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*.

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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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*.

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.

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.

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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*.

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."

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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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."