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.

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

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 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.

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[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.

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.

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 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.

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

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

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 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]

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[7] *Ritter von Staufenberg*, v. 701.

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

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 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.

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[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.

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.

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[10] Lembke, *Dämonische Allianzen*.

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

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 interpret 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.

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[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*.

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]

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

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

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 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?

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[16] Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 669.

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

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, 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.

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

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

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

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

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 nuͤtzte 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 muͤgen 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

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[21] Groß, *Grisardis*, 23, l. 10.

[22] Groß, *Grisardis*, 23, ll. 34–35.

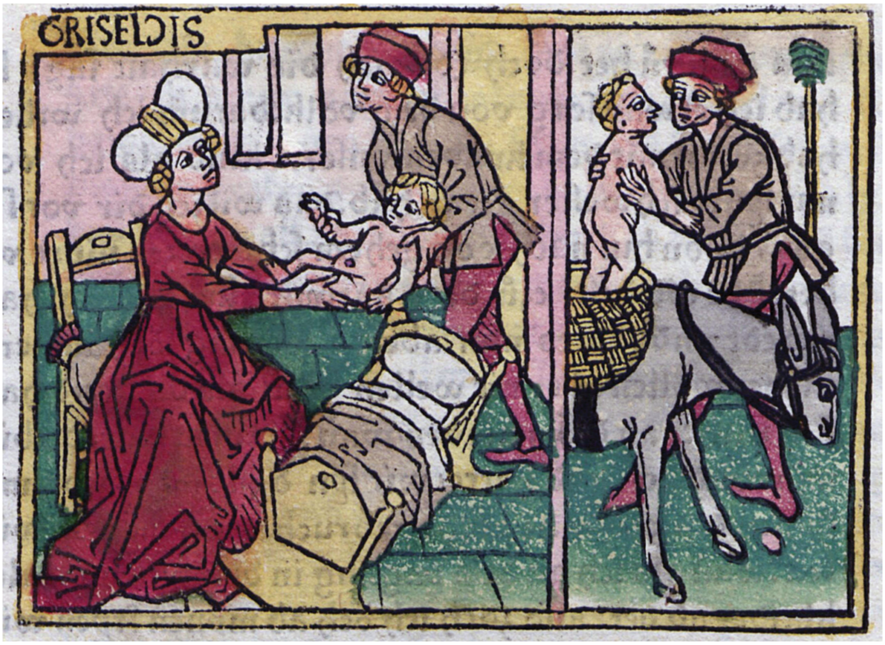

Figure 5. “Vanishing child.” In Francesco Petrarch, *Historia Griseldis*, trans. into German by Heinrich Steinhöwel (Ulm: Johann Zainer d.Ä., ca. 1473), fol. 7v, ca. 11.4 × 8.2 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 705#Beibd.1. Courtesy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

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.

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

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.

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 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.

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[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.

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

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

27 Donath, *Regretting Motherhood*, 108.

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

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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.

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 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.

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

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 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.

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[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.

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 conceiving 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]

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[34] "Asinarius," v. 15.

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

[36] "Asinarius," v. 25.

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 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.

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[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.

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 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.

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[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.

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

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

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.

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

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