phase Sally longed for her old, childless life and even regretted becoming a mother. Of course, I was not told this story because for a long time it seemed to be beyond the realm of the imaginable. The fact that a woman does not find fulfillment in her role as a mother and would rather not have children does not conform to societal expectations and conflicts with the master narrative of happy parenthood that has dominated since the early modern age. Therefore, regretted motherhood is even more taboo than infertility and has only recently been perceived and researched as a serious phenomenon.[13]

Another story of childlessness and parenthood could be told about Sally's second marriage, which shows that biological kinship is by no means a prerequisite for an intimate parent-child relationship, but that social bonds

12 Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

13 Cf. Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*.

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can be more stable. Sally's new husband cared deeply for her girls and adopted the twins as his own daughters. The different facets of this modern family history not only make it clear that the same person can tell different stories of (in)fertility, but also show that one's fertility identity can change over the course one's lifetime: unhappy nonparents can become happy parents, happy childless people, or regretful mothers. People can take responsibility as parents and lovingly care for children, regardless of whether they conceived them "naturally," used reproductive technology, or took over their care at a later stage.

Scientists also tell stories when they communicate their findings, as Hayden White showed when he drew attention to the narrative modelling of historiography in *Metahistory* (1973).[14] The work of historians, in his view, is to relate a series of historical events to each other and present them as a coherent story. White distinguishes between four basic emplotments, or historians' ways of explaining and interpreting historical contexts: as progress toward the better (romance), as failure and capitulation when faced with the immutability of things (tragedy), as partial failure that nevertheless ends with reconciliation and improvement in society (comedy), or as complete failure and insight into the inability to interpret the laws of history at all (satire). When starting to write or read a book about childlessness in the Middle Ages, the first of Hayden White's emplotments that comes to mind is tragedy. Historical case studies and laws under which infertile wives can be disowned imply a history of infertility as social discrimination, where premodern childless people had no choice but to face their immutable fate.

From the start it was clear to me that I did not want to structure this book around the narrative of a Passion play. The suffering of childless people would be expressed, but strategies for overcoming this pain would not. Such a perspective would be problematic for research on childlessness: marginalization in historical practice continues in research narratives that reduce married women who do not bear children to the passive role of victim. Although social stigma is an important aspect, it is by no means sufficient to deal with childlessness comprehensively.

Instead of overemphasizing the exclusion of childless people, I originally wanted to argue the opposite case and draw attention to the productive consequences of infertility: it enables people to act in exceptional ways. In both pragmatic and poetic medieval literature, childless people developed compensation strategies. Since childlessness was considered a social defi-

14 White, *Metahistory*.

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cit, couples made considerable efforts to compensate for infertility. They sought remedies and considered alternative courses of action. The disruption caused by infertility thus made people extremely creative and productive; it has extraordinary cultural, religious, and narrative potential.[15] Such an approach has the advantage of attributing agency to childless people in their own histories. They are perceived as active in finding ways to integrate and rehabilitate themselves.

The thesis of infertility as culturally productive is not unproblematic either, but it can be criticized for the following reasons. The binary of fertility and infertility is perpetuated in this interpretation, so that it ultimately contributes to reinforcing unequal relations. The efforts of childless people are seen as attempts to compensate or sublimate, and thus their achievements are subtly devalued. Marginalization is thus perpetuated under different auspices. The only way to fundamentally change perspective is to consider how the difference between fertility and infertility arose. How did childlessness become stigmatized and reproduction the norm? In what ways are people without children marginalized and forced into the role of unhappy nonparent? Are there counter narratives, and under what conditions do such assessments change?

My term, (in)fertility, points to how these valuations vary. The brackets signal that people's fertile identity is not fixed and can change over the course of a lifetime. In addition, they show that an issue can be evaluated differently, and that processes of marginalization and prioritization cannot be separated.[16] The term (in)fertility thus makes visible the methodological rethinking process I have described going through as I wrote this book. In order to avoid the danger of a single infertility story, I do not base my study on one overarching narrative model of interpretation, but I combine a variety of partly contradictory narratives. With the three forms of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood, I attempt to break down the binary between parents and nonparents as well as voluntarily and involuntarily childless people. This critical approach to normativity reveals new sides of the Middle Ages; perhaps we can identify better with the diverse and plural medieval concepts of family and ways of life than with the historical reconstructions of the Middle Ages dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

15 On the active participation of childless people in shaping cultural, spiritual, and religious life, see Signori, *Vorsorgen*, 364.

16 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 9–10.

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Seven Narratives of Childlessness

The aim of my book is to present the diversity and heterogeneity of stories of childless people in the Middle Ages. Therefore, I sketch a typology of seven different narratives underlying literary stories about childlessness in the Middle Ages, beginning with the bitter suffering of involuntarily childless couples and ending with the happiness of lovers regardless of children. Childlessness is addressed in various contexts, which are by no means always associated with devaluation and exclusion. In the first three narrative models, childlessness is overcome in the end, whether through divine, demonic, or human help. In the other narratives, the problem is not solved biologically or socially, but the scale of values is reversed. In religious contexts and emotional relationships, childlessness is not considered a problem but an opportunity to develop an intimate relationship with God or a human partner. In narrative literature, forms of desired, refused, and regretted parenthood are fleshed out, combined, and can vary within one story. Most of the texts examined here date from the high and late Middle Ages and are written in German, but I also draw on comparisons with ancient classical and biblical models and consider Latin, French, English, and Italian tales.

The first and most important narrative, Divine Help, is based on the duality of divine power and human powerlessness. The protagonists feel deep suffering without being able to change anything about their childlessness themselves. Therefore, they place all their hope in a metaphysical instance and are ultimately rewarded for their devotion. This narrative shows how couples without children are discriminated against in society, which makes them into unhappy childless people. Spouses must adhere to specific regulations proscribed in theology of reproduction in order to find fertile grace. The reproductive norm is confirmed yet again by the late birth of a child. For this narrative, I draw particularly on the story of Mary's birth to Anne and Joachim in the Middle High German versions of the *Life of Mary* by Wernher the priest (1172) and Wernher the Swiss (first half of the fourteenth century), and also on several courtly novels from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

In the second narrative model, Dangerous Third Parties, childless married couples are not satisfied with vague hope in God but seek their own solutions. They are helped by characters who have magical knowledge and extraordinary abilities but are portrayed as shady or dangerous. The problems with fixation on offspring are shown in this narrative. Children who are born with someone else's help are different and struggle with the consequences of their conception. Important textual bases for this chapter are the

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Middle High German Alexander romances written by the priest Lambrecht, Rudolf von Ems, and Ulrich von Etzenbach in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with their learned source texts, as well as the fifteenth-century German adaptation of the French verse novel *Robert le diable* and Niccolò Machiavelli's Italian comedy *La Mandragola* (1524).

The third narrative model, Social Alternatives, replaces biological reproduction with a comparable human bond. In German literature, childless married couples are constantly taking on the care of a child or even passing off a foundling as their biological offspring. The fertility/infertility binary is abolished by social alternative models; indeed, in many cases the social parents surpass the biological parents in love and caring. The text selection for the third narrative includes a wide range of stories dating from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, in different literary genres—biblical poetry, legend literature, verse novellas, romances, and prose epics.

The fourth narrative, Mystical Motherhood, tells of pious women's longing for the baby Jesus, whom they care for, embrace, and nurse in their visions. In the research literature, these women have been devalued as hysterics instead of acknowledged for the specifically feminine form of their religiosity. Women mystics lead a spiritual life with the holy child, describe their great desire to be close to the infant Jesus, and interpret motherhood as religious practice. My analysis is based on accounts of revelations, *Schwesternbücher* (i.e., sister-books or lives of nuns), and biographies primarily of fourteenth-century women mystics, including Margaret Ebner, Lidwina of Schiedam, Adelheid Langmann, and Dorothea von Montau.

As shown in the fifth model, Forced Parenthood, marriage and procreation are not anthropologically self-evident. In courtly narratives, some men vehemently resist marriage, whether because they want to lead an unattached life or because their liaison does not befit their status. However, nobles cannot escape the high social pressure to ensure succession through an heir of the body forever, which sometimes leads to deep remorse and at other times to domestic violence with even fatal consequences. In this chapter, too, the historical and literary span is wide; twelfth-century texts such as Marie de France's *Le Fresne*, Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius*, and the *Nibelungenlied* are analyzed, as are fifteenth-century vernacular translations by humanists. The work on the narrative can be observed particularly well in the rich reception of *Griselda*, Giovanni Boccaccio's last tale in the *Decameron*.

The sixth narrative, Chaste Marriages, tells of people who are committed nonparents. The role model of the Holy Family makes it possible to subordinate reproduction to the ideal of chastity, even within a marriage. If two

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spouses renounce physical consummation by mutual consent, their behaviour is considered particularly godly. The religious vocation seems more important than bearing children. In several bride-quest epics, the reproductive norm is questioned on the wedding night and the feudal political *raison d'être* is replaced by a sacral one; childlessness is even interpreted as a sign of holiness in the lives of saints. In addition to the spiritual narrative literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in German, the bridal-quest epics of Oswald and Orendel, the lives of Mary and the legends of Alexius, and the imperial couple Henry and Cunigunde, I also examine the vita of the English recluse Christina of Markyate and the canonization records of the French noblewoman Delphine of Glandèves, dating from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

In my seventh and last narrative, Courtly Love, childlessness is not marked out as a problem—or even registered at all. In the context of a genuinely secular genre, this absence is all the more remarkable. The focus of this chapter is on courtly romances—including Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*, Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneasroman*, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*—and *Minnelieder* (Courtly Love Songs) by Walther von der Vogelweide, Heinrich von Morungen, or Johannes Hadlaub, written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although reproduction is an essential purpose of feudal marriage, courtly literature sketches a social ideal that seems to manage largely without children—the best-known example of this is probably Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*. Fertility and infertility are not relevant criteria for an intimate love relationship and do not determine people's happiness in life.

This book is based on the second, literary studies part of my German-language monograph *Kinderlosigkeit. Ersehnte, verweigerte und bereute Elternschaft im Mittelalter* (Metzler/Springer 2020). For the English publication, I have slightly edited the text, particularly to integrate more of the latest literature in English and to refer to findings from the first part of my study, entitled *Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Palgrave 2022); the introduction and epilogue have largely been recomposed. For their repeated encouragement to publish and their great editorial support, sincere thanks to Anna Henderson and her colleagues at Arc Humanities Press, especially Tania Colwell and Jitske Jasperse. I would also like to thank Catherine Rider for her insightful comments on the manuscript and Felicitas Schmiederer, who supported me with organizing the bibliography and the editorial work. My deepest thanks go to Kate Sotejeff-Wilson, who also translated my previous book into English, for the many productive discussions and her tireless efforts to transform my argument into English suitable for the target culture.

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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

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

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

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.

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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

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

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]

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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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Chapter 2

DANGEROUS THIRD PARTIES

A CHILD AT ANY PRICE

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

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

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

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

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Fertile Deputies: Problematic Positions

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

Biblical and Historical Surrogate Mothers

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

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

2 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 91–111.

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

4 *Die frühmittelhochdeutsche Genesis*, W1687.

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

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

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

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

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

5 *Die frühmittelhochdeutsche Genesis*, W2668.

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

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

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

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

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

8 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede."

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

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Premodern Seed Donors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13 Koslow, "The Curtain-Sack."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Distressed Women: Moral Standards for Would-Be Mothers

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

Guilt and Desire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sexual Violence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

35 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede."

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

Marginalized Men: Devaluation of Would-Be Fathers

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

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

36 Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

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

Precarious Fatherhood

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

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

37 Connell, *Masculinities*, 79, 81.

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

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

Age Stigma

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Being Ridiculed

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

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

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

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

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

Conspicuous Children: Postnatal Consequences

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

Alexander's Otherness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Robert the Devil's Son

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Prospects

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

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

47 Lewitscharoff, "Dresdner Rede."

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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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*.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.*

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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."

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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-

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 tûn erkant / Mit getrúwelichen sitten." On troths (vows of fidelity) see, vv. 2641–43.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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."

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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.

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Chapter 4

MYSTICAL MOTHERHOOD

VENERATING THE CHILD

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

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

1 De Marneffe, *Maternal Desire*, 216; on the "'cavewoman' drive" see 222.

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

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

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

Suppressed Desire: Modern Perspectives on Spiritual Mothers

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

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

3 Drage Hale, "Rocking," 215.

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

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

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

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

Little Comforter and Soul Child

There is plenty of evidence of Christ Child figurines (e.g., Fig. 4) in the late medieval and early modern period. The Cologne councillor Hermann Weinsberg (1518–1597) recorded in his family chronicle that both his sister Agnes (1540) and his daughter Anna (1567) were given "a Jesus" with an expensive layette when they entered the Franciscan convent of Maria Bethlehem.[6] In the convents of the Poor Clares in Munich, Graz, and Vienna, the infant Jesus was even firmly integrated into the clothing ritual: the festively dressed candidate was collected from her parents' house and walked to the convent church with the baby Jesus in her hand. There, her hair was cut off, she took off her worldly clothes and put on the habit of the order. Afterwards, the novice was presented with her figurine, so that she symbolically became the mother of the infant Jesus. Numerous figurines like this—with their clothing, cradle, jewellery, crowns, and other accessories—are still in existence today, as impressively documented by the *Seelenkind* (Soul Child) exhibition at the Freising Diocesan Museum in 2012.[7]

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

7 *Seelenkind*. On the clothing ritual see Zwingler, "'Gekleydter Jesus,'" 59.

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

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

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

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

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

Margaret Ebner and Her Christ Child

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

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

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

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

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

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

Infertility and Hysteria

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

15 Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 140.

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

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

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

Christmas Visions

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

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

17 Elisabeth von Schönau, *Werke*, 36.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Maternal Role Models

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

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

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

22 Andersen, "Das Kind sehen," 307.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Urge to Be a Mother

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

32 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 92.

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

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

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

Spiritual Parenthood: Thinking and Acting Maternally

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

Motherhood as a Social Practice

One such devotional book on spiritual motherhood was printed in Dillingen in 1565.[36] Adam Walasser (ca. 1520–1581), an extraordinarily prolific edification writer, linguistically updated the older, Middle High German text, adding an introduction. Especially at Christmastide, he considers *Vom zarten Kindlin Jesu* extremely useful for meditation on the birth of the Saviour. The stable, the manger, or the crib to be prepared for the holy child is the human heart. The baby Jesus grows and flourishes when his spiritual mother cultivates a godly way of life. Purity and chastity of mind, sisterly loyalty and love, peace, gentleness, and gratitude help one to lovingly care for the Christ Child.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

38 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 42–44.

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

Living Spiritually with a Child

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No Dolls

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

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

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

45 De la Iglesia y Nikolaus, "'Heilige Puppen?,'" 91; Stagel, *Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töß*, 36.

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

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

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

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

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

Prospects

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

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

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

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

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

51 Koschorke, *The Holy Family*.

52 Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 198.

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

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

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

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Chapter 5

FORCED PARENTHOOD

REGRETTING A CHILD

REGRETTING MOTHERHOOD is the title of the 2017 study with which Israeli sociologist Orna Donath caused a worldwide sensation.[1] How do such feelings of regret fit in with the assumption that, deep down, all women want children? My fifth narrative highlights the dangers of drawing false conclusions from the last chapter and generalizing the observations on mother mysticism: not every woman longs for a child and enjoys being a mother. Donath used her book to draw attention to the social taboo that some women have children even though they would much rather be "nobody's mum." In retrospect, these women regret that they allowed themselves to be forced into a way of life that they find completely incongruous and burdensome. From their individual perspectives, parenthood does not bring happiness but constant discomfort.

In the narrative of forced parenthood, I start from this basic situation but historicize it by linking two wishes—not to have children and not to marry—and including men in my investigation. While previous chapters were primarily concerned with involuntarily childless people, this chapter deals with those who start a family due to external pressures. In the past, as now, marriage and parenthood are less self-evident than is generally assumed. Even in the courtly world of the Middle Ages, the mandate to multiply is not always accepted unquestioningly. Values that characterize the theological, legal, and ethical discourses on (in)fertility are discussed and criticized, but not completely rejected. A critical approach to normativity focuses on the perspective of those who would like to escape social pressure but are unable to. The fertile majority is thus revealed to be a heterogeneous group, as it is made up of different types of parents, including those who did not want children, regretful mothers, and involuntary fathers.

1 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*. The German first edition, translated by Dürr and Ranke, was published in 2016.

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Reproductive Demands: Men Under Pressure

The expectations of others can be overwhelming. In interviews with Donath, women explain who in their social circle presses them into starting a family; some of them feel pressurized by their mothers, others by their partners. One interviewee reported that since their wedding, her husband had not stopped talking about having children and had even threatened to divorce her.[2] In the end, she agreed so as not to jeopardize their relationship. Comparing this typical narrative of a mother who regrets having children in the present with the stories of forced parenthood in the past reveals two important differences. Firstly, in medieval tales, the ones under the greatest pressure to reproduce are the men; and secondly, this comes not from individuals, but from a collective. The fertility logic of the feudal system demands subjection to external coercion. Although these aristocratic men would like to refuse parenthood, they give in so as not to jeopardize their status and privileges. However, sexology researchers stress the key difference between will and consent and point to power structures in sexual relationships. Agreeing to a marriage is different from wanting it yourself.

Social Pressure

In the *lai* (French verse romance) *La Fresne*, the poet Marie de France (ca. 1130–1200) tells the story of a couple who are deeply in love but not married:[3] A noble lord falls in love with a beautiful, well-bred young woman who was abandoned as a child and has lived with an abbess ever since. He woos Fresne for so long that she responds to his love and secretly leaves the abbey with him. In return, the knight promises never to let her down and to always be faithful to her. For a long time, the couple have a happy life together. The knight's liegemen also hold the young lady in high esteem, but then begin to express resistance to the relationship. The vassals demand that their lord leave his mistress and marry a noble lady. Their displeasure is not directed at Fresne herself, but by the need for a successor.

These worries about the future can be explained by the church's rejection of cohabitation and the discrimination against children born out of wedlock under inheritance law.[4] The knights demand that their

2 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*, 24–25; on the distinction between consent and will, see 26–27.

3 Marie de France, *The Lais*, 116–43.

4 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 91–130, esp. 103–5.

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lord produce a legitimate descendant who can inherit his lands. There is no need to emphasize the fact that his mistress is not a suitable match. Because of her unknown origins, Fresne is not eligible for marriage. The men argue that they would suffer numerous disadvantages if their lord were to forego an heir because of his concubine. When they claim that their master is causing them harm and threaten that they will no longer accept him without a proper wife, the protagonist gives in. Both knight and lady accept the dictates of reproduction without complaint, even though it means the end of their love relationship. The compelled bridegroom leaves the choice of bride, the courtship, and the wedding preparations to his liegemen instead of deciding on the marriage himself. His pain of separation is shifted to his immediate entourage, who greatly regret losing Fresne.

Nevertheless, the story ends well for the lovers, as the precarious circumstances of Fresne's birth come to light, revealing her noble ancestry. We explored the context of this story of (in)fertility in the narrative of the social alternative (Chapter 3). A noblewoman had the newborn Fresne abandoned near the convent because she had given birth to twins and feared disgrace. She herself had once started the rumour that a woman could only have two children at once if she had slept with two men. To avoid being despised and ostracized, Fresne's mother ensured that she was seen to have had only one child. She sent one of the girls away, concealed her existence, and was even prepared to kill the baby. The story of Fresne shows the different criteria by which reproduction was judged: men only gain paternity if they father a child within a legitimate marriage, and women must be wives, neither barren nor too fertile. By doubling the problem of infertility, Marie de France not only draws attention to implicit value judgements, but also to their contingency. If Fresne's mother had not slandered a neighbour after she gave birth to twins, she would have had no reason to fear losing her own reputation.

Of all the possible brides, Fresne's unknown twin sister is chosen to be the knight's wife. The close relationship between the two women comes to light in the bridal chamber. The mother of the bride recognizes her second daughter by the precious silk blanket with which Fresne selflessly decorates her beloved's bed. The lady regrets her actions, confesses that she gave up her other daughter, and admits to her surprised husband that she had given birth to twins. When he also recognizes Fresne as his daughter, the conditions of the estate are met, and the knight can make his mistress his lawful wife. It remains to be seen whether their marriage will actually produce an heir. Recognizing the norm is more important than actual reproduction.

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The protagonist must learn that sexuality is not a private matter, but his feudal political duty.

Family Pressure

The Knight of Staufenberg also resists the demand for an heir in the German story of the same name (*Der Ritter von Staufenberg*, ca. 1310). Peter is an outstanding fighter who gains great honour by winning tournaments and whose bravery is universally admired. When he returns home after a long journey, the family wants him to marry. As in the story of Fresne, his relatives argue that his childlessness would cause them lasting harm.[5] In both narratives, the proponents of reproduction represent the social expectation: A good ruler and ideal knight should marry to secure the genealogical succession. In addition, brothers and relatives hope that Peter will ennoble his family through an advantageous marriage. Due to his success in combat, they are confident that a prince will give him his daughter's hand in marriage. This marriage policy, through which new kinships are forged and powers are extended, can be described, in Michel Foucault's words, as "deployment of alliance."[6]

The marriage plans are discussed in a homosocial male circle; women are not involved. The relatives present Peter with their thoughts only to obtain his consent. First, they look at his life situation and praise him for his good deeds and honour. From this symbolic and economic capital, they deduce that a wife would be appropriate for his prestige. The relatives then show the knight what his childlessness and bachelorhood would mean for them. Were he to die prematurely and leave no heir, this would bring them shame and suffering. But marriage, especially to daughter of a prince, brought feudal, familial, and personal benefits: Peter would bring honour to them all, enhance the status of his family, and obtain a faithful wife.

These arguments are repeated almost verbatim, which serves to reinforce and confirm them. The listeners inside and outside the narrated world thus get the impression that this is the best way of life for a male hero. The only one who does not share the general enthusiasm is the person most affected. The Knight of Staufenberg is shocked by this unanimous judgment and looks for ways out. He claims that marriage does not yet suit his way of life. He is busy with too many things and wants to enjoy pleasures in life for a little longer. Peter does not reject the request outright, but at least signals

5 *Ritter von Staufenberg*, vv. 636–40, cf. vv. 654–82.

6 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 106.

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his willingness to marry later on. Rather than committing himself while he is still young, he wants to leave all his options open. Yet his relatives are only briefly dissuaded and soon try again to persuade the knight to marry. The request, politely put forward by a wise old relative, is rigorously rejected. Although Peter promises to fulfill his people's every wish, he makes one crucial exception: "I want no wife!" ("ich wil kein elich wip").[7] By resolutely refusing to marry, Peter also refuses to become a father.

The knight is quite sure of himself. His aversion to marriage is so strong that he prefers a dishonourable and painful death. He would rather be cut into pieces than be wed. Peter even confirms this negative attitude, unprompted, by swearing an oath. Instead of giving in to the pressure from his relatives, he builds up counterpressure. If they want to keep him, they should abandon their plan. Whereas in *La Fresne* the liege knights call the feudal relationship into question, here the one who threatens to terminate it is the liege lord. Peter demands that, if they do not want to jeopardize their current rule, his family and liegemen put their concerns about his future succession aside. His dialogue partner, who has more life experience, can only wonder at this harsh reaction. He claims to have had the knight's best interests at heart but realizes that he can do nothing.

Unlike his interlocutors, readers know that Peter's pronounced marital phobia has another cause. The blameless knight does not want to marry because he is already in a marriagelike relationship. A beautiful lady once met him in the forest on Whitsunday and revealed herself to be his secret protector. She had accompanied him faithfully for a long time and made possible all his knightly successes. The good fairy offers her love to the knight but demands in return that he must never marry. Nor does the fairy conceal the deadly consequences of breaking a taboo:[8] if Peter violated the marriage ban, three days later he would be doomed to die. Once the enamoured knight gladly agrees, the fairy is at his disposal, at any time and anywhere. He can summon her whenever he seeks sexual satisfaction, but never reveal their relationship in public. Nobody has any idea who Peter has to thank for his glory in tournaments. Yet, in two respects, his relationship with the otherworldly woman poses a threat to his rule: Peter can never have children with the fairy and, since he is not allowed to marry anyone else, he cannot produce legitimate heirs. The infertility of his lover is easily explained

7 *Ritter von Staufenberg*, v. 701.

8 Cf. Schulz, *Erzähltheorie*, 214–41; Suerbaum, "St. Melusine"; Tang, *Mahrtenehen*, 56–62.

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in the context of contemporary demonology. Even in the lively debates in the Middle Ages, focused around figures like Merlin, scholars concluded that demons cannot beget humans.[9]

Peter's reputation is steadily growing, but he is also under increasing pressure. His relatives find his reluctance to marry baffling, but his beloved does not need to be told about his family's expectations. The fairy herself knows that he is to be forced into a marriage and fears for his life. She can foresee that Peter will not be able to permanently escape the mandate to multiply. Yet for the knight, the sexuality dispositive is still more important than the alliance dispositive. His family's demands do not make him doubt his love. Once he has again pledged the fairy loyalty until death, he is even permitted to speak openly about their relationship. The fairy hopes that this will put an end to all the marriage plans and urges Peter not to let himself be persuaded. There is even more at stake for the Knight of Staufenberg than there was for Fresne's lover. In this unusual case, were the longing for a child fulfilled, the father-to-be would pay with his life. Staying wifeless and childless is therefore in Peter's best interests.

Religious Pressure

The knight's steadfastness is shaken when he arrives at the French royal court. While as liege lord he was able to reject the concerns of his relatives, he owes fealty to the King of France. The king's attention is drawn by Peter's success in tournaments and his excellent reputation. He wants to honour the outstanding knight and give him the hand of his orphaned niece in marriage. So, Peter's relatives' wish seems to be coming true. The Knight of Staufenberg is to become a prince and can establish family ties with the highest nobility. The startled protagonist politely tries to refuse this noble offer, claiming that his status is too low to marry such a high-ranking lady. Although the king reaffirms his goodwill, Peter continues to resist, causing not a little displeasure. None of the princes can understand his reluctance; indeed, they doubt his sanity. Only the bishop, who is present, suspects that Peter's refusal could have a deeper reason and asks the fateful question of a lawful impediment: is Peter married already?

Seeing no way out, the knight confesses. He explains that he has the most beautiful lady, who always accompanies him and fulfills his every wish. Nor does he conceal the imminent fatal consequences of marriage. When

9 Kellner, *Ursprung*, 409–11; Van der Lugt, *Le ver, le démon et la vierge*. On the early modern debate on demonic infertility cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 145–51.

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the court clergy learn that only Peter can see his lover, they believe the relationship to be a diabolical spirit. They tell him that his salvation is at stake. Were he to continue his love affair with the she-devil instead of marrying a pious woman, he would end up in hell. Compared to the story of Fresne, the external pressure on the man refusing marriage is much greater. Peter's sexual relationship, which is not open to having children and is beyond social control, is deeply suspect to the clergy. To ensure a fertility-sensitive interpretation of this debate, we need to listen carefully to what is being said: When the anonymous author created the character of a materially and sexually generous fairy, was the aim to create a male fantasy or to demonize an infertile woman? Erotic relationships with demonic women were certainly a source of fascination to medieval and early modern readers and are repeatedly mentioned in both Christian and Jewish literature. Sexual and reproductive desire are played off against each other in these "demonic alliances."[10] As the men can only temporarily escape the social demands to produce an heir, from the outset, such relationships are doomed to fail.

The further course of action in *Der Ritter von Staufenberg* can be read as both normative and critical of normativity. While Peter resisted the family's demands, he concedes to the power of the church. Although his beloved has confessed Christ, he has no way to counter the force of spiritual authority. The constant attacks on his life choices have worn him down, so he submits to the collective judgment and promises to marry. Yet his lack of commitment to the clergy's command instantly becomes clear: the knight calls the fairy to him one more time. When she prophesies his imminent death, Peter changes his mind. Like the priests, he considers her prediction to be a diabolical deception. It is only when a mysterious bare foot pushes down through the ceiling at his wedding that Peter learns he was mistaken.[11] He prepares for death, makes his confession, and places his soul in the hands of the Mother of God. His heart remains steadfast, but the object of his love has shifted from the infertile fairy to a woman who could give birth to his heir. Peter says a tender farewell to the king's niece, who is transformed from a virgin bride into a childless widow and withdraws to a convent. The demand to extend his rule through marriage is met, but the price is extraordinarily high. While in *La Fresne* individual and social desire can be reconciled through a poetic device, when the Knight of Staufenberg yields to the reproductive norm, he pays with his life.

10 Lembke, *Dämonische Allianzen*.

11 Fuchs-Jolie, "Von der Fee nur der Fuß."

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Forced Fatherhood: Gualtieri's Questionable Behaviour

In medieval narrative literature, resistance often has to be overcome before characters can accept their duty to reproduce. Their problems initially seem to be solved by marriage but can return with greater force. People who look back and regret their parenthood are questioning the conventional hierarchy of (in)fertility. A critical approach to normativity can shed new light on one of the most popular early modern tales, which has fascinated and shocked readers right up until today due to the protagonist's excessive patience and her husband's cruelty: the story of Griselda, a poor peasant's daughter whose marriage raises her to the status of marchioness, but whose husband humiliates and tortures her. This story was first told by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) in the *Decameron*, where it concludes the entire narrative cycle. Early on, Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) removed the tale from its overall context and rewrote it as a humanist letter of consolation. By this roundabout route through Latin, it found its way into German literature in the fifteenth century, transmitted by the likes of Nuremberg Carthusian Erhart Groß (d. ca. 1450) and the early German humanist Heinrich Steinhöwel (1410/11–1479).[12] The names of the two protagonists differ slightly in the various versions: From Boccaccio's Griselda and Gualtieri, to Groß's Grisardis and her marquis, to Steinhöwel's Griseldis and Walter. Because each translator gives it different accents, Griselda's reception history is a particularly good example of the work on the fertility myth.

The Marquis of Salerno, like Peter von Staufenberg, tries to escape the "reproductive futurism" of his surroundings. This term was coined by Lee Edelman, in *No Future* (2004) where he criticized the concept that people prioritize having children in future over their present welfare. In his queer theory, heteronormative societies see children as a promise of prosperous future that is never fulfilled. Therefore, Edelman invites all those who call themselves queer to resist ideological overemphasis on children.[13] Yet premodern noblemen had far fewer opportunities to oppose the social system than people do today. Gualtieri is no more able to permanently refuse the reproductive order than the Knight of Staufenberg; this has serious consequences for him and his family. In contrast to previous scholarship, I inter-

12 Boccaccio, *Das Dekameron*, 830–42; Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 668–78. Cf., e.g., Aurnhammer and Schiewer, eds., *Die deutsche Griselda*; Bertelsmeier-Kierst, "Übersetzungsliteratur"; Kocher, *Boccaccio*, 157–202; Zanucchi, "Stoische Philosophin."

13 Edelman, *No Future*.

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pret the story of Griselda's marriage not as the trials of a humble woman, but as the regret of a man who had never wanted to be a father. Thus, I transfer Donath's female-centred approach to a male figure, to reveal the structural analogies between regretted motherhood and fatherhood, fictionality and reality, past and present. In the current debate, drawing parallels between mothers and fathers who regret parenthood is highly controversial. German sociologist Christina Mundlos (2015), for instance, believes that men regret parenthood less often because they can more easily avoid the work of raising children and are not criticized for this in the same way as women.[14] The phenomenon of regretted fatherhood in the Middle Ages seems justified in this context, because the role expectations were overwhelming, especially for men of the high nobility.

Longing for Independence

The tenth tale on the tenth day of the *Decameron* (1349/53) begins with a portrait of the Marquis of Salerno, whose sole occupations are hunting and fowling. Gualtieri pursues the typical pleasures of the male aristocracy and has no thoughts of marriage. Boccaccio's narrator sympathizes with the young man, approves of his drive for independence and praises him as wise. Yet, the marquis's subjects are absolutely opposed to his way of life. Like the vassals in *La Fresne*, in the *Decameron* the people of Salerno are worried about their future. They fear that the marquis may die without issue and would like to take matters into their own hands and find him a wife.

While in Boccaccio's version, the people have to beg again and again, in Steinhöwel's *Griseldis* (1461/62) the marquis caves in after just one conversation. Steinhöwel generally idealizes his main character, but also gives more weight to the pleas of his subjects. They are all too well aware of their lord's desire for freedom and know that he will not marry of his own free will. So, their spokesperson presents their request as urgent: although the marquis is still in the flower of his youth, the days will surely fly by. This puts time pressure on the protagonist, similarly to many discussions of (in)fertility today. One of the most common arguments why people—especially women—should have children as soon as possible is that their biological clock is ticking. In Steinhöwel's version, the subjects fear that they will wait in vain, and the marquis will never change his mind. They beg him to release them from their fear of a change of rule and social insecurity.[15]

14 Mundlos, *Wenn Mutter sein*, 18–19.

15 Steinhöwel, *Griseldis*, 183, ll. 41–42.

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Because the welfare of his subjects is at stake, the marquis agrees to marry, even though this clearly contradicts his personal wishes. Boccaccio has Gualtieri declare in a frank speech that he was determined to remain a bachelor. Unlike his subjects, he does not believe that a woman can bring him much joy. But he promises to look for a potential bride and demands that he have a free rein in choosing her. He is only prepared to marry if his subjects recognize his wife as their lady, regardless of her status, and threatens severe punishment for any breach of this agreement. With this concession, the marquis secures decision-making power in a situation that he finds utterly repugnant. As he repeatedly stresses, the aristocratic duty to reproduce leads him to go against his inner convictions. If he has to bind himself in the chains of marriage, he wants any wrong decision on whom he marries to be solely his own.[16]

The protagonist's desire for celibacy is most pronounced in the first German adaptation, *Grisardis* (1432) by the Nuremberg Carthusian Erhart Groß.[17] This version integrates an extensive debate into the plot, whereby literary staging and historical discourse enrich each other. The advantages and disadvantages of marriage and parenthood require thorough exploration, as the scope of the work shows: theoretical reflections on the best way of life take up about half of the text. For Groß's work, it is difficult to draw genre boundaries between didactic treatise and narrative literature. In *Grisardis*, the subjects want their ideal lord to marry so that they will not be worse off after his death. They interpret Jesus' parable that a good tree bears good fruit in terms of genealogy. Besides a virtuous wife, the blameless marquis must also have exemplary children. Although the subjects know that their lord wants to remain unmarried, they appoint a delegation to present their collective wish that he produce an heir. The protagonist reacts as expected. Although he sees the affection with which his people make their request, he refuses. The marquis does not feel responsible for securing his rule beyond his death; he favours religious over reproductive continuity. Concern for his succession seems almost petty to him compared to benevolent divine intervention: If he can no longer provide for his subjects, someone else will take care of them, and may even surpass him.

In contrast to the other versions, Groß's protagonist has honourable reasons for his choice. He does not want to indulge in feudal pleasures but is concerned about his salvation. Like Paul (1 Cor 7:38), he finds celibacy to

16 Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 669.

17 Groß, *Grisardis*. Cf. Allweier, "Griseldis-Korrektur."

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be a greater good than marriage and a guarantee of eternal life. Untainted by physical passions, he wants to surrender his soul to God and join the company of angels.[18] The marquis also used secular arguments to dissuade his subjects; they should not be lulled into a false sense of security. Even if he were to marry and father an heir, there was no guarantee that that son would also be a good ruler. The marquis thus reveals that some reasons for having children apply only to a limited extent. In all life's social complexity, reproduction cannot solve every problem. When the petitioners insist, the marquis changes tack. He appeals to their love and loyalty and contrasts the uncertain prospect of an excellent heir with his much more justified hope of the kingdom of heaven. The marquis responds to social pressure from his subjects with religious counterpressure and demands solidarity from his fellow believers. Why would they want to harm him, who is not only their master, but also their friend and brother in faith?

No Freedom of Choice

The protagonist of *Grisardis* can draw on an influential ascetic theological tradition; ancient philosophers and Christian church fathers praised singledom and childlessness.[19] Erhart Groß increasingly focuses on the marquis's status, which is the main reason why he cannot choose freely. The delegates do not accept his objections and declare his values inappropriate to his role. His concern for the salvation of his own soul seems unfounded to them, as husbands and wives, widows and widowers have also entered the kingdom of heaven. Celibacy is not a virtue for a ruler; eternal life will be easier for him to attain if he accepts the yoke of marriage. The messengers urge their master to prioritize the common good over his personal ideal. Yet marquis cannot be swayed, so no rapprochement is reached, and the conversation has to be interrupted.

For their second attempt, the messengers enlist the support of the respected Master Marcus. The marquis reiterates his wish to live without a wife and children but engages with Master Marcus's concerns on a discursive level, which leads to another extensive dialogue about the pros and cons of marriage. The marquis justifies his negative attitude with the suffering and cares a marriage can cause. His first thought is the fear of infertility and the terrible disappointment if his wife does not give birth to a child,

18 Groß, *Grisardis*, 3, ll. 17–21. On the patristic and scholastic doctrine see Toepfer, *Infertility*, 32–40.

19 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 168–79.

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and he has sacrificed his way of life in vain. But even with a fertile wife, life could be unbearable. The marquis vividly illustrates the dangers of worldly love, recalls biblical men for whom a woman's seduction was their downfall, and refers to numerous statements by philosophers and learned clerics that criticize marriage. He argues that women's gossip and bickering, envy and jealousy, pride and lack of understanding, desire for favours and infidelity, demands and mood swings are a heavy burden. While the marquis used religious arguments with the delegation from his subjects, in the scholarly dialogue he integrated himself into the misogynist rhetorical tradition that extends back to Antiquity.

In the marquis's opinion, not even longing for children justifies marriage. He finds all the usual future-oriented motives for procreation completely pointless: "What is it to us, when we depart from this world, that another bears our name?" ("waz get uns daz an, wen wir von dieser werld scheiden, daz ein ander genennet wirt nach unserm nomen?").[20] The marquis does not share the assumption that parents live on in their children. A son does not necessarily resemble his father, and many people have the same name. Efforts to secure the family legacy through descendants are far from the best course, in his view. A son could die before his father or go astray, which is why good friends and loyal relatives are a better bet. Your hard-earned possessions and property are best used in your lifetime, not left to others. The protagonist turns this argument, too, into a religious one. Why should a person who is heir to the kingdom of God want to beget physical heirs? Why should he yearn for children and grandchildren if they may fail to fulfill their Christian duty and be damned forever? The marquis cannot comprehend how any thoughtful man could marry and wish for children.

To rebut this passionate plea, Master Marcus adopts a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, he tries to cure the marquis of his marital phobia by extolling the virtues of women. Secondly, he attempts at convincing him of his duty to reproduce. In this argument, status is key. Master Marcus explains that there are virgins, widows, people bound by religious and wedding vows, and that every realm needs different estates: a king and princes, clerics as well as farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. Everyone must behave according to their status and fulfill the tasks assigned to them by God. Marcus relates this general theory directly to the marquis. As a prince, it was his social and

20 Groß, *Grisardis*, 14, ll. 37–39. On children as an investment in the future cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 180–82.

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religious duty to produce an heir. God had entrusted him with dominion over his own lands and thus also destined him to reproduce.

Master Marcus would like to leave his interlocutor to draw his own conclusions. He asks him to weigh up what he has heard and urges him to consider what is "the most useful and the best" ("daz nůtzte und das peste").[21] Can the pious marquis choose freely if his opposition to marriage is a rebellion against the divine order? Nevertheless, he lodges yet another objection, evidencing his fierce resistance to becoming a husband and father. The marquis again invokes the Pauline ideal of chastity, which Marcus does not recognize. Only a simple man is allowed to choose between different ways of life, whereas a ruler must bow to the will of his people. As Marcus puts it, there no choice in the matter: the case cannot be decided differently "because it is as it is" ("so die ding nicht anders můgen sich gehaben").[22] Social demands lead to a veritable compulsion to marry. Nevertheless, the disputation suggests that the marquis made his own decision—but he only did so in his choice of bride.

Fertility as a Mistake

The marquis chooses to wed a poor girl from the village. His marriage is a mesalliance, which Boccaccio only slightly glosses over by referring to Gualtieri's previous interest in the young woman. The choice of bride can be read as an expression of opposition to the institution of marriage and as a subtle protest against the social dictates of reproduction. Gualtieri does not use the marriage to expand his territory, to increase his prestige, or for economic gain. Instead, he opts for a woman who is far inferior to him in status and thus all the easier for him to control and reduce to her childbearing function. The marquis fulfills his subjects' request to the bare minimum, and in return, expects their approval. From Griselda, he demands absolute obedience. She must promise to live to please him, never to be angry because of his words or deeds, and always to submit to his will. If Gualtieri must marry, he intends to retain as much power and agency as he can.

Griselda proves the perfect choice. She is obedient, humble, eager to serve, and fulfills all the duties of her estate. At court, she behaves as appropriately as if she came from a noble family. Most importantly, Griselda meets the main requirement: to the marquis's great delight, she gives birth to a daughter. Soon afterwards, however, Gualtieri comes up with the strange

21 Groß, *Grisardis*, 23, l. 10.

22 Groß, *Grisardis*, 23, ll. 34–35.

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Figure 5. "Vanishing child." In Francesco Petrarch, *Historia Griseldis*, trans. into German by Heinrich Steinhöwel (Ulm: Johann Zainer d.Ä., ca. 1473), fol. 7v, ca. 11.4 × 8.2 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 705#Beibd.1. Courtesy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

idea of testing his wife's patience with unbearable things (*con cose intollerabili*), as Boccaccio's narrator reprovingly remarks.[23] The marquis instrumentalizes Griselda's fertility to discriminate against her because of her lowly origins. He pretends that his subjects are highly dissatisfied and would never accept their daughter as heir. Gualtieri thus ignores the actual reason for the marriage and conceals his people's promise of devotion. Instead, he suggests that they only wanted to be ruled by nobles. He portrays his wife's fertility as an undesirable byproduct of his marriage, indeed a serious error. Contrary to expectations created by inheritance restrictions, he does not blame Griselda for the child's gender, but rather for her own social background. Gualtieri acts as the enforcer of popular opinion on his wife. To live in peace with his subjects, he claims, he has to eliminate the cause of all criticism. He takes Griselda's baby daughter away from her and leads her to believe that the child will be killed.

23 Boccaccio, *Tutte le opera*, 108d27, p. 946.

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The coloured woodcut depicts the child being taken away (Fig. 5). It comes from an illustrated print by Steinhöwel's *Griseldis*, which was published in Ulm, ca. 1473, and comprises a good third of the folio page. On the left is an interior in which a lady dressed in a red robe sits on an upholstered chair. The cradle at her feet still seems to be rocking but is empty. The messenger has already taken the child by the shoulders, but the mother is still maintaining physical contact. It is difficult to say whether she is handing over her child voluntarily or holding her legs protectively. The child's nakedness and lack of parting gifts indicate a sudden separation. Without resistance, the lady lets the messenger go, looking him in the eye. In the next scene on the right, the messenger has left the shelter of the lady's chamber. Outdoors, he stows the child in the pannier of a donkey, ready to depart. The child's father remains unseen.

The marchioness passes this terrible trial in an exemplary manner. Without resisting or reproaching, she bends to her husband's will. After some time, Griselda is pregnant again and gives birth to a boy. Although their second child is the long-desired male heir, yet again, Gualtieri puts his wife to the test. Once more, he gives her the impression that her fertility is worthless and causes serious problems. His people would never accept the grandson of a poor farmer as their future ruler. Gualtieri uses this bogus complaint to justify taking away his wife's second child. He criticizes the aristocratic obligation to reproduce by declaring estate to be the decisive factor for the value of fertility. The double trial is illustrated in the incunabula. The same woodcut with the separation of mother and baby is reused, without distinguishing between daughter and son. Such multiple use of a woodcut is typical of early book printing, but here it adds narrative value: taking the second child away is an almost identical repetition of the fate of the first.

Without a word of protest, Griselda once again submits to Gualtieri, who can no longer desist from his horrific behaviour. Finally, he pretends to want to separate from his wife and marry a partner who equals him in status. There is a striking discrepancy between the true values and feigned disdain of the people of Salerno. Although his subjects, particularly the women, stand up for Griselda, Gualtieri acts mercilessly. He sends her back to her poor father, near naked. Only when Griselda once again proves her humility and continues to serve him willingly does the marquis end his cruel game. He reveals that the supposed new bride and her young companion are their children and takes Griselda back as his wife.

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Fantasies of Vanishing

The Marquis of Salerno's behaviour is puzzling. Why does the freedom-loving young hunter turn into a domineering and cruel husband? Why does he think he has to put his compliant wife to the test, even though she offers no cause for such distrust? The narrator in Boccaccio's *Decameron* sharply rebukes Gualtieri. Rulers like this were better suited to herding swine than to governing people. Later translators and adaptors of this tale have made every effort to gloss over the marquis's behaviour but are never able to resolve the issue.[24] A critical approach to normativity makes Gualtieri's actions appear less surprising. My interpretation starts with his pronounced aversion to the social dictates of marriage and reproduction.

Strangely, Gualtieri's attitude to his wife changes after the couple have children. He reacts to the new addition to the family not with unbridled joy, but with violence. Although the marquis does not explicitly lament becoming a father, he projects these negative feelings onto his followers. He thus relates his regret to the very instance that pushed him into marriage and fatherhood. Gualtieri uses status as a pretext to give him the maximum room for manoeuvre possible, even within his new family life. The man who wanted to be "nobody's dad" has fulfilled his feudal duty and can ensure he is relieved of this burden. What he justifies to himself as a test for his wife also gives him freedom from his children. "Fantasies of vanishing" are characteristic of the phenomenon of regretting motherhood, as Orna Donath explains. In their interviews with Dornath, women yearn to cast off family ties or at least to live apart from their children. They develop fantasies fuelled by the desire that they themselves or their children could suddenly disappear.[25]

The Ulm woodcut (Fig. 5) depicts an image of just such a vanishing child. The cradle on the left-hand side of the picture is emptied by a helper figure, who then puts the child in the basket and takes it far away. Compared to

24 Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 678. Petrarch allegorically refers to this as a tale of God testing the human soul. Steinhöwel draws on Petrarch's version, but leaves out the humanist framing, which again makes Walter's behaviour seem highly questionable. Groß is didactic in providing motivations for the trials. His marquis wants to prove Grisardis's constancy in public to set an example to other women. The narrator affirms the good intention but expresses astonishment as to how a virtuous man could put his blameless wife to the test for so long and compares this to the inscrutable will of God.

25 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*, 131–47. On the fantasy to "return to being a woman who is nobody's mom" see 138.

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modern mothers who regret having children, a premodern nobleman had more opportunities to organize family relationships in his own interests. In the Middle Ages, it was by no means unusual to send one's own children away to be brought up at other courts or in other households.[26] Gualtieri contravenes this common practice, however, by concealing his real intention and pretending to his wife that he has to get rid of their children. Because he has committed Griselda to total obedience, he can banish all thoughts of fatherhood. Three times, the marquis uses the supposed regret of his subjects as an instrument of power to secure complete autonomy and reverse the irreversible. He orchestrates the performance, and without contradicting him, Griselda plays her part. After the children vanish, the couple live together as if they had never become parents.

In my reading, the norms that require critique are not so much in Gualteri's "tests" as in the end of the story. Has Griselda proved the marquis wrong through her humility and convinced him that family life is worth it after all? Is Gualtieri finally coming to terms with his fatherhood and longing for his children? In Boccaccio's tale, not only the daughter's return home as a bride, but also the family's final happiness after many years of separation seems feigned. According to Donath's observations, mothers who regret having children tend to performatively disguise their true feelings. Because regretted parenthood is a taboo, in this view, the affected women imitate the actions of other mothers and thus seek to conform to normative expectations. They flaunt their maternal happiness, regardless of whether this is how they indeed feel. What the marquis and his wife "really" feel remains fictitious, both in Boccaccio's tale and its German adaptations. Nevertheless, in terms of reproductive norms, the end could not be happier. The social expectation that marriage and parenthood bring fulfillment and "even if it begins with a crisis—will necessarily lead to a happy ending,"[27] is confirmed by the family celebration.

Reproductive Expectations: When Women Regret

In interviews with the sociologist Donath, women complained that their desire for a childfree life was barely acknowledged. Others blamed themselves for prioritizing their partner's interests over their own needs. Even medieval narrative literature addresses how women's concerns can collide

26 Shahar, *Childhood*, 209–41; Byrne and Congdon, "Mothering."

27 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*, 108.

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with the reproductive expectations of others. Protagonists who would gladly renounce marriage and family are encountered in the context of various genres, be it an epic, romance, or legend. The reasons why female characters speak out against marriage and implicitly also against motherhood are manifold.[28] The Irish princess Isolde in *Tristan* by Gottfried von Strassburg (1200–1220) would rather stay with her family in familiar surroundings than move abroad with an unknown man. The widowed ruler Dido rejects all wooers in Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneasroman* (Romance of Aeneas, 1174/84–85) because she wants to remain faithful to her deceased husband. The young sister of the king, Kriemhild, categorically rules out marriage in the *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelungs, ca. 1200) so that she never has to experience such great suffering as was prophesied to her in a dream. In the medieval literature, women's desire for celibacy is most frequently motivated by religion; I discuss these saints' legends in detail in Chapter 6.

Unlike their male counterparts, female protagonists—at least in secular literature—are not given much opportunity to resist marriage. Medieval aristocratic culture in general paid little heed to what women wanted. Marriage agreements were negotiated between men who hoped to gain a range of benefits through new family ties: protection, peace, wealth, influence, and power. Although women formally had to consent to the agreement between men, they rarely had any real freedom of choice about to whether or whom to marry. The heroine of the best-known German heroic epic is a good case in point. Kriemhild's declared desire to remain unmarried is completely irrelevant to the rest of the plot. When her brother Gunther wants to marry her off to forge a political alliance with the strong Siegfried, she submits without question to his authority: "Yes, I will always do whatever you command me to do! That will be done" ("jâ wil ich immer sîn, / swi ir mir gebietet! daz sol sîn getân").[29]

Gregorius's Mother's Regret

In contrast, the Princess of Aquitaine in *Gregorius* by Hartmann von Aue (ca. 1190) has greater room for manoeuvre.[30] Unlike Kriemhild, the nameless protagonist can decide on her own way of life, as she is not subject to a male guardian. After the death of her father and brother, she took over the rule

28 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 11585–91; Heinrich von Veldeke, *Eneasroman*, 65, vv. 28–31; *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanzas 11–16.

29 *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 610, v. 3.

30 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 2185–224.

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of Aquitaine but sought to lead a spiritual life. Her wish to remain celibate is biographically based and is linked to an (in)fertility story that was mentioned in the narrative of the social alternative (Chapter 3): as a young girl, the princess became pregnant through a love affair with her brother and was only able to conceal it by abandoning the child. She then sought to atone for her grave sin of incest through piety, fasting, and prayer.

The influential noblemen of Aquitaine are aware of their princess's negative attitude toward marriage, as they suffer for it. Her country falls victim to plunder and devastation because an aggressor wants to conquer it, and the unmarried princess is unable to defend herself militarily. Only thanks to the commitment of a foreign knight, the young hero Gregorius, is the besieger defeated, the country liberated, and peace secured. As a result of these painful experiences, the nobles fear new attacks. As long as no man rules, they consider Aquitaine to be under threat. In the interests of the common good, they decide together to ask their princess to marry. Strikingly, in this conversation, the security needs of her subjects no longer play a role. Instead of gender-specific arguments, the lords focus on feudal politics and insist on the aristocratic duty to reproduce.

Their arguments are well known from the other (in)fertility stories of the forced parenthood narrative. The lords consider the princess's pious desire for celibacy to be a mistake. She would be wrong not to leave an heir to her mighty realm. The men of Aquitaine transfer the demand made of male rulers in the previous stories to their own princess. She has to bear an heir, not because of her gender, but because of her political role. The nobles appeal to the princess to put the needs of her lands before her personal wishes. They repeatedly emphasize that marriage is the more appropriate, indeed the best form of life for anyone of her status. Although they recognize the religious case for celibacy, they consider marriage to be more expedient: by agreeing to it, the princess would not only fulfill the demands of this world, but also better conform to the divine commandment.

Swayed by their arguments, the princess vows to marry. The narrator stresses that, here again, marriage is not an individual matter, but collective: "Thus the will of all was done" ("da geschach ir aller wille an").[31] The nobles leave it up to the princess to choose a spouse; that, at least, she is allowed to decide for herself. True to the basic rule of the narrative literature that the saviour gets the princess, she favours Gregorius. Readers of the legendary tale are unlikely to share the general enthusiasm for this match. They

31 Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, v. 2230.

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know that the princess has just chosen her own son as her husband and will unwittingly repeat the sin of incest. So, the hoped-for child is already there, but never permitted to take up his inheritance. For the Princess of Aquitaine, motherhood brings not joy but doubled sorrow. The child she once bore brought the sibling incest to light, causing her separation from and then the death of her beloved brother. Recognizing her son again after many years plunges her into a deep crisis. When the lady realizes who she is happily married to, she regrets ever having been born.

The Princess of Aquitaine's regret about her motherhood is all too understandable in view of the double incest.[32] She does not lament bowing to social pressure to produce an heir, but that she has slept with the wrong partners. This means that her negative emotions can be attributed to one of the few situations in which women today are allowed to complain about their family situation without facing criticism. As Donath makes clear, regret in the context of motherhood is tolerated in precisely two cases—one in which it is a power move and a threat, the other to normalize. Intentionally childfree women are told that they will regret not having children, but women have the right to regret having children if those children deviate from the norm in physical, psychological, or social terms, or are in any way "different."[33] The latter variant of regretted motherhood was the rule in the Middle Ages, as both the story of the Princess of Aquitaine and my next example show.

Asinarius's Mother's Regret

In the anonymous Middle Latin verse romance *Asinarius* (ca. 1200), a woman's regret stands in striking contrast to her own wishes. Although the protagonist has longed to have children, as soon as her baby is born, she deeply regrets her motherhood. The story begins with an unidentified king. The narrator explicitly emphasizes that no one knows his name or his country, so the introduction remains in the realm of fairytale vagueness. Unlike other rulers, this king does not have to be pressurized into marriage or parenthood. On his own initiative, he chooses a wife befitting his status to share his throne and bed. The royal couple enjoy many privileges, great wealth, and

32 On the leitmotif of repentance see Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius*, vv. 49, 75, 79, 126, 163, 226, 428, 852, 897, 1360, 1456, 2256, 2307, 2347, 2379, 2402, 2491, 2529, 2557, 2701, 2705, 2727, 2780, 2986, 2995, 3337, 3670, 3812, 3848, 3867, 3887, 3987.

33 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*, 56–60, 75–76.

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high regard, but lack an heir to complete their happiness; as in most stories of (in)fertility, for a long time, the marriage remains childless.

The narrator vividly describes the suffering that this brings the royal pair. The couple lead an active sex life without getting pregnant. Their efforts to reproduce never succeed. Although the king and queen face no external pressure, they have internalized social expectations. The queen seems to despair of her infertility the most, because she suffers twice over. She not only feels deep pity for her husband, whom the narrator also pities, but is also deeply ashamed of not being able to fulfill her essential role as a wife. An extensive soliloquy gives readers insight into the inner life of this unhappy woman, who feels helpless and superfluous. Sleeping with her husband again and again in vain makes her disgusted by lovemaking.

Her childlessness defines the queen's identity when she declares plaintively: "I am a woman to be pitied" (*Femina sum misera*).[34] She compares her body to a barren field and a sack full of holes. Both comparisons are culturally and historically revealing; they document the concept of procreation theory were taught much earlier by Aristotle and Hildegard of Bingen, who wrote that the male seed embodies the life-giving principle that must be nourished and brought to maturity by the female body.[35] The queen's deficient womb is seen as the sole cause of her infertility, not the poor quality of the seed. She therefore blames herself alone for the childlessness of her marriage. To her, all other values take second place to parenthood. Her noble lineage, great wealth, and royal reputation count for nothing as long as she is unable to bear an heir. The queen therefore replaces sexual with religious activities in accordance with the best-known medieval narrative of (in)fertility: she pleads ceaselessly to the gods to help her fulfill her reproductive mission.

When her wish is finally granted, the queen's attitude changes profoundly. As soon as the child is born, she regrets becoming a mother. Within the narrative, her regret is motivated by the fact that the child deviates from the norm: the queen gives birth to a donkey. Even the narrator can barely conceal his shock: "Oh, what a birth!" (*O qualis partus*).[36] When a human mother gives birth to an animal child, it evokes astonishment, but even more compassion. The great joy that the queen felt after a long period of deep despair during her pregnancy is crushed once more. She loudly bewails con-

34 "Asinarius," v. 15.

35 On premodern notions of seed theories see Toepfer, *Infertility*, 53–58.

36 "Asinarius," v. 25.

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ceiving such a child and wishes she could have her old life back: "She would rather not be a mother than the mother of a little donkey" ("Ergo non esse mater quam mater aselli / Maluit").[37]

The queen in *Asinarius*, like the princess in *Gregorius*, is allowed to express regret about her motherhood because her child does not conform to social values and norms. But she remains alone in rejecting her son. The father does not regret ever having had a child. The different attitudes of both parents to their child become abundantly clear in their interactions with him, which has the effect of subtly devaluing the mother. The queen does not stop at wishing her child to disappear, but even issues an order to kill it. The little donkey is to be dismembered and fed to the fish so that all memory of its existence is gone. The king, however, thwarts the infanticide, accepts Asinarius as his son and—despite his unusual appearance—appoints him as his heir to the throne.[38] The end of the story vindicates the caring father, not the regretting mother. After Asinarius has proved himself on several occasions and won the hand of a king's daughter, he is able to shed his donkey skin on his wedding night. His otherness proves to be a fairytale mantle that he can cast off. In the course of the story, he becomes the son his parents always wanted him to be: the perfect heir to the realm. The narrator does not tell us whether the mother's attitude ever changes, whether she lets Asinarius feel her hatred, or whether she talks to him about her regret. A medieval tale about a prince's search for happiness is not a sociological or psychological account of regretted motherhood. Yet the narrated murder plot presents the queen in a very bad light.

Good Mum, Bad Mum

Donath's study shows that regretful mothers are devalued in multiple ways. They are accused of having mental or personality disorders. Sometimes women who would have preferred not to have children are even demonized or criminalized by being accused of planning infanticide.[39] It seems almost inconceivable that women could regret their motherhood without having a specific cause. Yet the expectations that the category of (in)fertility place on women go even further. They are not only expected to have children and

37 "Asinarius," vv. 29–30.

38 The king calls the child a *monstrum* ("Asinarius," v. 32), but recognizes the child's right to life.

39 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*, 114–16. On "good mothers" and "bad mothers" cf. 31–41.

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take on caring roles, but also to develop specifically maternal feelings. When the English writer Rachel Cusk explained in her autobiographical *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001) that she longed for her "lost, prematernal self" after the birth of her daughter, this was considered scandalous.[40] A "good mother" is simply expected to love her children unconditionally and be happy with her maternal lot. Yet any woman who questions her motherhood is considered a "bad mother," regardless of whether she loves her children and how she treats them.

The maternal feelings of the protagonists in these (in)fertility stories are not always easy to categorize, particularly in the case of Griselda. How should we judge the behaviour of a mother who hands her children over to an assassin without a murmur? Gualtieri's cruel tests are not the only cause for astonishment in Boccaccio's tale: so is Griselda's docility. Once sworn to obey, she no longer seems to have a life of her own. The only feelings she shows to the outside world correspond to her husband's orders, though he repeatedly tries to goad her into an emotional outburst. The German translators struggle to reconcile the submissive wife with their own ideal of motherhood. Erhart Groß, for instance, stylizes Grisardis as an exemplary mother by even showing scenes of her breastfeeding her children. Unlike noblewomen usually did, she fed her babies herself to prevent the bad habits of a wetnurse from being passed on to her children along with the milk.[41]

In contrast, Heinrich Steinhöwel reveals that the demands on a "good wife" collide with the expectations of a "good mother." When the marquis tries to make her baby daughter vanish, Griseldis responds as a "good wife" should. She declares herself and the child to be her husband's property, saying that nothing he wants could displease her. Griseldis also shows no emotion to the servant who comes for her little girl in the middle of the night. Although she must assume that her child is to be killed, she stays silent and does not seem to shed a single tear. Steinhöwel's narrator specifically points out how little this behaviour corresponds to the usual expectations of a "good mother": even a wetnurse would be heard lamenting loudly in such

40 Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 8. Cusk ("I Was Only Being Honest") reported how she was shocked by the vicious reaction her book provoked especially from other women.

41 Groß, *Grisardis*, 40, ll. 16–28. Similar arguments play a role in the abolition of the wetnurse system in the second half of the eighteenth century. On the political functionalization of women's breastfeeding behaviour and similarities to surrogacy see Bernard, *Kinder machen*, 305–9. While in all the other versions, the marquis has to establish the family relationships, the protagonist in Groß recognizes her children herself. On Grisardis as mother cf. Allweier, "Griseldis-Korrektur," 101–7.

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a situation, but Griseldis cheerfully hands over her child. Her only request is that the baby's delicate body should not be torn apart by wild animals, provided this does not contradict her husband's wishes.

The marchioness reacts no differently when her son is taken away. She submits uncritically to Walter's orders and once again hands her baby to his potential murderer. Griseldis does not define herself as a mother, but as a service provider for her husband: "These children bring me nothing but work" ("jch [...] han och nůtz an disen kinden, wann allain arbait").[42] Griseldis's compliance is justified by the fact that, as a "good wife," she merely obeys her husband. Yet again, her behaviour deviates from the expectations of a "good mother" and appears increasingly questionable. Steinhöwel's narrator remarks apologetically that the outer impression does not necessarily correspond to the inner feelings. Although Griseldis's face is calm when she bids her son farewell, we cannot know how she feels inside. Even Walter, who keeps a close eye on his wife, finds this equanimity uncanny. Her motherly love no longer seems self-evident but needs emphasizing. The narrator makes it clear that if the marquis did not know about Griseldis's great love for her children, her behaviour would make him suspicious. He even accepts internal textual inconsistencies to save his protagonist's honour. Walter's certainty about her maternal love is inconsistent with his other doubts about his wife. But according to the narrator, a mother who takes the death of her children lightly is tantamount to a tyrant. Griseldis would therefore no longer fulfill the requirements and demands placed on an exemplary female figure.

Prospects

In the medieval narrative literature, fertility norms are enforced, values conveyed, and differences between "good" and "bad" mothers negotiated. As Martin Luther attests in *Vom ehelichen Leben* (The Estate of Marriage, 1522), the urge to procreate is nowhere to be found in these stories. In fact, some of the protagonists are forced into marriage and parenthood; they would like to refuse, but ultimately have to consent. The pressure to marry and have children is highly dependent on status, as is evident in all the stories in this narrative of forced parenthood. Although childless men were more pressurized to have children in medieval times than they are nowadays, the category of status was often more important than that of gender. Rulers were

42 Steinhöwel, *Griseldis*, 211, ll. 226–27.

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not permitted to freely choose how they wanted to live but had to regulate their succession through reproduction.

Today, the options for deciding on parenthood are no longer as limited as they were in the Middle Ages. Most people can choose whether they want to marry or have children. However, the widespread assumption that all women can now decide to become mothers of their own free will is not tenable. Orna Donath's study reveals that, even in Western societies today, the idea of all-encompassing freedom of choice is an illusion. Some women only have children because they are pressurized to do so by their partner, relatives, and friends or because they do not want to deviate from the norm. Nobody can imagine beforehand what motherhood will mean for them. Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* shows how on having a baby, a young mother's inner turmoil can shake her own self-image and perspective on life to its foundations.[43]

It is often suggested to intentionally childfree women that they will regret not having children. Scouring the medieval literature for the implicit promise that women can only find real fulfillment and satisfaction through biological motherhood proves fruitless. Although people are urged to marry and reproduce, the social interest is not yet disguised by the rhetoric of happiness. It was only during the Protestant Reformation that family life was charged with emphatic meaning and the social expectation to reproduce was transformed into individual women's purpose in life.[44] The narrative of forced parenthood demonstrates that reproductive demands have negative consequences, for people with and without children. Eliminating the dichotomy between fertility and infertility and relativizing the associated hierarchy of values can take social, family, and religious pressure off both parents and nonparents.

43 Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 14.

44 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 179–89.

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Chapter 6

CHASTE MARRIAGE

NOT WANTING A CHILD

FROM THEIR MID-THIRTIES onwards, many childless women put themselves under increasing pressure or even panic that they have left it too late to have a baby. In contrast, German publicist Sarah Diehl clarifies that others never develop a longing for motherhood.[1] In her book *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt* (The Clock That Doesn't Tick, 2014), she describes her situation as a happily childfree woman and talks about other women who lead a fulfilling life without children. Diehl is convinced that her own attitude to family will never change. The social pressure to regret, which many women have internalized, does not apply to her. Diehl takes a critical look at the image of childless women, which she considers miserable and laden with clichés. Women seem to be offered only two alternatives: to reproduce or to regret. While the former is highly regarded and equated with commitment, loyalty, responsibility, fulfillment and happiness, the latter is criticized. On the one hand, voluntary childlessness is associated with selfishness, self-centredness, and excessive career ambition; on the other, with failure, lack of fulfillment, and loneliness. Diehl is disappointed to find hardly any positive female role models for a life without children. Talk about motherhood is so omnipresent that women who are not mothers even distrust their judgment and wonder whether they should not have children after all.

There are many stories of women role models, but also of men who deliberately remained childless in the Middle Ages. These characters do not experience a shadow of a doubt or regret. The narrative of chaste marriage tells us about people who are supposed to be committed to parenthood, but who permanently refuse their society's reproductive futurism. However, their conviction differs fundamentally from Lee Edelman's queer approach in *No Future* (2004).[2] Although the protagonists of these medieval stories of (in)fertility refuse to subordinate everything to the wellbeing of the next generation, they are still future-oriented. All their efforts are focused on eternal life with God after death. Following Edelman, one could therefore

1 Diehl, *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt*, 11, 118, 165–66.

2 Edelman, *No Future*.

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say that the actors in this narrative replace reproductive futurism with religious futurism.

My sixth narrative begins like the previous one but takes a different course due to the characters' unwavering determination. Although the protagonists submit to being forced into marriage, they only appear to conform to the social norm. Unnoticed, they mould the secular model with monastic ideals and live a celibate life despite or with their spouse. The link between not marrying and not having children, assumed in the previous chapters, is thus decoupled; the desire for celibacy is replaced in the narrative of chaste marriage by the pursuit of abstinence. For those who yearn to live in celibacy, what others consider irresponsible and dangerous seems to be the only right way of life. While in their social context, intentionally childless people face enormous pressure, on a narrative level, they receive influential support. The narrators of lives of Mary and the saints, legends, acts of canonization, and bride-quest epics regard childlessness as evidence of particular piety. In the Middle Ages, interpretations of (in)fertility differed fundamentally, depending on whether the perspective was feudal or religious.[3] Anyone who chose to abstain from sex and so deliberately do not have children was on course for canonization.

Against the Norm: Chastity as an Ideal

Today, discussions about (in)fertility focus on women's unwillingness to have children, although men in couples often do not want children or postpone their decision. Childlessness has a different meaning for men, and above all, unlike women, they hardly have to justify it.[4] In the Middle Ages, things were different. As we saw in Chapter 5, the male characters in the medieval literature face the greatest pressure to marry and procreate. This can be explained by the greater agency that men had in medieval society. Only those who have the freedom to decide on their own way of life need to be persuaded. The desire to live a chaste life was nothing out of the ordinary, but only within the church and cloister walls. In the narrative of chaste marriage, men with political responsibility have the same experience as the Knight of Staufenberg and the Marquis of Salerno. Because an exemplary

3 Cf. Braun, "Stifterfamilien"; Müller, *Höfische Kompromisse*, 107–69; Kiening, *Unheilige Familien*, 87–103, 142–45; Then-Westphal, *Königs Wege*; Weitbrecht, "Brautschaft."

4 Diehl, *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt*, 64–66.

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ruler must be both husband and father, they are pressurized into marriage by their liegemen, advisers, and relatives.

The fact that women were also able to resist marriage in medieval stories of (in)fertility is linked to the Christian ascetic tradition, which decisively shaped the narrative of chaste marriage. Even the church fathers recognized that Christian women could choose between a life as a virgin and as a wife.[5] This is reflected in gender-specific genre differences: while female characters in secular and courtly literature are barely given the opportunity to object, in spiritual literature and saints' legends they are allowed to actively oppose marriage. The position of men and women differs primarily in terms of who makes demands on them. Rulers are usually asked to reproduce by their subjects, and ladies are asked to do so by a superior authority, whether their guardian or parents, clergy, or courtiers.

Kings Refusing Reproduction

Several medieval legends tell of men who do not want children. Because kings, earls, and knights are supposed to secure their succession through procreation, King Oswald of England is encouraged to marry. In the Middle Ages, the legend of this martyr and missionary who died in 642 was very popular. Since the twelfth century, the story of his dangerous courtship of a distant bride has been retold in various vernacular verse and prose versions. Oswald is introduced as a very young, very powerful, and very respected king. Princes, bishops, dukes, counts and knights are sworn to serve him. When the hero reaches marriageable age, everyone in the *Wiener Oswald* (Vienna version, second half of the fifteenth century) advises him to marry a virtuous woman who equals him in status. In *Der Heiligen Leben* (The Lives of the Saints, ca. 1400) the appeal that Oswald marry is explicitly justified by his exemplary character and the hope of an heir. Because the king is so honourable and pious, his liegemen think that he will produce an excellent son. They urge him to secure the succession to the throne; but Oswald does not want to engage in sexual activity.[6]

Ebernand von Erfurt illustrates the lack of understanding faced by a ruler unwilling to procreate in the verse legend of the imperial couple Henry and Cunigunde (ca. 1220). Even before his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor, Henry decides to remain chaste until his death. This resolution brings him into conflict with his princes, who demand a royal marriage. By

5 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 172–73.

6 *Wiener Oswald*, vv. 1–40; *Der Heiligen Leben*, vol. 1, 358.

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this time, Henry had already proved himself in battle, expanded his realm, and endowed places of worship. Once again, social pressure grows with the protagonist's reputation. The princes are glad that no one is equal to their just and benevolent ruler. Everyone hopes that Henry will father a son who will continue his exemplary rule. His advisers make every effort to pressurize the king into marriage. Every day they beg him to marry "for the good of the realm" (*durch nôt des rîches*).[7] Henry, however, sees no disadvantage in his childlessness. Instead of a biological son, he wants to appoint the son of the Holy Virgin Mary as his heir but keeps this plan secret. The question of marriage ultimately comes down to the ability to rule. The princes are unanimous that celibacy is not and never has been appropriate for a ruler. Henry is accused of failing to fulfill his duty and destroying his empire; this threatens his position of power. One would expect him to bow to the pressure, but the king only pretends to have changed his mind. While the delighted princes select a bride, Henry's commitment to chastity remains undimmed.

Mary's Unwillingness to Bear

The Christian prototype of a woman who resists getting married and bearing children regardless of the cost is the future mother of Jesus. In all medieval lives of Mary, she fiercely opposes marriage. One might ask why the narrators of her legends portray Mary as committed to chastity at all. The first answer is obvious: it adds authenticity to the miracle of the virgin birth when the future Mother of God does not want to marry under any circumstances and certainly does not want to have intercourse with a man. Since Mary held fast to this conviction, her pregnancy must have had a nonhuman cause. A second explanation arises from my critical approach to normativity: in the Christian ascetic tradition, childlessness is valued more highly when it is not accidental or unwanted, but intentional. If external circumstances were the only reason why Mary had not slept with Joseph, this could hardly be held against her. Yet, her achievement seemed much greater when she has dedicated herself to a life without children for religious reasons and had to stand up for her decision in the face of opposition.

In *Driu liet von der maget* (Three Verse Tales of the Virgin, 1172) Wernher the priest tells the story of a noble man who wants to win Mary as his

7 Ebernand von Erfurt, *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, v. 748, see chaps. 12–13. Cf. Müller, *Jungfräulichkeit*, 157–87; Then-Westphal, *Königs Wege*, 215–310. Henry II, who died in 1024, was canonized in 1146. Cunegunde, who survived him until 1033, was canonized in 1200. On the significance of childlessness for Henry's reign, see Ubl, "Der kinderlose König."

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daughter-in-law and the mother of his grandchildren.[8] But she categorically rejects the offer. She cannot imagine getting married, because she wants to remain a virgin for the rest of her life. The recruiter wins over the elders of the temple, in whose care Mary lives. All the priests urge her to take up this offer of marriage to a noble son. When the young woman defends her position, the highest-ranking cleric uses religious arguments to change her mind. His case is familiar from the theological reflections on (in)fertility: God himself instituted marriage at creation, and had Eve not had children, the world would have remained desolate and empty. The bishop sees childbearing as a prerequisite for both the glory of God and the redemption of women. Mary must therefore marry and bear children if she wants to attain salvation.

Mary counters this religious case. She refuses to obey and sets her ideal of life against the bishop's teaching, invoking the biblical role models of the pious Abel and the chaste Elijah. Her decision seems irrevocable: they are more likely to squeeze water from a stone than to force her into marriage.[9] Disgruntled, the priests withdraw to consider how they can break the young woman's resistance. The wedding is scheduled without her consent, and the celebrations begin with an episcopal lament about Mary's obstinacy. Many girls were brought up in the temple, but none of them ever resisted marriage, no matter how high their status. As in Henry's case, what corresponds to the norm is presented as natural and right. For the bishop, Mary's unwillingness to bear is new; until now, his only model of female fertility was reproduction, not refusal. He is therefore convinced that this story cannot end well. Under no circumstances should Mary be the only one to deviate from his advice.

This illustration in a Kraków illuminated manuscript (ca. 1220/1225) depicts the confrontation between Mary and the men (Fig. 6). At the centre of the picture, which fills more than half the page, is the figure that caused the dispute. The noble offering his son's hand presents his request to the two men on the left and points to the woman on the far right. The two men's religious position of power can be seen from their headdress and posture. The priests remain seated during the conversation and are authorized to pass judgment. Their figures form a unit; there is no clear division between drapery of their robes, and they speak with one voice through the speech-bubble-like banner they hold up, all of which lends double weight to their statement. In this composition, Mary seems marginalized, but her banner

8 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 1329–454. See also Gold, "The Marriage."

9 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 1412, A 1441–44.

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Figure 6. "Mary's resistance." In Wernher the priest, *Driu liet von der maget* (ca. 1220), 7.6 × 7.7 cm. Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, MS Berol. Germ. Oct. 109, fol. 28r. Courtesy of the Biblioteka Jagiellońska.

makes her voice heard. Her body is slightly turned away, expressing a distanced posture, but her face is turned toward the seated elders. All three heads are on the same line, which is emphasized by the framing and colouring of the picture. Mary communicates with the men literally at eye level. Her outstretched right index finger makes it clear that she has something to say. Mary wears her long hair loose; she does not have to cover it like a married woman and has no desire to change her marital status. The banner held by the clergy summarizes their demand: "Turn your heart to this man. We all advise you to do so, young lady" ("Chere an disen man dinen mvt. daz raten wir dir alle frǒwe gǒt").[10] Readers need to turn the page upside down to read

10 Priester Wernher, *Driu liet von der maget*, 37–38; Henkel, *Lesen*, 48.

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Mary's response. There is no clearer way to show that her unwillingness to give birth turns the established order on its head.

In Wernher the Swiss's *Marienleben* (Life of Mary, fourteenth century) this conflict intensifies.[11] Women are to give birth to comply with not just an unmarked norm, but a religious law. Before Mary's fifteenth birthday, the priests issue a decree obliging all young women of her age to marry. Women who are not fertile therefore violate the will of God and the Law of Moses. As in the *Driu liet von der maget*, Mary is pressurized into marriage by the religious elite. Many noble men woo her, offering rich gifts. Mary is allowed to decide who, but not whether, she wants to marry. In this more recent German version, she unshrinkingly professes her vocation and argues that she should be exempt from the general obligation to marry because she has already taken a vow.

The priests question whether Mary has acted in accordance with the Law of Moses and accuse her of introducing new customs. They reiterate their conviction that childless women are hated and cursed by God. Mary is undeterred. She draws a distinction between fertility in this world and the next, replacing the reproductive norm with her ideal of chastity. The priests do not know how to deal with this articulate young woman. Yet, they agree that her refusal must have consequences. If they do not force Mary to marry, other women will emulate her. The religious rulers fear that all men will be spurned and disgraced. The supposedly divine law proves an instrument of patriarchal rule. If a woman is exempt from the obligation to give birth, the entire scale of (in)fertility is called into question.

Putting God before Family

Of the arguments against reproduction deployed in ethical debates since Antiquity, the most decisive in medieval legends is the freedom for something more important.[12] Although avoiding the burden of family is one motive for commitment to chastity, its proponents want to be able to devote themselves above all to religious matters. Mary's yearning for celibacy is justified in the *Driu liet von der maget* by the fact that God has chosen her for a bride. The young woman is not free to marry because she is committed to a metaphysical partner. The illustrator of the illuminated manuscript (Fig. 6) records this fact. Mary's banner reads "for I have promised myself to God" ("wan ih mih got entheizen han"). The length and shape of her banner show

11 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 1275–518.

12 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 168–79.

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that this key argument will lead her to emerge victorious from the dispute with the priests. Mary's banner frames the entire picture and even extends beyond it. The dispute between the two positions is clearly decided in her favour.

In his adaptation, Wernher the Swiss also stresses the Virgin Mary's emotional connection to God. She calls Christ her bridegroom, to whom she has entrusted herself. She describes their intimate relationship in standardized formulas familiar from courtly romances and love songs (*Minnesang*): "for he is mine and I am his" ("Wan erist min und bin ich sin").[13] God takes the place of a human life partner to whom Mary has promised fidelity and with whom she wants to grow old. In private prayer and before the priests, she makes a spiritual profession of love, vividly describing her relationship with God. With the divine there is only joy, no suffering; she is spared hunger and thirst, cold and old age. For God, she wants to remain chaste and pure, without marriage or children.

Love for God is also the protagonist's key character trait in Konrad von Würzburg's legend *Alexius* (ca. 1274).[14] The narrator presents him as a young man who led a holy life, held fast to his chastity, and remained free from serious sins. From the first, Alexius stands out because of his piety; he loves God more than anything else. His parents count themselves fortunate in their long-awaited son: he is extremely clever, respected, and honourable; his appearance, impeccable; his behaviour gives no cause for shame. Alexius's love for God is mentioned twice and its intensity is highlighted through the metaphor of fire: his heart burned like a hot coal with love for God. His family only realizes that this means Alexius never wants to sleep with a woman or father a child when, on his wedding night, he runs away. Religious and sexual love are alternatives for Alexius, and he has to choose between them.

The different forms of love are also sharply contrasted in the life of the English anchoress Christina of Markyate (1096/98—ca. 1155).[15] When the girl first encounters religious life, she immediately longs to enter a convent. The hagiography shows how Christina distances herself from her social environment at an early age. While others enjoy themselves at festivities, she remains alone, praying and meditating. When her parents make their first marriage plans for her, Christina declares that she wants to remain a

13 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, v. 1375.

14 Konrad von Würzburg, *Alexius*, vv. 42–56, 120–56.

15 *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 38–49.

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virgin. She refers to a vow of chastity that she secretly took during mass. Her parents do not take this declaration very seriously, because they cannot imagine life without marriage and children.

Christina soon has to prove her steadfastness. At a family gathering, she meets Bishop Ralph of Durham, who is in a relationship with her aunt but is also stalking Christina. The narrator demonstrates how dangerous the situation is for the innocent young woman. How is she supposed to defend herself against a sexually experienced, cunning, and influential churchman? Yet the protagonist is intellectually superior to the bishop. She sees through his strategy, pretends to be seduced, and flees in the nick of time. Her chastity remains intact, but she gains a powerful enemy. When Ralph realizes that Christina will never sleep with him voluntarily, he sends another man to destroy her virginity. The bishop persuades a young nobleman called Burthred to ask for her hand in marriage. Christina has defended her ideal of chastity against an abusive stranger, but then has to resist her parents' will, to which she is required to submit.

With flattery, promises, threats, gifts and punishments, the parents want their daughter to conform to the female norm. Even Christina's best friend is enlisted to manipulate her into consenting. She is forbidden to meet like-minded people any longer, banned from visiting the convent, and has no more time and space for prayer. Instead, she is required to attend public receptions, pour wine, and dine with guests. Well before marriage, Christina thus finds herself in a situation that the church father Jerome wrote about as a warning to Christian women: with all the social duties that a wife has to fulfill, she hardly has any time left for God.[16] This places Christina's behaviour in all the more positive a light. Even at court and feasts, she cannot be dissuaded from her religious commitment. The view of the convent that she glimpses from the banqueting hall strengthens her resolve. Her love for God is so great that it withstands all temptations and reprisals. Christina shares this certainty with others who never doubt their ideal of chastity. In the narrative of chaste marriage, it is impossible for a woman who chooses to be childless to later regret her decision. This critical attitude toward reproduction is not only accepted by the legend tellers, but—in contrast to the inhabitants of the narrated world—the narrators see it as exemplary.

16 Jerome, "The Perpetual Virginity," 344–45, chap. 22.

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The Eschatological Clock

Age is an important issue for women who still hope for children. Many would-be mothers worry about how long their reproductive capacity will last. With increasing age, women who long for a child increasingly tend see themselves as the cause, but men also assume that women are primarily responsible for the lack of pregnancy.[17] In medieval Western medicine, however, reproductive aging was not so different for men and women, as Catherine Rider shows in "The Medieval Biological Clock?" (2023). Medieval physicians did not view age-related fertility decline as a slow process but saw fertility as continuing until a final cut-off point.[18]

Limited time also plays a decisive role in the narrative of chaste marriage, yet this is related not to female fertility, but to human life in general. Several times, characters commit to chastity in order to prepare themselves as well as possible for the afterlife. They know that death will come to them and want to do everything they can for their salvation. Warnings not to lose sight of what is essential in life and to devote oneself to religious matters permeate the history of Christian discourse. This eschatologically motivated imperative for childlessness is acted on in the narrative of chaste marriage.

In Ebernand's legend, the fear of dying is the driving force for refusing fatherhood. Disturbed by a dream, Henry prepares for his death. He thinks he is to die in six days because he has read the words "after six" (*post sex*; *nâch six*) on an epitaph.[19] When on the seventh day, he is still alive the king assumes he has five more weeks to live and redoubles his efforts. Six weeks become six months and finally, six years. This context explains Henry's dogged resistance to marriage. His decision to live a chaste life arises from his constant expectation of death. When judgment day is approaching, the mandate to multiply is irrelevant and even counterproductive.

The protagonists of these (in)fertility stories hear the eschatological clock ticking with varying intensity. So, they do not always decide to lead a chaste and childless life of their own accord. In the legendary bride-quest epic, God commands the protagonist to enter lifelong chastity. In the *Münchner Oswald* (Munich version, second half of the twelfth century), the hero is celebrating the successful conclusion of his bride-quest when Christ appears and charges him not to consummate the marriage. This abrupt turnaround

17 Wippermann, *Kinderlose*, 93.

18 Rider, "The Medieval Biological Clock?". See also Rider, "Gender," 267–90.

19 Ebernand von Erfurt, *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, chap. 4, vv. 229, 231.

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has caused some debate in German medieval studies.[20] If it leads to a chaste marriage, the entire courtship seems to come to nothing. But Oswald sees no contradiction between his efforts to win a bride and their shared abstinence. From the very beginning, the young king was preoccupied with the question of whether marriage was possible without sin. He had firmly internalized the social norm that a ruler must produce an heir. His own heart drove him to look for a bride who shared his status, but he made his plan contingent on not having to sin. Love for the bride always remained secondary to love for God. On the wedding day, Oswald's initial question is answered in the negative. Marriage cannot be consummated without sin. As the young married couple only have two years to live, they should no longer defile themselves with sexual desire.[21]

For the same reason, the protagonists in the legend romance *Orendel* (ca. 1190) are urged to be chaste. On their first night together, King Orendel is ordered not to sleep with his bride for nine years; later, this commandment is extended for the foreseeable future. Orendel and his spouse are to remain celibate for the last six months and two days of their lives so that they can enter heaven all the sooner.[22]

Deliberate childlessness for eschatological reasons is a culturally specific motif that can be explained by the Christian doctrine of original sin. The theological doctrines of (in)fertility have a direct impact on medieval narrative literature when a biblical character argues like a medieval scholastic. In the life of Mary by Wernher the Swiss, Joseph addresses the problematic connection between marriage, sex, and sin when he implores God to spare him from marriage.[23] He wistfully recalls prelapsarian paradise, where people were conceived in everlasting joy, without sin or pain. For Joseph, the Fall marks a definitive turning point in the history of human sexuality. The blissful initial state is irretrievably lost; procreation, conception, and birth are inextricably linked to sin. Only through chastity does Joseph believe that he can break the link between reproduction and sinfulness. Since all people are born in sin, all must focus fully on their own salvation. People should not worry about having earthly offspring, but about their heavenly wellbeing.

20 E.g., Kohnen, *Die Braut*, 242–59; Müller, *Höfische Kompromisse*, 123–29; Müller, *Jungfräulichkeit*, 128–38; Müller, "Das Ende der Werbung"; Then-Westphal, *Königs Wege*, 180–215.

21 *Münchner Oswald*, vv. 33–50, 595–97, 3510.

22 *Orendel*, vv. 3870–77.

23 Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 1813–82. On sex and sin in patristic and scholastic doctrine, see Toepfer, *Infertility*, 32–40.

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The resoluteness with which the protagonists of this narrative defend their marriage and childlessness is related to their conviction of their religious vocation in life.

Perfect Partners: Shared Ideals

In the narrative of chaste marriage, religious and political value systems conflict. The main characters' interpretation of (in)fertility differs diametrically from that of their surroundings. For their society, what individuals consider to be the best way of life has serious disadvantages. Although those who long for celibacy cannot assert themselves against religious authorities, feudal lords, and relatives, they do not simply abandon their ideal of life; this determination is a constitutive element of the narrative. The best way to come to terms with a forced marriage is to find a partner who shares your values. When two people who are both committed to chastity marry, they can realize their ideal together. This creates a new, third way of life that combines marriage and celibacy. In this variant of the narrative, which I call harmonious, we can distinguish between two strands: either the protagonists search for a suitable partner themselves, or one is miraculously brought to them.

Searching for the Right Partner

In the Vienna *Oswald*, the hero refuses to submit passively to his marital fate. From the very beginning, the young king is looking for a noble bride who will consent to a chaste marriage. In contrast to the Munich *Oswald*, the plot does not take any unexpected turns: throughout, it is guided by commitment to chastity. When none of his advisers are able to find him a wife of equal birth, Oswald enquires with a well-travelled and eloquent pilgrim friar. He does not conceal from him that sexual abstinence is just as important to him as the bride's noble lineage. Oswald has to question his guest twice before receiving a recommendation. The beautiful and virtuous princess Spange would be a chaste wife for him but has a terrible father who wants to marry her himself and therefore has all her suitors killed. Oswald is undeterred by this threat. He finds the prospect of his perfect partner so tempting that the pilgrim's warnings fall on deaf ears.

As a suitor, Oswald immediately makes his position clear. He gives his talking raven a chastity ring, with the message that he always wants to remain chaste and faithful to his wife.[24] Oswald's promise is in line with the

24 *Wiener Oswald*, vv. 451–53. Cf. Kiening, "Heilige Brautwerbung."

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church doctrine that marriage is permanent and indissoluble but replaces the physical consummation with a deliberate renunciation. The category of sexuality seems even more important to the hero than that of religion. While in the Munich *Oswald* the bride has to declare her willingness to convert to Christianity, the Vienna *Oswald* it is primarily about her consent to chastity. Spange happily agrees. The chaste marriage enables her to break out of the deadly spiral of courtship and execution and escape the threat of sexual assault by her own father.

Oswald goes to great lengths for his chaste bride. With her consent, he sets sail with seventy-two ships on veritable odyssey. Instead of the expected eight days, he travels for eight years and gets into more and more trouble; almost all the ships sink, but on the last one, he finally reaches his destination. In his bride's land, new challenges await. Oswald must free the princess and flee from her enraged father and his thirty thousand warriors. Despite all his endeavours, he never loses sight of his commitment to chastity. In prayer, he repeatedly reminds himself why he has set out on this quest. When he is finally able to embrace Spange for the first time, his thoughts turn to their shared ideal. Without any ulterior sexual motives (*ane allen argen wan*), as the narrator assures us, Oswald kisses his bride on the mouth and asks God to bless their chastity.[25] After his victory over the pagan army, the hero demands a vow of chastity from Spange before he agrees to fulfill her father's request and resurrect his fallen fighters. The condition Oswald imposes seems almost redundant to the plot but reiterates how much abstinence means to him. Spange is so convinced of this way of life that she commits to even reject all thoughts of desire. Without a doubt, she wants to hold fast to her virginity and proves to be the perfect bride.

Divine Miracles

Other protagonists do not embark on the search themselves but find a suitable partner through divine providence. In medieval lives of Mary, she is betrothed to a man who is just as unwilling to marry as she is. The spiritual leaders, who do not accept her unwillingness to bear a child, rely on God's judgment. In the *Driu liet von der maget*, the bishop calls on all unmarried men to undergo a rod test. Everyone must place a stick on the altar, where a fertility miracle is to occur. The one whose dead wood sprouts overnight

25 *Wiener Oswald*, v. 1136, cf. vv. 1109–11, 1142–43, 1204–5.

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will be given Mary's hand in marriage.[26] All but one of the men participates enthusiastically; only Joseph hopes to fail the test. Wernher the Swiss narrates that he does not even appear at the temple first time round and has to be forced to participate. Wernher the priest has him deliberately bring a small stick to minimize his chances. His dismay is all the greater when of all the rods, his is the one that starts to bloom. Joseph tries in vain to get out of the affair. As soon as he is located, he is honoured twice over by another miracle. Before everyone's eyes, a dove descends upon him.

Joseph puts up a robust defence against the unwanted marriage, arguing his old age and physical frailty. In Wernher the priest's version, he has been married once before but considers a second marriage completely inappropriate due to the large age gap and offers his sons instead. In the legend by Wernher the Swiss, the forced marriage is an even greater blow; Joseph remained unmarried and childless into old age in order to abstain from sinful sexuality. While God's will drives him to the brink of despair, readers are privy to the divine plan: for Mary, Joseph is the ideal husband. Wernher the priest has the bishop explain Mary's commitment to chastity to Joseph. Although he cannot grant the old man any reprieve from the marriage, he relieves him of the fear of having to prove his virility. Under these circumstances, both agree to wed. Mary promises to obey Joseph but excludes her body from his conjugal rights. She would never allow anyone to sleep with her. Even the spiritual authorities, who initially insisted on Mary's obligation to bear, consider this attitude praiseworthy. Legitimized by the divine miracle, the couple are permitted to make a marriage vow that includes chastity and childlessness. Josephite marriage is accepted as a model.[27]

Secret Arrangements

In contrast to the other perfect couples in Ebernand's verse legend, before their wedding Henry does not know what Cunigunde is thinking and feeling. He could not make chastity a condition of marriage, nor was he visited by a communicative angel. So, Henry has to wait until their wedding day to negotiate a living arrangement with his bride. The splendid feast, for which the noblest of the realm have gathered, is apposite to the groom's powerful

26 Priester Wernher, *Maria*, A 1458–865. Cf. Wernher der Schweizer, *Das Marienleben*, vv. 1559–916.

27 On the history of spiritual marriage in the West from apostolic times to the sixteenth century, cf. Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*. Cf. Then-Westphal, *Königs Wege*, 113–25; Toepfer, *Infertility*, 38–40.

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position. The narrator steers purposefully toward the point of the ritual. He does not report on the enjoyable entertainment, the delicious feast, or the church ceremony, but directs the reader's gaze into the royal bedchamber. The guests escort the bride and groom to bed, where the bishops give the fertility blessing. When the people have disappeared, Henry does not quite know how to begin. He politely addresses Cunigunde as "my lady queen" (*vrou kuniginne*) and thus respects her new status before any consummation. He then tells her that he wants his marriage to be different from other people's: he has been chaste so far and has no intention of changing this.[28]

Cunigunde is immeasurably relieved and confesses to her surprised bridegroom that she has also made a vow of celibacy. When Henry and Cunigunde realize that they have found a likeminded partner, they feel drawn to each other. They fall in love, not with sexual passion, but with "true love" (*wâre minne*),[29] as the narrator assures us. In camera, they agree on a model that subverts social expectations. Henry promises Cunigunde that he will always honour her as his wife and never sleep with her. Their marriage bed shall become a religious place where they can be together in the name of Jesus. In this scene, the balance of power between the couple is unevenly distributed. Henry assures his wife of her physical integrity, whereas she can only thank God that she has been saved from losing her virginity and her reputation. If Henry had not accepted her commitment to chastity, the wedding would have ended badly for the bride: Cunigunde would either have been raped or dismissed in disgrace. Unlike Henry, she is not given the opportunity to publicly express her wishes before the marriage. Their shared ideal enables both to live chastely and childless while maintaining their social status.

Henry is only too aware of the explosive nature of their agreement, which is why he demands secrecy. Outwardly, the king keeps up appearances and fulfills his duty to marry. It is impossible for others to recognize that the marriage remains intentionally childless.[30] Cunigunde obeys Henry's com-

28 Ebernand von Erfurt, *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, v. 897, cf. chap. 14, vv. 898–903. Cunigunde's resistance to the marriage is only briefly described, see chap. 13. Examples of marriage and bridal blessings are provided by Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen*, vol. 2, 180–83.

29 Ebernand von Erfurt, *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, v. 925.

30 The historian van Eickels ("Männliche Zeugungsunfähigkeit," 83) deconstructs the logic of the legend. He cannot imagine that Henry II would have held on to his wife if he had not himself been infertile. Rather, van Eickels speculates that the king suffered from gallstones as a child and may have lost his fertility due to surgery.

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mand until she is accused of adultery by a diabolical trick. The queen is especially hard hit by the fact that her husband also doubts her fidelity. To free herself from the evil suspicion, Cunigunde undergoes a divine trial by fire: she has to walk barefoot over red-hot ploughshares. Her oath of purification goes far beyond what called for on this occasion. The queen not only affirms that she has not committed adultery, but that she has never been touched by Henry or anyone else. Horrified, the king tries to prevent the implicit confession. He forces his hand over Cunigunde's mouth, not even caring about the risk of injury. Blood splatters on her robe, whereupon Henry steps aside in shame.[31] Anyway, his reaction comes too late; the truth about their marriage is out. Yet their wanted childlessness has no negative consequences. In the legend, the infertility issue pales before the fame that Cunigunde achieves through her virginity. Nobody asks Henry to father an heir to the throne.

Unilateral Desire: Ways Out

A relationship runs into difficulties when partners have different views on vocation, family, and sexuality. They have to agree on a way of life together, whether one of them prevails or the couple negotiate a compromise. In the narrative of chaste marriage, tensions and accusations abound when only one partner is committed to celibacy. The partner who is committed to chastity denies their spouse access to their body; they prevent sexual desire from being satisfied and a child from being conceived. Concepts of theology and matrimony do not entitle married people to have their yearning for chastity respected. Spouses may only withdraw from each other by mutual consent; each one can demand that the other fulfills their sexual duty.[32] In this conflict-laden version of the narrative, protagonists go to great lengths to convince their partner of their own ideal and gain his or her consent to a chaste marriage. If they fail to do so, the only options are to give up their own life's ambitions or to separate and flee. As has been observed in other literary works, in the narrative of chaste marriage, too, sexuality can become an arena of power, in which hierarchies between spouses and genders are negotiated.

31 Ebernand von Erfurt, *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, chap. 22. In *Der Heiligen Leben* (238), Henry is so upset that he slaps Cunigunde violently on the mouth.

32 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 36, 47–48; Zeimentz, *Ehe*, 231.

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Verbal Seduction

The eponymous hero of Konrad von Würzburg's legend, *Alexius,* is never asked whether he wants to marry.[33] Since childhood, he has been promised to the very beautiful and wealthy daughter of an imperial family. As agreed, the two are married at the appropriate age. Their marriage is solemnized and God's blessing for it asked in church, then celebrated with a magnificent feast. The narrator points out early on that social expectations will not be fulfilled: the bride and groom remain virgins. How Alexius averts coitus is described in detail. His father tells him to leave the celebration and devote himself to his bride, to continue the family tradition and father a child. However, when the bride receives him in all her beauty, loveliness, and virtue, Alexius is not interested in sex. Instead, he tries to win her over to his ideal of chastity with tender words. In doing so, Alexius focuses on deterrence and declares sexuality to be a worldly deception that endangers salvation. He then presents his bride with two gifts that appear to represent consensus. The ring and veil are not a sign of the couple's physical unity, but of their religious bond with God. What the bride thinks about this abstinence remains unclear. On her wedding night, she is not given her own voice.

In the case of Christina of Markyate, her narrator can hardly explain why she agreed to marry in the first place. For a year, her family tries in vain to pressure her into marrying Burthred, then suddenly—despite her vow of chastity—she is bound to him. Their relationship begins with a moratorium. The couple's house is not yet finished, so Christina continues to live with her family and is careful to avoid any form of physical closeness. Her parents have no understanding for this reticence. They therefore ensure that Burthred can surprise his bride in her sleep and force her to submit. But Christina is prepared. Awake and fully dressed, she receives her bridegroom like a brother. She engages him in a conversation, in which she extols the virtues of chastity and tells the story of St. Cecilia and her husband Valerian. Her suggestion of a chaste marriage is modelled on this legend. As with all other forms of (in)fertility, the characters in the narrative of chaste marriage need role models. Whether they long for a physical or a holy child, for family or single life, is always influenced by the thoughts, words, and deeds of others. Christina urges Burthred to follow the example of the saints and thus attain heavenly glory. In their vision of an ideal relationship, spouses only hold hands chastely, never cast a covetous glance at each other, and after a few years, enter a monastery together.

33 Konrad von Würzburg, *Alexius*, vv. 160–241.

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As in Konrad's *Alexius*, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* does not report on how the rejected partner responds after his failed seduction attempt. In legends, spouses are permitted to declare their commitment to chastity, but little interest is shown in what their partners have to say about this noble ideal. The balance of power between proponents and critics of reproduction can change depending on the couples' sociocultural and literary historical context. On their first night together, her husband does not touch Christina. When her relatives learn that the sexual assault has failed, their anger is directed at Burthred. They accuse him of failing and call him a fool ("ignavum ac nullius usus iuvenem conclamant"). His masculinity is questioned and marginalized because he has subordinated himself to Christina. The many taunts prompt Burthred to assault his bride a second time. Before that night, he is admonished not to allow himself to be made effeminate again by seductive speeches ("ne [...] candidis sermonibus fallentis effeminetur").[34] Christina's refusal to give her body to a man destabilizes the gender order. Women who are childless by choice are considered dangerous because they challenge the patriarchal system. The inhabitants of the narrated world differ significantly in their view from the legend tellers. Their sympathies lie with the characters who reject marriage and family for religious reasons.

Emotional Blackmail

Delphine of Glandèves (d. 1360), too, was determined to preserve her chastity. Her lifelong celibacy is an important topic in her canonization process, as documented in the records dating from May 14 to October 30, 1363. For feudal reasons, the fourteen-year-old Delphine agrees to marry in the hope of persuading her husband Elzéar of Sabran, who is two years younger, to keep the marriage chaste. To this end, she draws on two tried and tested argumentation strategies. First, she presents him with the appropriate role models of St. Cecilia and her husband Valerian, as well as Alexius and his bride. Second, she makes the eschatological case for the brevity of earthly life and the imperatives of eternal salvation. Elzéar concedes to Delphine not because she convinces him religiously, but because she blackmails him emotionally. When she comes down with a fever, she gives her husband a choice: he must either give up sex or give her up. Only if he promises never to force her into coitus will she be able to leave her bed alive. The young man, who loves his wife tenderly, agrees to her request. Delphine's hagiographer assures us that Elzéar kept his promise for twenty-seven years of

34 *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 50.

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marriage: the longer he lived with his wife, the more he was inspired by the ideal of chastity. The general admiration, of course, is for Delphine, who seduced her husband into a chaste marriage "through prudence, piety, and sanctity" ("per prudenciam, devocionem et sanctitatem").[35]

Numerous witnesses in the canonization process confirm the couple's chaste life. The seventh witness, Bertrand Jusbert, knows that Delphine was not so ill that she was unable to get up. She only claimed this to increase the pressure on her husband. The eighth witness, Durand Andree, even alludes to deliberate deception: Delphine only pretended to suffer from a serious illness and stayed in bed until the doctors declared her incurable. Then she called Elzéar to her, sent all her relatives out, and told him what she wanted. In Andree's version, Elzéar even has to make a promise without knowing what is being asked of him. Only after he has agreed does he learn of Delphine's commitment to chastity. Elzéar weeps, because then they will not be able to have children. How will their parents, who long for grandchildren, react? His wife brushes these concerns aside; God will comfort the couple's parents in their trials. Yet Delphine is not open about her celibacy either; she shares a house, room, and bed with her husband. The narrative of chaste marriage only works in court records and poetic verse narratives under the seal of secrecy. Socially, voluntary childlessness is not accepted.

Marital Barter

The marriage of Margery and John Kempe is based on a different arrangement. Margery (ca. 1373–1439) married at the age of about twenty and was already a mother when she developed an intense desire to live in celibacy. She is thus a case in point that fertile identity is not immutably fixed but can change over a lifetime. Even a wife and mother can grow convinced of the value of celibacy and childlessness. The decisive factor here is a religious awakening, recounted in the *Book of Margery Kempe* (late 1430s), as well as the couple's struggle to find a shared way of life together.[36] In bed one night, Margery hears such a sweet and blissful melody that she imagines she is in heaven. After her imaginary visit to paradise, she no longer feels any desire to sleep with John. She lets her husband have his way because she owes him obedience. But she makes no secret of her dislike, showing that while John had rights over her body, her love belongs to God. The couple are caught in

35 *Enquête*, arts. 10, 37, cf. arts. 7–18, 34–42, 212, 242–43. Cf. Vauchez, "Two Laypersons," 73–82; Vauchez, "The Virginal Marriage," 191–203.

36 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chaps. 3, 9, 11. Cf. Lochrie, *Margery Kempe*.

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an endless argument about sex. Margery is very upset that John keeps on wanting to sleep with her. She never lets him forget what way of life is superior. Yet John remains unmoved when Margery reproaches him for angering God through sexual desire. Although he agrees with his wife that abstinence would be good, he feels unable to live in chastity.

Margery laments her distress in prayer. The narrative time hop in the *Book of Margery Kempe* almost makes us forget that she has to wait years and give birth to fourteen children before she can fulfill her desire to live a life of chastity. When her husband demands sex again one Easter week and Margery calls on Christ for help, he provides the longed-for miracle. John suddenly suffers from erectile dysfunction and is unable to penetrate his wife. The scene marks the turning point in the Kempes' sex life. For eight weeks, John does not dare approach his wife. Every time he wants to touch her, he is overcome by a vague fear. Taking a walk one hot summer evening, the couple finally reach an agreement. John turns down Margery's request to take a vow of chastity one last time, knowing full well that he will lose his conjugal rights and will no longer be able to sleep with her without committing a mortal sin. His refusal frightens Margery. She fears that her husband might put his words into action during their walk and rape her.[37]

However, John has long since stopped thinking about sex and just wants to be rewarded as well as possible for his renunciation. At a symbolically and religiously significant place, a wayside cross, he barters with Margery. If she fulfills his wish, he will grant hers. The price that John demands for the vow of chastity is made up of three separate demands: First, as before, his wife should sleep in the same bed as him; second, she should pay off all his debts; and third, she should give up her Friday fast. Margery is undecided as to whether she should accept this compromise. She is particularly worried about breaking her fast and seeks reassurance in prayer. After that, Margery agrees to meet all of John's demands. In return, he releases his wife and agrees that henceforth, her body belongs to God alone. What becomes of the couple's children is not part of this tale of (in)fertility. All desire, cares, and storytelling are absorbed by the ideal of chastity.

37 Despite his sexual assaults, John is described as a good husband. Note that marital rape has only been a criminal offence in Germany since 1997 and in the UK since 2003.

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Deep Rifts

Intentional childlessness not only affects the relationship with one's partner, but also calls into question the life choices of one's own parents. If they do not accept their child's values, this can lead to a rift. In the legend literature, some commit to chastity and escape their families' clutches by running away. Christina of Markyate resolves the conflict with her parents and Burthred radically. After failing to win him over to a chaste marriage on the first night, she realizes that all further talk is useless. During the second nighttime assault, she hides behind a wall hanging and holds on to a nail. Neither the groom nor his companions, who are waiting impatiently outside the door, can explain her disappearance. Before the third attempt, Christina takes to her heels and jumps over a high, pointed fence. Looking back, she thinks she only just escaped the devil. To her, sexual assault therefore poses an inhuman threat. The public celebration of their wedding has to be repeatedly cancelled. One time a fire ruins the preparations, another time the bride falls ill with a fever. Finally, Christina flees her parents' house, disguised in men's clothes. Only by changing her gender identity can she avoid having to fulfill sexual demands.[38] The concept of a chaste marriage does not work because Burthred caves in to intense pressure from his family.

Why Alexius also flees remains unclear for a long time. In Konrad's legend, the protagonist extols abstinence to his bride but does not try out the model of a chaste marriage in practice. He leaves his homeland on his wedding night and travels by ship to Syria, where he lives as a penitent. His father searches for him in vain. Although the Roman messengers reach their destination, they do not recognize Alexius. He does not reveal himself lets them leave, without ever reflecting on what his disappearance means for his family. The magnificent palace has been transformed into a house of mourning. His parents are distraught, and the bride is also deeply affected. Like a turtledove, she wants to remain faithful to her beloved and hold out in her father-in-law's house until she finds out where her groom has gone.

After an absence of ten years, Alexius finally returns to his family, but without revealing his identity. Instead of claiming his privileges as sole heir, he appears as a recipient of alms. Alexius stays in his parental home unrecognized for seventeen years and patiently accepts all the humiliations inflicted on him by the family servants. Only after his death do his parents receive his farewell letter and learn that he had been with them all this time.

38 *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 52–55, 90–95. On cross-dressing and sexual identity, see Kraß, *Geschriebene Kleider*, 270–308; Hess, *Literary Hybrids*.

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Shocked, the father wonders how Alexius could have caused them such bitter suffering. He will never get over the pain that his son has been hiding from him for so long. The mother breaks down crying on his deathbed and accuses Alexius of cruelty and hard-heartedness. How could the one she nurtured with her own breasts torture her so much? She can only satisfy her maternal need for closeness and tenderness on the corpse. In deep grief, she embraces Alexius, holds him to her breast, and kisses his whole body. Finally, the virgin widowed bride joins the family lament. The boundless suffering shows the shadow side of striving for chastity and holiness. Even the narrator, who remains full of admiration for the protagonist, feels pity. He considers it "a wild wonder" (*ein wunder wilde*) that Alexius has not comforted his grieving relatives.[39]

Alexius puts his parents through a great deal, but the critical view of the family relationship can also be reversed. Why do the father and mother not recognize their son, even though he asks for shelter in Alexius' name? The parents want nothing more than for their child to return, but do not realize when their desire has long since been fulfilled. Because his appearance and ideal of life do not meet their expectations, they misjudge their beloved son. Through this blindness and the pain of parting from someone who has returned, Konrad von Würzburg reduces biological family relationships to absurdity. However, the one who stays childless by choice is completely satisfied with his outsider role.

Identity Issues: Asexuality and Chastity

In this sixth narrative, the discourse on (in)fertility is related to sexuality: the problem is not the children that result from it, but the coitus necessary for reproduction. This brings the narrative of chaste marriage closer to the discussion about asexuality, which has attracted increasing interest in recent years. The Frankfurt sexologist Volkmar Sigusch (1940–2023) explained in "Der Nichtgebrauch der Lüste" (No Desire to Act On, 2011) that there have always been people who neither felt sexual desire nor engaged in sexual activity, but that they have only recently begun to define themselves accordingly.[40] Do the protagonists of this narrative perhaps only want to remain celibate and childless because they do not feel desire for anyone else? Were

39 Konrad von Würzburg, *Alexius*, v. 732, cf. vv. 1200–1205.

40 Sigusch, "Der Nichtgebrauch." Cf. Bogaert, *Understanding*, 27–39. On modern specificity, cultural contingency, and research since the late 1970s see Przybylo, "Producing Facts."

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some of those who committed to chastity in the Middle Ages asexual, before the term existed?

Projecting a modern concept of sexuality and identity back onto the Middle Ages is generally problematic, as I have shown regarding female mystics' desire for the infant Jesus.[41] Asexuality is a personal category, as the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) emphasizes on its website. Although asexuals share certain similarities, there is neither an exact number of criteria nor a fixed test procedure; the decisive factor is the person's own identity.[42] The right to self-definition is intended to prevent people from being assigned a sexual orientation against their will, forced to conform to norms, or even pathologized. Even with awareness of the historical context, one should be very careful not to make such attributions. However, the criteria used to describe emotions and experiences of asexuality are helpful for a cultural history: the experienced intensity of attraction, frequency of arousal, and desire for a relationship. Two aspects are particularly important for my question about the relationship between asexuality and chastity: sexual attraction and one's own will.

Sexual Attraction

Researchers consider the absence of sexual attraction to be the key characteristic of asexuality. Asexuals may feel emotionally attracted to someone but have no need for sexual union.[43] Like the experiences of asexual people today, the feelings of chaste characters in medieval literature are plural and diverse. Some—above all Mary and Joseph—never desire any sexual activity. For believers, it may seem downright scandalous to imagine an erotic bedroom scene in the Holy Family. The authors of medieval lives of Mary preempt this by characterizing Joseph as a frail old man who cannot be aroused. In the legendary context then, too, the category of age serves to marginalize a man so that he is not considered as the father of a child. Other chaste spouses feel no sexual desire despite being significantly younger and very physically close to each other. Delphine sleeps in the same bed as Elzéar for decades but does not perceive him as a sexual being. She only touches his body for hygienic and medical reasons; she washes his hair, and when he is ill, feels his pulse and cools his forehead. Furthermore, witnesses in the

41 As argued regarding homosexuality in Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, esp. 42–43. On how concepts of sexuality developed see also Sigusch, *Neosexualitäten*.

42 "AVEN."

43 Bogaert, *Understanding*, 11–26.

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canonization process report that Delphine kept a great distance from her spouse in bed and never slept unclothed.[44]

In other variants of the narrative, the protagonists feel more emotional, physical, and sexual arousal than they would like to. Alexius, for instance, later explains his mysterious escape with attraction to his bride.[45] In his farewell letter, he says that he fled from her out of love for God. Alexius does not go into detail, but for him the Mediterranean seems to have been a safer boundary between them than a gap in the marital bed. After the long separation, he still feels emotionally attracted to his bride. While Alexius meets his parents unmoved, the sight of her pains him. The fact that he is close to his spouse and cannot speak to her causes him real heartache.

The difficulty in suppressing sexual desire is clearer in the bride-quest epic. The protagonists take specific precautions so that they can maintain chastity. When Orendel is ordered to remain celibate for nine years, he places a naked sword in the centre of the bed.[46] Self-harm would ensue if the couple got any closer to each other. His bride, however, considers this measure superfluous and declares that she can remain celibate for as long as ten years. In contrast, the young couple in the Munich *Oswald* regularly need a contraceptive to prevent sex. Christ himself gives the hero a tip on how to dampen desire. Next to the marital bed is a tub of water, into which Oswald and his wife take turns jumping.[47] The couple share the bed for two years and remain celibate because any arousal is extinguished by a cold bath. So, in this work, at least, it is not possible to state that there was no sexual attraction.

Margery Kempe's relationship to sexuality is particularly complex. After her spiritual awakening, she no longer feels the need to sleep with John. Her sensations during coitus go far beyond what is considered asexuality today. The AVEN website explicitly states that asexuality has nothing to do with disgust or aversion to sex, but simply means a lack of desire. People who describe themselves as asexual say that sex means no more to them than everyday household tasks—such as washing the dishes or cooking pasta. Yet Margery finds sexual intercourse abhorrent. She would rather swallow feces than come into contact with other bodily excretions.[48]

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44 *Enquête*, arts. 11, 37–38; Witness 8: Durand Andree, 248; Witness 14: Betranda Bartholomea, 316; Witness 40: 462.

45 Konrad von Würzburg, *Alexius*, vv. 716–22, 752–55.

46 *Orendel*, vv. 1799–834.

47 *Münchner Oswald*, vv. 3515–20, 3531–34.

48 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chaps. 3–4, pp. 15–19.

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Contrary to what Margery thinks, her sexual arousal has not completely diminished. After a year without developing any desire for John, she feels strongly attracted to another man. An acquaintance has made sexual advances to her, and she can no longer get him out of her mind. She cannot concentrate during church services and lies awake at night, agitated. While she finds sex with her husband unbearable, she passionately desires the other man in bed. For lack of opportunity, unchastity remains on the level of her thoughts and words. When Margery wants to commit adultery, the wooer coolly rejects her. She is deeply ashamed and doubts that she is worthy of divine mercy. Even in a later sexual vision, Margery is disturbed by the realization that she is experiencing pleasure against her will. She describes it as agony to be presented with countless male genitals and to have to choose an object of satisfaction.[49] It is not the absence, but the experience of sexual attraction and arousal that brings greatest distress to those who want to live chastely.

Will and Perception

Another distinction between asexuality and chastity is the different relevance of the human will. Sexual orientation is different from a religious ideal. Anyone who takes a vow of celibacy decides—more or less—voluntarily to abstain from sex. In contrast, people who define themselves as asexual cannot choose whether they want to be attracted to a sexual partner.[50] In the medieval religious literature, the conscious decision is an integral part of the narrative. The illustrator of the miniature in which Mary resists her marriage emphasizes this aspect. On her banner, Mary justifies her rejection with the fact that she has promised herself to God and concludes: "therefore I will always remain a virgin" ("durh daz so wil ih iemer maget bestan," Fig. 6). It is not the lack of opportunity, but the conscious renunciation that characterizes such pious protagonists. Mary's unwillingness to bear a child is presented positively in this illustration, at a time when the priests in the text still harbour serious doubts as to whether she is acting in accordance with the Law of Moses. The young woman is the only one in the image with a halo. Even before the conception of Christ, Mary's decision for chastity makes her a saint.

Chastity is a cultural and religious concept that can only be realized by living it out and must be constantly renewed. This is why those who commit to chastity must never feel too secure, defend their ideal against exter-

49 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chap. 59, pp. 130–33.

50 Cf. Bogaert, *Understanding*, 33–34; "Aven."

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nal resistance and internal temptations, and cannot make any reproductive concessions. According to Henry, even the good purpose of securing the succession to the throne does not justify coitus; in Ebernand's legend, the emperor is concerned with the principle of chastity. Delphine is clear that she would rather die than sleep with her husband.[51] Even Margery considers abstinence so important that she would accept death for it. She replies honestly to John that his life is less important to her. In the hypothetical case of having to choose between murder or sex, she would rather have his head chopped off.[52] This rigour distinguishes commitment to chastity in the legend literature from asexuality today. While the subjects of interviews and experience reports talk about compromises with partners and family, the protagonists in the narrative of chaste marriage show zero tolerance for sex in fear of their salvation. The value of sexuality for asexuals and people who commit to chastity could not be more different. For some, sex means nothing; for others, it means everything.

In the narrative of chaste marriage, the narrator's perception differs only slightly from that of the characters. Sexuality also plays an important role in the protagonists' social circles. In the narrative world, parents, partners, relatives, liegemen, and spiritual authorities cannot even imagine that married couples might remain permanently celibate. Therefore, a chaste marriage evokes ambivalent reactions: disbelief and criticism, astonishment and praise. One witness in the canonization process, Durand Andree, reported that many doubted Delphine's chastity. They thought it was impossible to live with a partner for so long without sleeping together. But those who believed in Delphine's chastity praised her behaviour all the more.[53] Despite his great kindness, Bishop Philip of Lincoln appears skeptical in the *Book of Margery Kempe*. He keeps putting off clothing Margery like a nun. First, he demands her husband's consent, then he asks his adviser and wants to have the Kempes' married life scrutinized more closely. Finally, he tries to pass the matter on to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Receiving a vow of chastity from a married woman is no easy matter. Others are also suspicious and accuse Margery of hypocrisy.[54]

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51 *Enquête*, art. 8, 35.

52 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chap. 11, pp. 25–26.

53 *Enquête*, Witness 8: Durand Andree, 243. The relatives even have Delphine and Elzéar watched by married ladies to find out whether they are really sleeping in the same bed (248). On the wise woman charged to observe the couple's sexual behaviour cf. Murray, "On the Origins"; Toepfer, *Infertility*, 99–100.

54 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chap. 3, p. 17; chap. 15, pp. 34–36.

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Narratively, such doubts are very effective. The more difficult a life of abstinence seems, the greater the efforts made by chaste heroes and heroines. Even for the author of the imperial legend, it is inconceivable that Henry and Cunigunde had no interest in sex. Rather, he assumes that all people are attracted to a partner of the opposite sex and can feel sexual arousal. Ebernand von Erfurt notes that abstinence is particularly difficult for young people and points out that the imperial couple were very vulnerable due to their age. A spark of passion could easily have been ignited; just as straw catches fire. To confound the conclusion that celibacy is not possible with such intimate familiarity, Ebernand gives a metaphysical explanation: God is watching over Henry and Cunigunde.[55] Nevertheless, his protagonists still agonize as they lie chastely side by side. Because they take on this suffering voluntarily, their abstinence can be interpreted as following Christ. At a higher level, the legend tellers ensure that all ambiguities are removed so the admiration is unadulterated. Chaste married life appears as martyrdom and turns the protagonists into saints.

Prospects

In contrast to the childlessness debate today, the medieval narrative of chaste marriage is fixated on sexuality. The pious protagonists are primarily concerned with not acting on sexual desire and not sinning sexually. Childlessness is not the purpose of abstinence, but its unavoidable consequence. Commitment to chastity means a conscious choice not to have coitus and thus to deny oneself parenthood. The negative evaluation of infertility in the genre context of the legend changes with increasing spatial and temporal distance. On the meta-level of the narrative, the dynastic disruption is sacralized and the childless marriage of Henry and Cunigunde, for instance, is understood as a sign of holiness. The imperial couple acquire religious merit because they voluntarily renounce sexuality and reproduction.

The view that chastity is especially valued by God follows a specific cultural logic: celibacy only deserves so much praise if one attributes great and dangerous significance to sex. The idealization of chastity therefore does not lead to a marginalization of sexuality, but paradoxically has the opposite effect: the sex drive appears as a force of nature that can only be tamed by superhuman efforts and metaphysical assistance. These ideas are not too far removed from Luther's concept of the urge to procreate. In the narrative of

55 Ebernand von Erfurt, *Heinrich und Kunigunde*, vv. 1190–244, 3044–55, 3133–96.

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chaste marriage, the protagonists have to prove themselves in bed by staying celibate despite their attraction and arousal. This gives wanted childlessness a completely different meaning in religious literature than unwanted childlessness. While the former is considered a sign of piety, the latter is interpreted as a sign of sacrilege. In retrospect, abstinence is no longer a life task, but a characteristic of chaste protagonists and a state of holiness. However, the reproductive matrix only changes to a limited extent in the narrative of chaste marriage, as abstinence and childlessness are an absolute exception to the general rule.

Today, authors such as Sarah Diehl and Sheila Heti, who have chosen not to have children themselves, are calling for a more nuanced view of childlessness.[56] Instead of making generalized accusations of selfishness and career obsession against women who are voluntarily childless, society should value other female achievements than motherhood. Recognizing their social, ecological, artistic, and professional commitment requires, of course, that women are not always perceived as potential, actual, would-be, or refusing-to-be mothers. The narrative of chaste marriage creates a third option in medieval literature beyond binaries such as marriage or celibacy, child or convent, mother or non-mother. The narrative shows that there are many ways of life that cannot be reduced to the alternative of accepting or refusing reproduction. This third path challenges established gender hierarchies, which is why, in the literature, spiritual and secular rulers intervene. In the current sociopolitical debate, too, those who fear the loss of patriarchal privileges are complaining particularly loudly about women's deliberate decisions for childlessness. A recent example of this arose in summer 2024 during the election campaign for the Forty-Seventh President of the United States. The Republican vice-presidential nominee accused the Democratic presidential candidate of belonging to the "bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and the choices that they've made and so they want to make the rest of the country miserable too."[57] On both sides of the Atlantic, to mobilize conservative voter groups, influential women politicians who do not have children are accused of inexperience, self-centredness, or careerism.

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56 Diehl, *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt*; Heti, *Motherhood*. On the role of asexuality, whose deconstructing and destabilizing effect is comparable to celibacy, in critical approaches to normativity, see Fahs, "Radical Refusals"; Przybylo, "Crisis and Safety."

57 See Looker, "JD Vance defends."

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Chapter 7

COURTLY LOVE

HAPPINESS REGARDLESS OF CHILDREN

HAPPINESS RESEARCH CAUSED quite a furor in the early 2010s. The centuries-old view that people who have children are happy and people who do not are to be pitied was shaken by several large-scale studies. The consensus of this research was that couples who are not parents are happier than those who are. The Norwegian economist Thomas Hansen, the Italian economist Luca Stanca, and the American scientists Angus Deaton and Arthur A. Stone all concluded that around the world, people are better off on average if they do not have children. Hansen contrasted common opinions with empirical data and tried to clarify why the idea of parental happiness dominates the social discourse, although the advantages of childlessness objectively outweigh the disadvantages. Stanca expressed himself particularly drastically: "the optimal number of children may be zero."[1] In contrast, Deaton and Stone remained more cautious, pointing to uncertainties, difficulties in drawing comparisons, and the issues with viewing parents as unhappier per se.

At first glance, the love stories in this chapter also create the impression that people who do not have children are happier: Tristan and Isolde, Erec and Enite, Iwein and Laudine, who remain permanently childless, are happier together for longer than Riwalin and Blanscheflur, Herzeloyde and Gahmuret, or Kriemhild and Siegfried, who have a child together. A closer look, however, reveals that the happiness of these couples is not influenced at all by the category of (in)fertility. Neither are some burdened by an unfulfilled desire to have children, nor do the others regret their parenthood, nor—unlike those who yearn for chastity in Chapter 6—are they committed nonparents. (In)fertility does not seem relevant to the protagonists of the courtly love narrative, where happiness depends solely on the presence and reciprocal love of one's partner.

With my seventh and final narrative model, I focus on the connection between happiness, sexuality, and reproduction. Courtly romances and

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1 Stanca, "Suffer," 749. Cf. Deaton and Stone, "Evaluative and Hedonic Wellbeing"; Hansen, "Parenthood." Deaton and Stone stress that the findings for the USA cannot be applied worldwide. In countries with a high fertility rate, life with children is viewed much more negatively than in countries where fertility is low.

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Figure 7. "Lovers' union." In *Roman de la rose* (first half of the fourteenth century), 3.8 × 5.3 cm. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Acq. e doni 153, fol. 196v. Reproduced by permission of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

love songs (*Minnesang*) centre around the emotional and erotic relationship between two lovers, whereas the implications for fertility are largely ignored or only relevant when the love ends. This focus on partner love rather than parental love is illustrated in this miniature (first half of the fourteenth century, Fig. 7). It comes from a Florentine codex of the *Roman de la rose* (Romance of the Rose),[2] a thirteenth-century allegorical love story that was very influential in the Middle Ages. There are numerous similar depictions of the act of love.

Two figures are lying together under a blanket. The fine lines on the red background make it look like the covers are moving. Only the couple's bare shoulders, arms, necks, and heads are visible. The covered bodies almost completely occupy the lower part of the picture, encouraging viewers to imagine what is happening between the sheets; the genitals would be exactly in the centre of the bottom half of the image. An essential feature of the narrative of courtly love is immediately apparent: wrapped in the same blanket, the lovers form an intimate unity. Their faces are turned to each other, both seek the other's gaze; with her naked arm, the woman tenderly embraces her lover. The bed scene could easily be extended to the moment of conception if a small human being were drawn into the heavenly blue area above the couple. Yet the two lovers would hardly notice it because they are not longing for a baby; they only have eyes for each other. In the medieval romances, the characters who do not think about (in)fertility at all are perfectly happy.

2 Cf. Peruzzi, *Il Codice*, 61.

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Isolde's Childlessness: Love Instead of Reproduction

Tristan and Isolde are among the greatest lovers of world literature. Although their medieval love story has been retold and adapted time and again, no one imagines the couple as young parents. The silence on the subject of (in)fertility is particularly striking when you read the aesthetically sophisticated version by Gottfried von Strassburg (ca. 1200–1220). Gottfried, who is firmly on the two lovers' side, does indeed talk about childlessness, but only in relation to Isolde's husband Mark.

Mark's Duty to Procreate

At first, the Cornish king is childless by choice. Long before he marries, he makes a conscious decision not to have children.[3] The decisive factor is his nephew Tristan, whom Mark always wants to have by his side. He met his sister's son by chance and is fascinated by him. Tristan is polite, eloquent, and clever. He knows how to hunt, plays chess and stringed instruments, and is the best companion Mark could wish for. Fearing that Tristan might leave him to rule his father's realm, Mark promises him his own throne. He publicly vows to always share his property and kingdom with Tristan and to make him his sole heir. This presupposes that there will be no closer relative than his nephew. The medieval law of succession also affects the actions of the ruler in Gottfried's *Tristan*. Mark succeeds in his strategy of renouncing marriage and parenthood in Tristan's favour. Although Tristan goes to Parmenia, kills the occupier of his land, and reestablishes his power relations, he then returns. Tristan justifies this to his followers with his appointment as heir to the Cornish throne. In Cornwall, Tristan legitimizes his calling through increasingly heroic deeds. He frees his uncle's country from high tribute payments to the Irish king by killing his envoy. He then tricks the messenger's sister into healing his poisoned wound. Unrecognized, Tristan stays on enemy territory until his recovery and meets the young Isolde. Yet, his incredible successes provoke hatred and envy at the Cornish royal court. This makes Mark's childlessness a cause of conflict.

The king's council intrigues against the heir to the throne and demands that Mark fulfill his duty to reproduce. His councillors constantly urge him to take a wife and produce an heir. Gender is secondary; even a daughter would do. Yet the king cannot be swayed. He sees his decision for childlessness not as a defect, but a privilege, as he can choose his favourite candidate.

3 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 5151–67, 8350–577, 10561–66.

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In Mark's opinion, his succession is well in order. He even legitimizes Tristan's appointment with the divine will that has given them this excellent heir. Mark invokes God twice to confirm his decision. He would never marry or accept a queen at court as long as Tristan lived. Instead of strengthening his nephew's position, however, Mark achieves the very opposite: Tristan's enemies are so hostile that he fears for his life and asks that his uncle get married. Mark remains unaffected by Tristan, too, at first. He tells him to be silent and renews his resolution to remain childless. Apart from his nephew, he does not want any other heir. Only when Tristan threatens to revoke the succession agreement and return to Parmenia does the king change his mind; he asserts he is innocent and concedes to Tristan's wishes.

Mark involves his council in the search for a wife. They soon come up with Isolde of Ireland, whose beauty and virtue Tristan had previously praised. Isolde would undoubtedly be a worthy wife, and the marriage would bring significant political gains. Yet an alliance seems completely unrealistic due to the longstanding enmity between Cornwall and Ireland. Aware of this difficulty, Mark concurs with the council's choice, hoping to be able to avoid marriage altogether. Counting on the unlikelihood of the match, he swears to marry none other than Isolde. This time, too, Mark's advisers have other plans. They are less interested in the successor to the Irish throne than in the death of the appointed heir to the Cornish one. Tristan is to present the suit to the enemy's royal court and, hopefully, lose his life in the process. Despite Mark's protest, Tristan immediately agrees to the dangerous bride-quest, and completes it. He kills a terrible dragon in Ireland to win the favour of the queen and the promise of Isolde's hand. Tristan not only conveys Mark's proposal of marriage to her and her mother, but also tells them of the Cornish king's original wish to remain childless and unmarried. Once again, the beloved nephew is named as the reason for Mark's desire to live, but the future queen's duty is also implicitly determined. She is to give the kingdom an heir.

Rewritten Discourses of (In)fertility

When the marriage was solemnized, the problem of childlessness should have shifted from Mark to Isolde. In medieval literature, when a male ruler marries, he has usually done his reproductive duty; his wife is the one to ensure the birth of an heir to the throne. Yet Isolde does not have a child, although she has sex regularly and even sleeps with two men—but surprisingly, this is never presented as a problem. This silence is symptomatic of the narrative of courtly love. Gottfried's *Tristan* certainly addresses aspects

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that could be relevant to (in)fertility, but they are rewritten and reinterpreted. My case is particularly well supported by these "rejected alternative interpretations" (*Abgewiesene Alternativen*):[4] in this seventh narrative, childlessness is meaningless because love absorbs all.

On the return journey from Ireland to Cornwall, the wooer and the bride are thrown together. Inadvertently, Tristan and Isolde consume the love potion that was intended for her wedding night with Mark. Although, compared to other medieval authors, Gottfried minimizes the power of the potion, for him it also marks the beginning of the passionate love affair. In a moment, Isolde's hostility to Tristan disappears and love takes upper hand. The two become one heart and one soul, sharing every joy and sorrow, and aching for physical closeness. The love potion is such an integral part of the Tristan material that hardly anyone doubts its significance.[5] From the perspective of (in)fertility research, however, one has to wonder why on earth the mother gives Isolde a love potion to take with her on her journey. For a young queen who is to found a dynasty and needs to prove herself in a foreign realm, a remedy for sterility would have been much more appropriate. Even before marriage, the discourse on (in)fertility is recast for the first time. The queen does not use her magic out of feudal interests, but in accordance with the courtly ideal of love: mutual affection is more important than reproduction.

During the voyage, Tristan and Isolde confess their feelings and make love. Nevertheless, completing his mission, the nephew hands his lover over to his uncle. But even after their marriage, Tristan and Isolde cannot and will not let each other go. They secretly continue their love affair at the royal court, which is soon gossiping about them, and try to keep up appearances with cunning and deception. Mark feels wracked with doubt. There are many signs that his nephew and his wife are cheating on him, but he cannot be sure. Finally, he demands that Isolde submit to God's judgment. Once again, a historical (in)fertility discourse is alluded to, but the issue is reframed. The court proceedings are reminiscent of church marriage trials, but *Tristan* is not about fertility. Like Cunigunde in Ebernand's legend, in Gottfried's romance, Isolde must prove her loyalty. Even her temporary banishment from court is not justified by her infertility. Rather, Mark breaks off his relationship with his wife because he can no longer tolerate her affectionate behaviour toward Tristan.

4 Schulz, *Erzähltheorie*, 350–59.

5 Cf., e.g., Johnson, "This Drink," 87–112; Keck, *Die Liebeskonzeption.*

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The most serious deviations from the scholarly discourses on (in)fertility can be observed in theology. In the eyes of the church, Tristan and Isolde are committing the grave sin of adultery. According to the basic principle of reproductive theology, the queen's childlessness could be understood as God's punishment, but there is no evidence for such a view. Rather, the author, who in medieval literature is difficult to distinguish from the narrator, sympathizes with the lovers from the first and shows great understanding for their behaviour. Gottfried pulls off the feat of giving the illegitimate love affair even more legitimacy than marriage. The contrast to the negative value of sexual desire seen in the narrative of chaste marriage could not be greater. Sexual union erases all heartache and gives Tristan and Isolde the greatest happiness; but it can never last due to the precarious love triangle. Gottfried rewrites the theological discourse by glorifying the lovers' willingness to suffer. Tristan and Isolde are presented as martyrs to their love, whose story is intended to comfort all unhappy lovers.[6]

Isolde's childlessness casts a shadow—not on the exemplary lovers, but on the Cornish king. Gottfried reveals the unfavourable conditions for procreation in the royal marriage by showing us the king and queen's bedchamber. While all of Tristan and Isolde's encounters are erotically charged and nonverbal, Mark and Isolde engage in a war of words in bed. Mark uses intimate situations to question Isolde about her relationship with Tristan. This considerably impairs his sex drive. When he wanted to sleep with Isolde, his mistrust prevented this, the narrator tersely remarks.[7] The fact that Mark does not fulfill his duty to procreate is so problematic because Tristan has disqualified himself as heir to the throne. His love affair with the queen threatens the stability of the kingdom. Mark is unable to free himself from his barren wife and his unfaithful nephew, which testifies to his impotence as a ruler. Only the Cornish king is characterized as deficient.

Happiness Through Partnership: The Ideal of Intimate Unity

The formula for happiness in courtly literature is simple: requited love. But those who doubt their beloved's affection, are rejected, or lose their partner must suffer greatly. The beloved is considered outstanding, incomparable, and unique, and thus cannot be replaced. German sociologist Niklas Luhmann

6 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 1–244. On the "religion of love" cf. Ranke, "Die Allegorie," 16. See also Kasten, "Martyrium und Opfer."

7 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 13769–71.

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distinguishes in *Love as Passion* (1982) between three types of love: courtly love, passionate love, and romantic love.[8] Contrary to Luhmann's opinion, these three do not arise in successive evolutionary stages, but are all developed in courtly literature. I therefore use courtly love as an umbrella term for the various medieval concepts of love and refer to Luhmann's narrower type as lofty love, or courtship love. Although the three types of love yield differing degrees of attainable and lasting happiness, they are united by the lovers' childlessness.

Unattainable Happiness in Courtship Love

The lack of desire to have children is least surprising in courtship love, which is developed in love songs and is generally regarded as a typical medieval form of love. The protagonist of the song woos his lady love, who will never enter into a relationship with someone so far beneath her. Nevertheless, the lover cannot stop praising his lady and serving her.[9] Meinloh von Sevelingen (second half of the twelfth century) explains that every day since he began to court her, he is a little more enamoured of his chosen one. Therefore, in the song *Ich bin holt einer frowen* (I am Devoted to a Lady) he affirms unrequited love with all its painful consequences. Even if he were to die of longing, he would come back to life and woo her again. Other singers of medieval courtly love songs (*Minnesang*) vary this basic structure of courtship love. They are not satisfied with sublimating and aestheticizing their suffering for love but make demands on the lady.

Walther von der Vogelweide (ca. 1203) asks about the nature of love in the song *Saget mir ieman* (Can Anyone Tell Me). Provocatively, he proposes to evaluate love according to the emotions it triggers. Only when it does good does love rightly bear its name. Walther's understanding of happiness is based on reciprocity. In real love, passion is shared; if it is unrequited, one lover alone cannot keep it alive. The singer argues similarly in *Bin ich dir unmaere* (Do I Mean Nothing to You). After professing his love and lamenting her lack of attention, he tries to get his lady to react. She would do well to think about whether he means something to her, after all. In both songs, the wooer appeals to his view that only mutual love is worth anything. His

8 Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion*, esp. 49–56; *Love as Passion*, 41–47. According to Luhmann, sexuality in the Middle Ages is sublimated in courtly love, from the mid-seventeenth century lived out in passionate love, then from the nineteenth century integrated into romantic love in marriage. For criticism see Kraß, "Freundschaft als Passion," 100. On courtly love see, e.g., Egidi, *Höfische Liebe*; Schultz, *Courtly Love*.

9 *Deutsche Lyrik*, no. 18, 58–59; no. 168, 416–19; no. 176, 438–41.

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lady should rush to his aid; he has been suffering too long and too deeply from unrequited love. Unlike Meinloh, Walther is not prepared to continue his courtship without hope of success. In the first song, the singer tries to put pressure on his lady. If she wants to continue to be praised, she has to show him her favour. Walther thus reveals that the ideal woman is a male projection.

The lady is always imagined as a lover, never as a mother. The wooers are not toying with the idea of getting the lady pregnant or having a child together. Rather, the one they praise surpasses all other women because she does not serve any profane purposes and does not have to fulfill any mandate to multiply. Love is exclusive, as Walther explains in *Bin ich dir unmaere*: it should pierce two hearts and no more. In contrast to the early modern wedding sermons and poems, in which a couple's happiness depends on their parenthood,[10] any extension to a third party is expressly ruled out. If children are mentioned at all in these courtly love songs, it is mainly to extend the love in time: childhood love implies that the suitor has loved his lady from an early age. Heinrich of Morungen (ca. 1200) extends this perspective into the future when his son will one day take up office. The point of his song *Het ich tugende niht sô vil* (Had I Not So Much Virtue) is that the generation shift brings a role reversal. The protagonist imagines that the lady will later suffer greatly out of unrequited love for his son.[11]

Johannes Hadlaub (ca. 1300) tells the unusual tale of a child acting as a go-between in courtship love in *Ach ich sach si triuten* (Ah, I Saw Her Caressing).[12] The singer watches his lady stroking a child and is profoundly shaken. The lover can hardly bear to see her hugs and kisses; all caresses seem eroticized. Johannes Hadlaub contrasts maternal and courtship love so the one intensifies the other. The wooer longs to be able to take the child's place. Although this wish remains unfulfilled in the courtship love songs, the protagonist can at least transfer his desire. When the child approaches him, the lover imitates his lady's behaviour. He kisses the child in the very places his beloved had previously touched. In this way, the child becomes the medium of love, but not its end. The difference to parental love is obvious: the child is a transmitter between unrequited and requited love.

10 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 166–69.

11 *Deutsche Lyrik*, no. 101, stanza 3, 240–41; on love from childhood, see 1088 (index).

12 *Deutscher Minnesang (1150–1300)*, 160–61.

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Happiness Hindered by Passionate Love

Passionate love differs from courtship love in that the desire cannot be sublimated. Sexuality is essential for this form of love and brings both partners the greatest joy. Passionate love differs from romantic love in that it is expressed outside marriage. The lovers can only meet in secret and are always in fear discovery. Their limited opportunities to be together and constant threat to their happiness continually refuel their desire. In *L'amour et l'occident* (Love in the Western World, 1939/1983), the Swiss philosopher Denis de Rougemont (1906–1985) saw the interfering spouse as the main reason that Tristan and Isolde's love endured. Without such an obstacle, they would not have been able to rekindle their love so repeatedly and so fervently. Rougemont considered the idea that Tristan could have married Isolde to be completely absurd and expressed understanding for the male character: Isolde "typifies the woman a man does not marry; for once she became his wife, she would no longer be what she is, and he would no longer love her."[13]

In the courtly romances, passionate love is often contrasted with a husband's behaviour to question the legitimacy of his claim. As early as his prologue, Gottfried von Strassburg makes it clear that Tristan and Isolde are destined for each other and are true lovers. From his point of view, the love potion does not thwart plans for a legal marriage but ensures that those who belong together can be together. Mark, who prefers to live with a man, only agrees to the marriage out of necessity, does not even realize on the wedding night that the wrong bride is being foisted on him, eyes his wife suspiciously: he does not deserve a woman like Isolde at all.

Two verse narratives by Marie de France set out a similar situation.[14] Her protagonists are susceptible to passionate love because they bear the cross of an unhappy marriage. In the *lais* of *Guigemar* and *Yonec* (ca. 1170) a noble, beautiful, and clever woman is married to an old, narrow-minded, and jealous man who imprisons and keeps a close eye on her. According to such men, wives have only one purpose: to give birth. As the young women in both *lais* are emotionally neglected, it seems all too justified that they enter a relationship with an empathetic knight. In both stories, the lady's sexual encounters give her great pleasure. In *Yonec*, the protagonist regains her former beauty through experiencing the joy she had lost during the suf-

13 Rougemont, *Love*, 45.

14 Marie de France, *The Lais*, 52–99 ("Guigemar"), 210–39 ("Yonec"). Like Mark, the bailiff of Caerwent marries in *Yonec* (vv. 18–20) to obtain an heir.

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fering of her marriage. Her knight gives her all the tender affection she has only ever known from stories. In passionate love, sexuality is always an end in itself and never a mere means of reproduction.

In the narratives of courtly love and chaste marriage, the perception of sexuality could not be more different. While sex is judged extremely negatively in the legends, the view of it in romances is enthusiastic. Sexual desire is not considered sinful, but an essential part of a happy life. Remarkably, the courtly authors draw on religious images and concepts in their descriptions of sexual encounters. When Engelhard and Engeltrud sleep together for the first time in Konrad von Würzburg's friendship legend (second half of the thirteenth century), this is staged as a cosmic natural event and a supernatural experience of grace. Konrad compares their joy to the relief of a man suffering from great hunger who can eat his fill at a feast. He exuberantly recounts that for this couple, the door to paradise was opened. This metaphor of happiness stands in striking contrast to church sexual morality. Not abstinence, but sexual pleasure provides a foretaste of eternal bliss or a return to humanity's joyful prelapsarian state. The location of the meeting, an idyllic garden filled with trees, also hints at paradise. The flowers, red roses, and grass seem to be smiling at the lovers, just as they are smiling at each other. Konrad repeatedly speaks of joy (*freude*), delight (*wunne*), and bliss (*saelde*) to describe the overwhelming experience of happiness.[15]

In the paradise of passionate love, there is only room for two. In the lovers' cave episode, Gottfried emphasizes that every other person disturbs their happy togetherness. Tristan and Isolde are temporarily banished from the court and create their own world of love in the forest, where their joy in each other is complete. Instead of indulging in culinary delights or starving in the wilderness, the lovers savour the sight of each other and the delight in their hearts. As the narrator rhetorically asks, why would they need to add anyone else? In his opinion, one and one is a perfect combination. Every third party is one too many and can only irk the lovers.[16] Gottfried creates

15 Konrad von Würzburg, *Engelhard*, vv. 2955–3167.

16 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 16850–58: "nu wes bedorften s'ouch dar în / oder waz solt ieman zuo z'in dar? / si haeten eine gerade schar: / dane was niuwan ein und ein. / haeten s'ieman zuo z'in zwein / an die geraden schar gelesen, / sô waere ir ungerade gewesen / und waeren mit dem ungeraden / sêre überlestet und überladen." Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan and Isolde*: "Why would they need anyone else, what would they do for them there? Together they were an even number, just one plus one. If they had admitted someone else to their even company of two, then they would have been uneven, and the unevenness would have only been a burden and a nuisance."

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this formula for happiness knowing full well that only a little later, Mark will discover the lovers' cave. In *Tristan*, Isolde's husband repeatedly takes on the role of third wheel who disturbs the lovers and intrudes on their companionship. Of course, the unwanted husband is not the only one to threaten their happiness; so, do potential children. The idea of Isolde being a mother and caring for a baby is even less compatible with the concept of passionate love than Denis de Rougemont's verdict on the likelihood of a "Mme Tristan."[17]

Happiness Harboured by Romantic Love

In romantic love, sexuality, love, and marriage come together. The protagonists are allowed to marry whomever they love, so their happiness seems permanently assured. But in romantic love, new problems arise. How can feudal duties be reconciled with the passion and totality of courtly love? Hartmann von Aue describes the difficulties that result in the first two German Arthurian romances, deliberately leaving (in)fertility out of the question.

In Hartmann's first romance (ca. 1180/85), the king's son Erec marries the beautiful Enite, with whom he fell in love on his first adventure. At the wedding celebration, the protagonist in the Old French source text, Chrétiens de Troyes's *Erec et Enide* (ca. 1165), expressly prays before an altar to Mary that she be able to fulfill her obligation to give birth. She asks Jesus and Mary to give her and her husband an heir who will one day inherit the realm.[18] In the German romance, however, Enite does not pray for parenthood. By removing the plea for fertility and increasing the intensity of the sexual encounters, Hartmann creates the image of a romantic couple whose happiness does not depend on reproduction.

Erec loves his beautiful wife so much that he only wants to be alone with her. Instead of continuing his knightly activities or fulfilling his public royal duties, the young ruler withdraws from life at court and spends most of the day in bed with his wife. While Chrétien's Erec often stays abed until noon, Hartmann's protagonist goes back to bed at noon. The couple only leave their love nest to attend mass and for meals. People soon start gossiping about Erec "lying lazily" (*verligen*) like this and his prestige dissipates. The rule that togetherness brings happiness may apply to passionate love, but it

17 Rougemont, *Love*, 45.

18 Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, vv. 2347–53, 2430–41; Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*, vv. 2966–98. See also Bumke, *Der "Erec,"* 87–111.

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only works to a limited extent with romantic love. Noble spouses are obliged to fulfill social duties and are not allowed to devote themselves entirely to their partners. In Chrétien's romance, Erec's companions accuse him of precisely this: he treats Enide not as his wife, but like a lover.

In Hartmann's version, the hero is so fixated on his beautiful wife that he does not even realize how others are talking about him. He only learns of his bad reputation from Enite, although she would prefer to keep the derogatory comments secret. She finally decides to tell him for fear that Erec might accuse her of something worse, which could be read as a hidden reference to infertility. What else could Enite be afraid of? The suspicion of infidelity that some medievalists have surmised[19] does not fit the context of the plot. A young woman who is in bed with her husband around the clock hardly has time for a lover. It would be more likely that Enite would worry about not being pregnant despite intensive sexual activity. But rather than making this connection explicit, the narrator and his protagonist remain silent on the issue. Without any explanation, Erec orders his wife to prepare to leave. He sets off on one more adventure, this time with her, but treats Enite very badly. Nothing seems to be left of their all-consuming passion; Erec completely withdraws from their intimate companionship at table and in bed and has Enite do the work of a groom. The hero makes full use of his patriarchal power until, after numerous displays of loyalty, he finally returns Enite's feelings once more. At the end of the romance, Erec has learned to reconcile love and rule and to live out his marriage in such a way that his desire no longer poses a threat to society.

In the second Arthurian romance, *Iwein* (Ywain, ca. 1200), Hartmann reverses the problem.[20] Fearing that he will be overwhelmed by passion like Erec, Iwein neglects his wife and his duties as ruler. This romance is also based on the concept of romantic love: Iwein falls passionately in love with the recently widowed sovereign of a mysterious fountain realm, whose husband he has killed. His desire causes him great pain, so he is overjoyed to win the hand of the beautiful Laudine. Securing the rule plays a decisive role here. Laudine is only so quick to take on a new husband because she needs someone to defend her realm. Unlike Iwein, love is not the cause of Laudine's consent to marriage, but its consequence. Although social duties

19 Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*, vv. 3029–49. On the research discussion cf. Scholz, "Kommentar," 747–48.

20 Hartmann von Aue, *Iwein*.

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are emphasized more strongly than in *Erec*, the task of reproduction is not mentioned at all in *Iwein* either. Laudine is concerned about having a well-defended realm in the present, not in the distant future. Both protagonists believe that their love is secure but learn that marriage does not guarantee happiness. Laudine is surprised that after just a few days, her husband wants to set off again and take part in tournaments; Iwein learns painfully that a woman can break away from an unreliable husband. In the end, they realize how much they depend on each other and reunite.

One would expect to see shifts in romantic love related to (in)fertility. If rulers are required to father children, parenthood is logically a key condition of a happy marriage. But the idea of happiness is not extended from a loving couple to a happy family in either *Erec* or *Iwein*: the protagonists of Hartmann's romances do not want or have children. Nor does anyone close to the couple demand that they provide an heir to the throne. Laudine is not required to marry to bear a son and people do not talk about Erec and Enite failing to produce one. Not even the epilogue to the first Arthurian romance, which extends to the couple's eternal life, mentions children.[21] In the narrative of courtly love, the basic principle of reproductive politics is suspended. Mutual affection is enough to be happy, whereas parenthood and childlessness are completely irrelevant—at least as long as love remains.

Lost Happiness: Children as Compensation

Children become relevant in medieval romances when a relationship ends. Yearning for parenthood is a specifically female motif in the narrative of courtly love. Women long for their disappeared or deceased beloved to live on in their son. The child is therefore not the culmination of a fulfilled love, but compensation for its loss. Through motherhood, women hope to be able to hold on to their happiness beyond the end of a relationship.

Dido's Fantasy of Fatherhood

The ancient heroine Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* (29–19 BCE) and its later adaptations provide an impressive example of desire for children as compensation. The powerful ruler of Carthage thinks about having a child for the first time when her lover wants to leave her. Her position of power is permanently weakened by her love affair with the Trojan refugee. Before Aeneas was stranded in Libya with his companions, Dido was an undisputed ruler who

21 Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*, vv. 10054–135.

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had built up her empire through her own wisdom and skill. She abandoned her resolution not to marry again and to remain faithful to her deceased husband for the Trojan hero. Dido fell in love with Aeneas, slept with him on a hunting trip and then continued their liaison at court. She ignored her people's gossip, left affairs of state to her lover, and indulged in the illusion of lifelong love.

As Aeneas prepares to continue his journey to Italy, Dido realizes how precarious her situation is. After voluntarily subordinating herself to a man, she is no longer accepted as a ruler and is despised for her inconstancy. In a great lament, she regrets her behaviour and fervently wishes she had never begun the relationship—or at least that they had conceived a child. If only the Trojan had left her a little son "whose features at least would bring you back to me in spite of all, I would not feel so totally devastated, so destroyed."[22] Dido's desire for a child only arises when it can no longer be fulfilled. Little Aeneas, who plays in her halls and looks like his father, is a projection marked as unreal. Dido's fantasy of having children springs from an explosive mixture of emotions: love, passion, remorse, disappointment, fear, and anger. On the one hand, her longing testifies to a lasting emotional bond, insofar as Dido would like to transfer her love to a potential son. On the other, she confronts Aeneas with the fact that he has failed both as a lover and as a would-be father.

Ovid reformulates this desire to have children in the *Heroides* (Letters of Ancient Heroines; 23 BCE). In her love letter to Aeneas, Dido does not lament that they have not had children but plays with the possibility of pregnancy. As in most letters, the appeal of the *Heroides* lies in the fact that the writer still hopes to be able to keep her beloved man, while the reader knows that the myth has a tragic end. Dido vividly describes to Aeneas what terrible consequences his departure would have for her. She could be banished, attacked, conquered, raped, and killed. She tries to paint an even more horrific picture by imagining an unborn child as the victim of the violence. Dido mentions her potential fertility to exert emotional pressure, manipulate her lover, and increase her own value: "But perhaps it is Dido, swollen with child, / whom you abandon with part of you. / To the mother's fate must be added the child's / you will cause your unborn child to die. / Iulus' brother will soon die with his mother, / one fate will take us

22 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 138–89. Cf. Vergil, *Aeneis*, bk. 4, vv. 327–30: "saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset / ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi parvulus aula / luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret, / non equidem omnino capta ac deserta viderer."

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both together."[23] Ovid's Dido is a skillful rhetorician. She presents herself as an expectant mother and Aeneas as a fugitive father who provokes and tolerates the murder of his fictitious child. If Aeneas has no sympathy for her, she says, he should at least think of their potential child. The danger she invokes is all the more threatening because Dido refers to his real son. If Aeneas wants to be a caring father, he must stay with her and protect the unborn brother of his Ascanius.

In the Middle High German *Eneasroman* by Heinrich von Veldeke (Romance of Aeneas, 1174/84–85), the theme of childlessness fulfills one more function. Dido hopes for both emotional comfort and political support from the imaginary child. She laments her aloneness: she has neither a child nor any other relatives, and urgently needs male support to defend her right to rule. Unlike in the *Aeneid*, Dido does not blame her lover for her misfortune, nor does she formulate longing for a child from her own perspective. Instead, she struggles with herself: "If only you had had a child from me!" ("hetet ir doch ein kindelîn / an mir gewunnen!")[24]

Dido's longing for his fatherhood sheds a different light on Aeneas's departure and the North African princes' contempt. At least from her point of view, one reason that the man she loves is leaving is because she did not bear him a child. By admitting that she has gambled away her own honour, she provides an implicit explanation for her infertility. In Veldeke's German version, childlessness appears to be a punishment from God because Dido thoughtlessly slept with a man. This gives the neighbouring princes one more reason to lower their esteem for Dido. None of her former wooers are interested in a woman who is unfaithful and infertile. Because Aeneas lets Dido cry and does not comment on her hypothesis that he is leaving because she failed to give him a child, this view remains unchallenged. The childless ruler remains alone with her shame and—as in the ancient epic—commits suicide.

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23 Ovid, *Heroides*, 62; Ovidius, *Liebesbriefe*, letter 7, vv. 133–38: "forsitan et gravidam Didon, scelerate, relinquas / parsque tui lateat corpore clausa meo. / accedet fatis matris miserabilis infans / et nondum nato funeris auctor eris. / cumque parente sua frater morietur Iuli / poenaque conexos auferet una duos."

24 Heinrich von Veldeke, *Eneasroman*, 72, vv. 6–7. In the English translation, unlike in the Middle High German text, the longing for children is attributed to Dido: "I would be much better off if God had allowed me to get a child from you […]. Sad to say, I did not." Heinrich von Veldeke, *Eneit*, 27.

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Life Must Go On

Courtly love stories in which a longed-for child plays an essential role have a clear timeline. Because courtly love has a basic dyadic structure, relationships with the desired man and the cared-for son cannot be lived out in parallel. A woman is either an ideal love partner or a caring mother. Therefore, the beloved man must leave before the child can take first place in a woman's life. As Marie de France's *Yonec* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (1200–1210) show, this temporal logic applies to both passionate and romantic love stories. Each eponymous character enters the narrative world at the very point when he can take his father's place at his mother's side.

In *Yonec*, the lady's pregnancy is first mentioned after her lover is mortally wounded.[25] The knight, who could only approach his lady love in the guise of a hawk, fell into the trap set for him by her jealous husband. Feeling death is near, he prophesies that his beloved will give birth to a son. Amid this powerless suffering, the child fulfills a double function: first, to console the bereaved lady in her grief and second, to avenge his parents' misfortune. The dying man instructs his living lover exactly when she should tell his son about his origins, hand him his sword, and ask him to kill her husband. She faithfully carries out all these instructions, gives birth to the child, looks after him carefully, and loves him tenderly. Yonec resembles his father in beauty and reputation. The father is regarded as the strongest, bravest, most beautiful, favourite, and best knight of all time, while the son is praised as incomparably noble, brave, generous, and magnanimous. At the appointed time, the mother tells Yonec his birth story. No sooner has she fulfilled her knight's last wishes than she falls dead on his grave.

Wolfram details how a woman's love shifts from her deceased husband to her unborn son in *Parzival*.[26] Although Herzeloyde is warned in a dream, the news that Gahmuret has died is a harsh blow. Fainting, she sinks to the ground and almost follows her husband into death. Once again, the narrator only announces that a woman is expecting her lover's child when he dies. The overpowering suffering of the widow and the strong will of the unborn child struggle for survival. When Herzeloyde regains consciousness, her first thoughts are of Gahmuret's germinated seed. The child means much more to her than her husband's last testament; she believes that he will come back to life in his son. So as not to kill her lover a second time, she conquers her pain. In her dirge, Herzeloyde changes role—from loving wife to overpro-

25 Marie de France, *The Lais*, "Yonec," vv. 319–32.

26 Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, para. 109, v. 1; para. 111, v. 14.

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tective mother. Due to her grave misfortune, she believes she is practically entitled to a complication-free birth. A faithful God would allow her child to be born safe and sound.

Motherhood becomes a lifeline that allows Herzeloyde to overcome her grief. Yet it leads her to fixate on her baby as compensation for the loss of his father, whom she hopes to meet again in her son. Her attention is immediately drawn to the newborn's genitals; she is pleased to see that there is a sweet little penis (*visellîn*) between his legs. Herzeloyde showers the little boy with kisses and gives him various courtly pet names. She never calls him by his real name, but always addresses him in French, alternately as good son, dear son, or beautiful son ("bon fîz, scher fîz, bêâ fîz").[27] She breastfeeds the child herself, which is highly unusual for a noble lady in the High Middle Ages, as the narrator approvingly stresses.[28] Yet—in contrast to Grisardis in Erhart Groß (see Chapter 5)—Herzeloyde is less concerned with being an exemplary mother than with satisfying her longing for her beloved. Holding her child tenderly, she feels as if Gahmuret is in her arms again. Herzeloyde does everything she can to preserve this love. To ensure Parzival does not suffer the same fate as his father, she takes him away from court to live in a wooded wilderness. But all efforts to keep the boy from knightly life fail. When Parzival leaves her, Herzeloyde is literally overwhelmed by heartbreak and dies. Separated from Gahmuret's son, she has no more reason to live.

No Consolation Through Fertility

Pregnancy is no panacea for the loss of a loved one. In the medieval romances, a child temporarily helps some women get over the death of their partner, while others remain inconsolable. In the narrative of courtly love, the joy of having a child never equals the overwhelming happiness with a partner. Lovers are always happier than parents, especially as in the courtly literature, they usually have to bring up their children alone. When women die of heartbreak despite pregnancy or childbirth, it is especially evident that a child is no substitute for a partner.

The lesson that a child is no remedy for lost happiness can be taken from the first love story in Gottfried's *Tristan*. The romance begins with Tristan's future parents, who partly anticipate the fate of the main lovers in the story.

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27 Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, para. 112, v. 25; para. 113, v. 4.

28 Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, para. 113, v. 5; para. 114, v. 2. On her presentation as *mater lactans* see Brinker-von der Heyde, *Geliebte Mütter*, 220–3; Miklautsch, *Studien*, 54–59.

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Riwalin and Blanscheflur fall passionately in love, overwhelmed by their feelings, and grow ever closer. They find the lack of opportunity for sex so agonizing that they fear they might die. For both of them, this makes their secret love affair all the more satisfying. Their bliss was so perfect, the narrator affirms, that they would not have given it up for anything, even the kingdom of heaven.[29] When Riwalin has to return to his homeland, the pregnant Blanscheflur lets him abduct her. But their happiness does not last. Riwalin falls in battle, and Blanscheflur is frozen with anguish. Her whole being is infused with living love and intense suffering, which threatens to suffocate her will to live. She no longer speaks a word—about either her dead lover or her unborn child. Her motherhood does not allow her to live any longer than is absolutely necessary for the story to continue. Blanscheflur lies in labour for four days before she gives birth to her son—and dies.

Just like Blanscheflur, the mother of the protagonist in Rudolf von Ems's romance *Willehalm von Orlens* (first half of the thirteenth century, discussed in Chapter 3) is not consoled in her bereavement by the fact that she is expecting a child.[30] The very day that her beloved husband dies, the duchess gives birth to a son. Elye initially acts according to feudal protocol. She announces the birth of the heir to the throne, who is to compensate everyone for the loss they have suffered, and makes her followers swear allegiance to him. Only when Elye has secured her son's position as ruler does she let her grief flow. She would rather die than live on in longing for the man she loves. With a great wail, she collapses dead on the open coffin. The logic of succession is not enough in this romance. A son can only replace a father as a ruler, but not as the beloved.

The *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelungs, ca. 1200) also shows that, to many women in medieval literature, the idea that a child could compensate for the loss of a loved husband was completely alien.[31] The beautiful Kriemhild gives birth to a son after ten years of marriage, to the delight of the royal family in the Netherlands. But little Gunther is completely irrelevant to the rest of the plot. After Siegfried is murdered during a family visit to Worms, Kriemhild does not return to Xanten. In vain, her father-in-law reminds her of the child waiting for her at home. Kriemhild does not accept the argument that her son will comfort her in her suffering once he is older. Instead of

29 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 1369–72.

30 Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, vv. 1632–2022. Cf. Miklautsch, *Studien*, 178–81.

31 *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanzas 712–13, 1084–85, 2369.

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thinking of a future without Siegfried and taking up her role as the mother of the heir to the throne, she prefers to stay close to the grave and devote the rest of her life to mourning and revenge. For Kriemhild, her child does not represent a lasting connection to his father. As she nears her own death, Siegfried's sword, not his son, reminds her of her beloved. The grieving widow finds no happiness or consolation in her son, because he is not a personal gift of love. Thus, the social significance of parenthood prevails.

Changing Perceptions of Happiness: Life and Literature

Recent happiness research on (in)fertility has met with resistance. Scientists, journalists, and laypeople did not want to believe that nonparents are happier than parents. Cologne-based business journalist Malte Buhse asked in *Zeit online* (2014) how meaningful these studies were.[32] Parents' delight when their children take their first steps or get up on stage in a drama group surely indicated that the opposite was true? In many studies, it is not possible to determine whether children are the key factor in couples' happiness. Other factors may have distorted the results. Perhaps happy and self-confident people are more likely to remain childless because they find it less difficult to defy social expectations and go against the traditional model of family.

Fictional Happiness

It is even more challenging to research happiness in the past. We cannot ask premodern people personally how satisfied they were with their lives. While little information may be gleaned from historical sources, the authors of romances describe in great detail what makes their protagonists happy. Since literary works do not aim for historical accuracy, they cannot be used to draw conclusions about medieval society. Undoubtedly, the happiness lovers find in the narrative of courtly love is fictional. As research into the history of mentalities emphasizes, this motif is genuinely literary, but also typical of the era. The Austrian historian of mentalities Peter Dinzelbacher (1981) proclaimed the "discovery of love in the High Middle Ages," and the medieval Germanist Walter Haug (2004) described the "birth of the modern idea of love"; human life finds fulfillment in an erotic personal relationship between a man and a woman.[33] The popularity of this narrative in the

32 Buhse, "Der kollektive Baby-Blues," *Zeit online*, March 27, 2014.

33 Dinzelbacher, "Über die Entdeckung"; Haug, *Die höfische Liebe*, 34.

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twelfth century is so astonishing because courtly love challenged the norms and values of medieval feudal society. Neither passionate nor romantic love can be reconciled with the marriage practices of the nobility.

Some courtly authors themselves emphasize that the happiness they describe is fictional. In a comparison of artforms that anticipates the renaissance conventions of *paragone*, both Gottfried von Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach juxtapose their literary description of the act of love with other artistic representations.[34] Gottfried compares Isolde and Tristan, surprised in bed, to a golden work of art made from a single mould. Arms wound round each other, cheek to cheek, their embrace is sealed with a kiss. The blanket over them reveals their intimacy rather than concealing their nakedness. Above the covers, from the shoulders up, the couple is nestled so close that they appear fused together. In the *Tagelied* (medieval German "day song" about the separation of lovers at daybreak) *Den morgenblic bî wahtaeres sange erkôs* (The Dawn Light Saw at the Watchman's Call"; ca. 1200–1220), Wolfram von Eschenbach says no painter would find it easy to show how tightly the fair, smooth bodies are intertwined, but Wolfram's aesthetic portrayal resembles the miniature from the Florentine codex (Fig. 7) so closely that it almost seems he had seen that image, or one like it. In the manuscript of the *Roman de la rose*, the painter has refrained from depicting the fusion of entire bodies and has instead portrayed the unity of the lovers through the arrangement of the bedclothes. The question of which artform best describes the lovers' happiness reveals something significant here: in courtly literature, sexual bliss is aestheticized.

Literary narratives are no less important for the study of medieval ideas of love, happiness, and (in)fertility just because they are fictional. In her cultural sociology of love, Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz emphasizes that historical narratives and fictional feelings are anything but irrelevant to happiness. In *Warum Liebe weh tut* (Why Love Hurts, 2011), she traces how culturally specific feelings are mediated through various media.[35] Here and elsewhere I have engaged with the question of what prompts the desire for parenthood: for instance in Chapter 4 of this book, on the mystics' desire to mother the infant Jesus, and in *Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2022), where I analyzed the cases of childless women seeking an annulment through church marriage courts, the enthusiastic descriptions of

34 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 18195–211; *Deutsche Lyrik*, no. 215, stanza 3, 534–37.

35 Illouz, *Warum Liebe weh tut*, 359–86; *Why Love Hurts*, 199–215.

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the joys of fatherhood in early modern wedding speeches, and the great sorrow lamented by the childless self in the Protestant prayer book.[36] Instead of seeing longing for a child as a female disposition, anthropological constant, or "natural" instinct, I have drawn on Michel Foucault's theory of culture, Niklas Luhmann's theory of communication, and Caroline Walker Bynum's research into the history of piety to explain the affects of infertility through discursive, media, and sociocultural factors.

In addition to these, Illouz's emphasis on aesthetic and narrative forms makes her approach especially suitable for literary analysis. Literary narratives evoke fictional feelings that can have the same cognitive content as real feelings. They create cognitive templates that people use to form and anticipate feelings. Thus, historical narratives make a decisive contribution to how people perceive, experience, and interpret parenthood. Stories of childlessness and its emotional impact always follow a script, but ideas of love undergo a significant change from medieval to modern times, as happiness regardless of children is abandoned.

In the early modern period, the courtly script for fictional happiness of lovers is rewritten. The basic two-part structure that characterizes the narrative of courtly love is expanded to include a third party, the child, shifting the focus from partner love to parental love. This makes parenthood an essential part of a fulfilled life. Didactic treatises and wedding speeches clearly reflect this shift, as does an uptick in the poetic fertility rate. While the protagonists of courtly romances usually remain only children, Melusine bears ten sons in the early New High German prose romance (first published in 1456) and in his string of affairs, Hug Schapler (first published in 1500) begets son after son.[37] By the sixteenth century, it was no longer enough for a couple to love each other; they had to prove this by reproducing. Children were seen as an expression of their parents' love, evidence of a happy relationship, and the crowning glory of the partnership.

This reinterpretation of happiness spread through the early mass media. The idea that a marriage without children was equivalent to a life without sunshine[38] gained traction through printing and preaching across regional, linguistic, class, religious and epochal boundaries. For centuries, this pattern has shaped people's feelings. "While imagining that they were pursu-

36 Toepfer, *Infertility*, 95–96, 182–84, 193–96.

37 *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, 46–51, 259–72; Schultz, *The Knowledge*, 113–14.

38 Cf. Toepfer, *Infertility*, 168: "Barren to be and heirless quite, is like a sun that gives no light."

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ing happiness, individuals actually served to reproduce humankind," Niklas Luhmann critically notes.[39] In recent decades, the early modern script for marital and parental happiness seems to have lost its influence. Publications in this vein include the polemic by Sarah Diehl, who confidently announces in the subtitle of *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt* (The Clock That Doesn't Tick, 2014) that she is "happy without children." More recent happiness research also documents that individuals no longer necessarily see children as part of a happy life.

Freedom of Choice and Doubt

Angus Deaton and Arthur A. Stone suggest that people's general attitude toward parenthood should be included in happiness research. They propose that the key question is why people have children. If parents deliberately chose to have children and nonparents deliberately remained childless, the researchers surmise that neither group would necessarily feel more contented. They thus declare freedom to choose as the decisive criterion for happiness.[40] So is choice the main reason to be happy? If you take this approach a little further, happiness should have kept increasing. Western adults have completely different freedoms today than their premodern counterparts: they are largely free to choose their partners, ways to live and love, without being overly restricted by social, religious, moral, and family expectations.

Yet Eva Illouz states that opposite is the case.[41] Sexual liberation and the resulting multitude of choices created new insecurities; love became less intense and happiness, permanently impaired. Illouz argues that "the capitalist cultural grammar has massively penetrated the realm of heterosexual romantic relationships"[42] and has triggered a profound change in the history of love. In the digital age, the logic of the free market is applied to sexual relationships: competition, sexual capital, personal performance, and pleasure are the criteria by which people measure themselves and others. According to Illouz, freedom of choice, rationality, interest, and oversupply change how people look for partners, behave in relationships, and develop feelings. The overwhelming sense of uniqueness that characterized the medieval narrative of courtly love has been "drowned in the sheer numbers

39 Luhmann, *Love as Passion*, 148; Diehl, *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt*.

40 Deaton and Stone, "Evaluative and Hedonic Wellbeing," 1328.

41 Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, 8–10, 159–62; Illouz, *The End of Love*, 9, 221–23.

42 Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, 9.

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of potential partners."[43] The countless options cause people to constantly compare themselves to others, doubt their own feelings, and hesitate to commit. All this leads Illouz to see a negative pattern in relationships today: many people no longer know how to define and judge a happy partnership. The result is generally chronic and structural uncertainty.

Medieval literature certainly recognizes insecurities in love when characters hesitate to embark on a relationship because of the potential negative consequences. But the protagonists usually doubt their partner's affection, not their own feelings. Gottfried von Strassburg tells us of the worries that weigh on Riwalin after he has fallen in love with Blanscheflur. He cannot decide whether she also loves him or perhaps even despises him. All these doubts only lead to Riwalin becoming more and more entangled in love. Gottfried illustrates this typical phase of love with the image of snaring a bird. Love is like a lime-twig. A bird that settles on the sticky branch realizes too late that it is trapped. Every attempt to fly away merely spreads the gluelike birdlime further into its feathers. In the same way, the more Riwalin tries to escape love, the more he is drawn into it.[44] Other popular metaphors and symbols such as the love potion or Cupid's arrow also make it clear that courtly love is experienced as a compulsion and force. Such a passion can neither be explained nor justified rationally. The lovers depend completely on each other for their wellbeing; their happiness has nothing to do with freedom of decide.

Modern freedom of choice also includes the possibility of not having to choose. In *Warum Liebe endet* (The End of Love, 2018/2019), Illouz explains that more and more people are deciding not to look for a partner, or to end their current relationship. She sees falling fertility rates as an indication of cultural fear of commitment, especially among men. The structural uncertainty that Illouz describes primarily for romantic relationships can also be applied to parenthood. In the autofictional *Motherhood* (2018), Canadian author Sheila Heti thinks hard about whether she wants to have a child. She talks to numerous people about what motherhood means or would mean for her and her partner. Confronted with differing social ideals, cultural norms, family influences, fluctuating hormones, advice from friends, relationship crises and her own intellectual demands, she finds it very difficult to reach a decision. For a long time, she wonders whether having a baby would make her happier or unhappier. The worry of regretting not having a child and

43 Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, 232.

44 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, vv. 828–920.

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the fear of finding motherhood unbearable are equally present in the first-person narrator's mind. She can barely imagine finding the same fulfillment in caring as she does in writing. So, she ultimately makes what Illouz calls "the choice to 'unchoose.'"[45]

Such doubts about (in)fertility are alien to medieval narrative literature. Comparable considerations can only be found in the early modern literature on marriage, in which the first humanists discussed its pros and cons before clearly deciding in favour of marriage and family.[46] In the narrative of courtly love, the protagonists do not even think about whether or not they want to have a child with their beloved. Although a passionate or romantic love affair may lead to pregnancy, it is neither a reason to sleep with your partner nor to categorically rule out sex. Not longing for children does not mean that courtly lovers reject children on principle, but that to them, the issue of (in)fertility is irrelevant. Medieval authors thus develop a vision of a society which does not draw a distinction between parents and nonparents.

Alternative Models

Happiness researchers debate what conditions would have to be met for people with and without children to be equally satisfied with their lives. Luca Stanca sees the main perceived drawback of parenthood as the financial burden. Using a worldwide survey, he shows that people with children address money problems significantly more often than people without children. The empirical social researcher Matthias Pollmann-Schult observes that employment has a negative impact on life satisfaction for mothers, but not for fathers, which he explains with mothers' double burden of paid employment and reproductive labour.[47] Feminist authors also see the fact that women take most responsibility for bringing up children and running the household as a key reason why some choose childlessness. Limited childcare options, too little professional and private support, an unequal distribution of domestic tasks, financial and emotional dependency on the main earner and a lack of freedom all contribute to making mothers feel overwhelmed and less satisfied with their life situation than nonmothers. Eva Illouz and Sarah Diehl are therefore asking us to consider alternative

45 Illouz, *The End of Love*, 21. Cf. Heti, *Motherhood*.

46 E.g., Albrecht von Eyb, *Ob einem manne*; Toepfer, *Infertility*, 176.

47 Stanca, "Suffer"; Pollmann-Schult, "Parenthood," 85, 95–96.

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models of love and new concepts of life together.[48] To find other possibilities, it is worth taking one last look at the medieval narrative literature.

The protagonists of the courtly romances do not find happiness in the nuclear family, but in an intimate love relationship or in a circle of like-minded people, as is characteristic of King Arthur's knights. Many medieval love and adventure stories are set in the narrative world of Arthurian legend. Iwein and Erec set off from Arthur's court to prove themselves as knights; as a young man Parzival hurries first to the king to obtain a suit of armour. Arthur's court is an ideal world in which different characters meet, yet no one is more important than another; the famous Round Table symbolizes this equality of all knights. At the court of the ideal king, there are no crying babies, no breastfeeding mothers, and no bathing fathers. Arthur's court does not reproduce itself but is rejuvenated by the admission of new members. Here, biological parent-child relationships barely play a role.[49] Fathers do not recognize their biological sons, but experienced men take responsibility for the next generation of knights and introduce young heroes to the art of jousting. Ladies care for their knights, who return the favour with tournament prizes. The love of heterosocial couples can be integrated into the courtly community in the same way as the friendship of homosocial couples or individuals' striving for independence. The alternative social model of Arthurian society provides a way for those who share the same values and ideals to live together. The inhabitants of the Arthurian world do not even consider (in)fertility.

The contrast to the present could hardly be greater: how to encourage people to have children is a hot topic in political and social debates. Illouz takes a refreshingly different approach from the usual population policies. In an interview (2011), she advised women not to make their longing for children dependent on the idea of romantic love. If they wanted children, they should have them either alone or in a community with other women or men who also wanted to start a family but were not their partners.[50] The German journalist Teresa Bücker argued similarly in *SZ Magazin online* (2020): You do not have to be the biological parent to love a child. On the contrary, a family made up of several adults has several advantages. In view of the demands of paid work and the lack of childcare options, family models with more than

48 Diehl, *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt*, 224–53; Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, 246–48.

49 On Arthurian society as an alternative to the patriarchal family see Müller, *Höfische Kompromisse*, 141–50.

50 Illouz, "Macht euren Kinderwunsch"; Bücker, "Ist es radikal."

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two parents can greatly promote the wellbeing of everyone involved. People who yearn to be parents would not need to make the fertility clinic their first port of call but could consider living with other adults and their children. Both authors thus argue the case for separating love for a partner and parenthood, as is characteristic of the medieval narrative of courtly love. Unknowingly, they are returning to a tried and tested concept of happiness that was abandoned in the early modern era in favour of idealizing reproduction. Their argument that a nuclear family structure is not needed to bring up children is in line with countless stories from medieval literature.

Prospects

The cultural history of childlessness is characterized by very different and competing ideas of happiness. Church fathers and philosophers, nuns and noblemen are convinced of happiness in childlessness, whereas Protestant reformers and wedding preachers enthusiastically praise the happiness of parenthood. My research revealed the unhappiness of people who are involuntarily childless, forced fathers, and regretful mothers; some stories were about the great happiness of late parenthood, while others emphasized the intensity of social alternatives or the joys of spiritual motherhood. Whether people with or without children are happier can hardly be answered in general terms. Rather, every self-perception and evaluation of (in)fertility—not only in medieval literature—depends on numerous individual, social, religious, cultural, discursive, and narrative factors. My brief overview shows that emotions around (in)fertility are many and varied.

This heterogeneity is misjudged by those who contrast parents with nonparents and see them as two homogenous groups. More recent research into happiness and (in)fertility has fallen into this very trap. A binary between people with and without children is assumed, then reinforced in and by the study design. To exaggerate, happiness research itself generates unhappiness because it attributes such significance to the category of (in)fertility. The aim of my critical approach to normativity in this book was to overcome such binary thinking and to question the social divide between parents and nonparents. The decisive finding here is the cultural historical plurality and multifaceted approaches to childlessness, from desired, to refused, to regretted parenthood. In the previous chapters, proponents and critics of reproduction dominated at different points, but the distinction between parents and nonparents ultimately become irrelevant in the narrative of courtly love. In the medieval literature, there are at least seven different narratives and models for a happy life, with or without a child.

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EPILOGUE

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

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

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

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

2 Brunschweiger, "Rezeption."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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