Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Premodern Views on Childlessness

Regina Toepfer

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"Toepfer's meticulous delineation of the emergence of (In)fertility as a cultural construction in medieval and early modern Europe is an important, timely intervention that refines our understanding of what "childlessness" meant in the past and, by placing the past and the present into lively conversation, demonstrates the centrality of reproductive ideology in the shaping of the social subject."

—Christine Neufeld, *Eastern Michigan University, USA*

"This excellent study offers intriguing insights into the extensive discourse on (in)fertility and childlessness (involuntary or voluntary) in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. By considering (in)fertility and childlessness as a category of identity that shapes people's positions, behavior, and self-perceptions, Regina Toepfer applies an innovative approach and creates a transdisciplinary dialogue between the premodern world and today."

—Dina Aboul Fotouh Salama, *Cairo University, Egypt*

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For Sebastian

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As a medievalist I do not usually expect my research to interest others beyond my own discipline. In the past few years, when I told people about my research project, I realized again and again how deeply people are concerned about infertility, childlessness, and parenthood. In a very short time, small talk developed into intense conversations. The issue is relevant for some because they wish to have a child in the foreseeable future, for others because they cannot have children, and still others because they have made a conscious decision not to do so. People who do have children pity or envy their acquaintances who do not, some of whom are considering whether they could or should have a child. Through the questions of my interlocutors, which often had little or nothing to do with medieval culture, my own research interest shifted. While I was initially only concerned with the historical perception of infertility, I soon became more and more interested in the parallels and differences between medieval times and today.

This led me to a method of literary analysis that I would like to call comparative studies in historical context: in this book, I relate and compare present and past phenomena. Many disciplines—above all biology, sexology, and reproductive medicine—have made such great advances that we may think our current understandings no longer have anything to do with the Middle Ages. Yet, we can observe structural parallels with historical knowledge and narratives of childlessness. In my

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cultural-historical investigation, therefore, I am able to include current issues such as adoption, sperm donation, or regretting motherhood. My aim is not to draw a teleological line of development, but to initiate a dialogue between contemporary recipients and premodern texts.

While we cannot trace an unbroken line of continuity from the present back to the Middle Ages, they are not as distant as we might think. Some ways of reasoning are completely alien to us, yet other patterns of interpretation still make their mark today. This oscillation between closeness and distance makes dealing with stories of ages past particularly fascinating. Hindsight is enlightening for several reasons. Firstly, continuities can be identified that show us the long tradition of some arguments and the contexts in which they originally arose. For involuntarily childless people, the knowledge that they are not alone and that others before them have longed for a child since Antiquity can even be comforting. Secondly, historical distance makes it easier for us to get an overview, to reveal competing interests, and to identify different strands of discourse. Neither in the past nor in the present does everyone want to have a child: some refuse to reproduce; mothers and fathers may question their parenthood. Thirdly, differences and ruptures in the perceptions of infertility help to put commonly held beliefs into perspective. It is easier to see the ambiguity in positions taken today when you know that evaluation criteria have changed in the course of history. Our current concepts are strongly influenced by reproductive medicine—just one phase in the history of interpretation of fertility and infertility—and they will continue to change, in some cases coming closer to premodern ideas than is generally assumed.

The Relevance of Infertility: Current Complaints and Historical Cases

Childlessness is a much-discussed issue in politics, the media, and society. Both commentators and researchers often draw a sharp distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness. Couples who are unable to have the child they long for are advised to go to a fertility clinic and subject themselves to medical treatment. In contrast, women who do not want to have children are often harshly criticized for failing to fulfil society's expectations. This is coupled with grave concerns about the birth rate in Europe, which is the lowest in the world. Europe is also the continent with the world's oldest population; more than half of European countries, including Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain, had negative rates

of natural increase in 2021, as more people died than were born.[1] While experts argue about the reasons for reproductive reticence, governments try to set incentives to counter it. In addition to inducements, such as birth premiums or child benefit, parental and family allowances, sanctions are being considered, especially financial levies on childless people. The low birth rate in Europe conjures up threatening future scenarios: entire regions are being depopulated, the balance between the generations is increasingly out of kilter, and it is barely possible to care for ageing populations. Unless we can stem the shortage of young people, our economic growth and prosperity are at stake. Many such forecasts are accompanied by the sometimes covert, sometimes overt accusation that childless people are enriching themselves at the expense of society and are not prepared to contribute to securing our future. Medical developments, which have created a specialized fertility industry, reinforce this negative assessment. Failure to reproduce seems neither justifiable from a social perspective nor excusable on biological grounds.

Concern about a future into which not enough children are being born is nothing new. Although the state has only been interested in population regulation since the eighteenth century,[2] reproductive behaviour had great political relevance long before that. In the Middle Ages, producing offspring was one of a ruler's most important duties. The survival of a dynasty depended on whether the succession to the throne was assured: the need for an heir is the overriding theme of medieval imperial history. 'Woe to the peoples who have abandoned hope of being ruled by the descendants of their masters,' laments the bishop and historian Thietmar of Merseburg in his chronicle (1012–1018).[3]

In the matter of children, political and religious motifs were closely interwoven. The fertility of the royal couple was interpreted as a sign from God and associated with the well-being of the empire. The correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen testifies to the concern about the ruling couple being without issue. In the early 1160s, Frederick Barbarossa (c. 1122–1190) and his wife Beatrix of Burgundy (c. 1140–1184) asked the respected nun and naturalist for intercession. After the death of their young sons, they feared remaining childless and sought religious help. By her merits, Hildegard was to intercede with God to ensure that Beatrix 'may become fertile and, having borne a child, present the blessed fruit of her womb to Christ.'[4] Hildegard rejected the urgent request. She declared that she was not competent and could not bring a child into

being. But Barbarossa and Beatrix were fortunate—unlike many other couples—that their hopes for offspring were fulfilled.

Infertility could have dramatic consequences in the Middle Ages, leading to divorce proceedings, the end of a dynasty, and conflict over succession to the throne.[5] Early on, when a couple did not have children, the woman was held primarily responsible. Again and again, women of the high and lower-ranking nobility were cast out if they did not fulfil feudal political expectations.[6] The Frankish King Lothar II (855–869) was known for the marital strife that dominated his reign. When his wife Thietberga had not borne him an heir, he wanted to separate from her and resume an earlier relationship that had produced a son. King David of Scotland (d. 1370) disowned two wives because neither bore him the longed-for heir to the throne. The most notorious case is that of Henry VIII of England (1491–1547), whose six marriages can partly be explained by his desire to produce a male heir. After his sons were born dead or died shortly after birth leaving only one surviving daughter, Henry had the marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), annulled. His example also suggests that childlessness in the Middle Ages had a different meaning than it does today that was dependent on both gender and the lifespan of the offspring. Among the high nobility, a marriage was considered barren if it did not produce male heirs.

Statistically, childlessness was more widespread in medieval and early modern Europe than it is today. Whereas today, about 10% of all married couples are childless, the proportion in premodern times was nearly twice as high.[7] Detailed studies conclude that 16% of husbands and 17% of wives in English ducal families were childless. In Florence in the fifteenth century, 25% of households remained without issue, and in Basel the rate exceeded 40% for certain professions such as tanners. In the city, the proportion of marriages without children seems to have been generally much higher than in the countryside, as a study of the Farnsburg dominion in northwestern Switzerland suggests (34% vs 19%).[8] Thus, childlessness was a problem across all classes in the Middle Ages, but nobody was concerned about society ageing or pension systems collapsing. Instead, people worried about provision for themselves in old age or passing on their inheritance. Infertility was stigmatized among the high nobility and bourgeoisie, peasants and craftsmen; it led to social exclusion, as is vividly expressed in a proverb from Mecklenburg: 'The ones who do not multiply, outside the churchyard they must lie.'[9]

Childless people—like suicides—were denied the right to be buried on consecrated ground. Not even death ended this discrimination.

Statements and stories about people who do not have children are plentiful in premodern literature: in the Bible and its exegesis, the works of the early church fathers and Doctors of the Church; in theological tracts, penitential books, aphorisms and sermons; in marriage law and acts of canonization. Proposed explanations for reproductive incapacity can be found in medical works conveying ancient, Byzantine, and Arabic knowledge, as well as in tracts on gynaecology, pharmacopoeias, medical compendia, and historiographical sources. Infertility plays a role in religious miracle narratives in biblical poetry, legends, saints' vitae, and books of miracles, but it also appears as a motif in a wide variety of other literary genres: courtship and heroic epic poetry; ancient and Arthurian romances; fairy tales and novellas; songs, poems, and letters; marriage tracts, autobiographies and occasional poems, all tell stories of people who long for a child, but also of others who decide not to be parents. The assumption that childlessness is taboo and therefore rarely mentioned in historical sources[10] can rapidly be refuted. Infertility is a ubiquitous theme in medieval and early modern Europe, as the plethora of genres shows.

Despite its striking significance, childlessness has long received little attention in historical research. The German historian Claudia Opitz noted in *Evatöchter und Bräute Christi* (Daughters of Eve and Brides of Christ, 1990) that regarding the 'plight and misery, hope and struggle of supposedly or actually sterile women of the Middle Ages, [we] are still largely in the dark.'[11] This is due to the erroneous assumption that children are born 'naturally'; so, for cultural historians, only the obstacles to reproduction are remarkable. This research gap has closed somewhat since Gabriela Signori's key historiographical monograph on testators without issue or family in late medieval Basel (2001)—and especially in the last ten years. Infertility, sterility, and impotence are the subject of encyclopaedia entries, papers of the history of sex, and survey articles, even of edited works on gynaecology and published medical history studies.

While I was working on this book and examining medieval discourses of infertility, early modern historians Jennifer Evans (2014) and Daphna Oren-Magidor (2017) published their important monographs on fertility and infertility in early modern England, exploring the relationship between medicine, morality, gender, and sexuality.[12] Other research worth noting includes Daphna Oren-Magidor's and Catherine Rider's special issue of *Social History of Medicine,* on infertility in medieval and

early modern medicine (2016), in which they explain 'Why the History of Infertility Matters,' and the childlessness issue of the German medievalist journal *Das Mittelalter* (2021), edited by the pharmaceutical historian Bettina Wahrig and myself, with archaeological, literary, and historical contributions. The *Palgrave Handbook of Infertility in History* (2017), whose chronology extends from Antiquity to the present, pays significant testimony to this burgeoning research interest. In their introduction, Gayle Davis and Tracey Loughran urge us to discuss infertility not only in the context of reproduction, motherhood, and family, but as a distinct issue. The medical historian at the University of Edinburgh and historian at the University of Essex see their handbook as a corrective to previous research on infertility in contemporary societies and 'as an attempt to illuminate this historical blind spot.'[13]

Analytical Perspectives: Questions of Identity and Critique of Normativity

To have or not to have children is fundamental to one's self-image. Therefore, I consider fertility as a category of identity in its own right, though it is inextricably linked to other categories such as gender, sexuality, body, and disability. How little biological and social, natural and cultural aspects can be separated from one another has been shown by the French discourse analyst Michel Foucault for sexuality and the US queer theorist Judith Butler for gender.[14] Their approaches can be transposed to another category—fertility. Following Foucault and Butler, I understand infertility as a factor that shapes language and structures our thinking, determines our doing, and creates legal and institutional frameworks for interpreting bodily phenomena.

Talk about infertility is based on the following observation: many heterosexual couples have offspring if they have regular vaginal sex during their childbearing years and do not use contraception; other couples do not procreate under the same conditions. Although the category fertility undoubtedly has a bodily dimension, the perception and experience of the body are shaped in discourse. We need linguistic terms to even be able to comprehend and investigate biological phenomena; these terms are linked to certain ideas, notions, and concepts. While we are usually unaware of it, our perception, thinking, and describing are thus controlled by previous cultural patterns of articulation.

The term infertility itself only became common in the twentieth century, and its use has increased dramatically since the 1980s. It is no accident that this coincides with the development and spread of modern reproductive technology; infertility is clearly conceptualized in medical terms. The older term, 'barrenness,' can still be found in English-language literature of the nineteenth century and is semantically broader; but it is hardly used today. Like the categories *unvruhtbære* or *unbërhaft* in the German literature of the Middle Ages, barrenness refers to the fact that a couple cannot have a child, thus indicating a physical incapacity or biological deficiency without seeing it as a disease.[15] The terms are used to refer to people and animals in the same way as to plants or farmland that do not produce fruit or seeds, but can also be used in a metaphorical sense for 'a lack of anything useful.'[16] Childlessness, in contrast, does not describe the physical inability to give birth, but the family life situation, although this is also marked as deficient. As a term, 'childlessness' presupposes the imaginary reference point 'child' and describes its absence as a lack or loss. For this reason, people who have made a conscious decision not to be parents today sometimes prefer to describe themselves as childfree. Remarkably, there is no equivalent for the term 'childlessness' in medieval literature, possibly because people in the Middle Ages were integrated into larger social contexts—family ties, work and residential, urban and religious communities of young and old—so a life without bodily issue certainly did not have to mean a life without children. But even in Middle High German texts, the terms *unfruchtbarkeit* and *unberhaftigkeit*, which refer to the body and its reproductive capacity, are only used to mark a void in the lives of individuals, married couples, or the structure of entire branches of a family tree. Biological and social aspects of infertility in medieval and early modern Europe cannot be separated, not least for reasons of historical semantics.

To even perceive something as a lack requires a desire or counter-image. This connection can be illustrated with the bed scene depicted in the fifteenth-century *Vita Christi* (Life of Christ) by Jean Mansel, which takes up more than half a page of the Paris manuscript (Fig. 1.1). The spouses, lying chastely next to each other in bed, are identifiable as a couple seeking children by the fact that a tiny naked person is flying towards them. Follow the bright connecting line linking the child with the figures of the Trinity in the upper left of the picture to complete the story of infertility. A childless couple has offspring through support from on high. The Latin banner separating the Father, Son and Holy

Fig. 1.1 Conception of a childless couple—miniature from the *Vita Christi* by Jean Mansel (fifteenth century)

Spirit from the bedroom scene identifies God himself as the author of new life by quoting Gen 1:26: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'[17] As in the well-known iconography of the Annunciation to Mary, a miracle of fertility is visualized by a ray of light coming from above. In comparison with Annunciation scenes, the presence of the man is almost disturbing. With open eyes he looks towards the child, while his wife seems to sleep through the conception. His slightly enlarged slippers placed in front of the bed also draw the eye. The shoes are askew, indicating that something is awry in the couple's lives.

Both artistic representations and medical diagnoses of infertility rely on cultural interpretations. People who cannot reproduce are declared infertile through hermeneutic, discursive, and aesthetic procedures; by definition, the attribution has negative connotations. Being labelled 'childless' devalues a person, not least because others' perceptions shape our own identities. Like gender identity, people's fertility identity is forged by different institutions, practices, and discourses of disparate origin. A cultural history of infertility examines the factors that have influenced how

people without children saw themselves and how others viewed them in the past, which may still impact on the present.

My study critiques normativity: I do not understand infertility as a deviation from a natural, normal state, but as a social category shaped by discrimination. Instead of perpetuating marginalization guised as emancipatory self-help, I enquire into the mechanisms that justify the unequal treatment of people who do and do not have children. What causes the binary of fertility and infertility? In what ways is the difference between parents and non-parents constructed, legitimized, and established? What influence do social factors have on the desire to become a mother or father? Critique of normativity does not mean denying the painful experiences and negative emotions of those who long for children. Instead, it is about the cultural patterns that shape these perceptions and cause deep suffering. People who are not parents do not form a homogeneous group, as the grand narrative of their misfortune and incapacity would have us believe. Not everyone wishes to have children; throughout history, some have always wanted to lead a life without a partner or family. They, too, draw on established arguments to explain this choice, to arrive at different subject positions.

The distinction between parents and non-parents falls short for another reason: when fertility intersects with other categories such as gender, race, and class, this leads to very different forms of up and down valuation. Fertility is valued differently for women and men; for Black and White people; for foreigners, immigrants, and natives; for Christians, Jews, or Muslims; for people with lower or higher levels of income and education; for people who do or do not conform to the common ideals of health, beauty, and mobility. All the intersections of these categories create a complex of multiple discriminations, as intersectionality theorists have pointed out on demarginalizing of women of colour.[18] When we fail to differentiate between social conditions, we neglect the experience of people who belong to multiple minorities. In contrast, the parenthood of privileged people tends to be more politically promoted and socially valued.

My central thesis is that infertility is not simply a biological fate or a natural defect, but culturally constructed. This has various consequences, as I intend to indicate with the spelling of my key term: (in)fertility. The brackets signal that there are different ways for those affected to deal with childlessness, which can change over the course of a lifetime.[19] Fertility identity is not fixed once and for all, as the historical example of Frederick

Barbarossa and Beatrix of Burgundy proves. People who do not have a child yet can still do so; people who have one can lose that child; people who do not have a biological child can be social parents; people who are childfree by choice can change that choice; people who are involuntarily childless can come to terms with their life situation, and be happy. Even the political weakness of a childless monarch can become a strength if they skilfully use the open question of succession to play powerful princes off against each other and secure loyalties. For these reasons, I do not limit my study to those who cannot have children, but also consider those who do not want to.

The '(in)fertility brackets' also make it clear that the same issue can be evaluated very differently in different contexts and that processes of marginalization and prioritization are inseparable. Although childlessness in the Middle Ages was judged very negatively from the perspective of power politics, it was viewed completely differently from behind the cloister walls. Infertility may be accompanied by increased fertility, socially, religiously, or intellectually. If we let go of an essentialist understanding of fertility and infertility, their opposition becomes relative; they are closely interrelated. Indeed, my book reveals that fertility and infertility are two sides of the same coin. People are called infertile if they do not achieve the reproductive norm. Because they deviate from the norm, the childless minority are devalued by the majority with children. This increases the perceived value of those who claim to be 'normal.' Ultimately, then, the only way to establish this ideal of fertility is by excluding the people who do not live up to it.[20] This intricate link might also explain the heated discussions about the choice not to have children and the social division between parents and non-parents today. For population policy, it could even be counterproductive to overcome the 'deep rift'[21] between people with and without children. Devaluing childless women is a prerequisite for defending the ideal of reproduction.

By distinguishing between desired, refused, and regretted parenthood, I attempt to break down the binary between parents and non-parents, voluntarily and involuntarily childless people. My concept of (in)fertility includes two levels. One is a kind of meta-discourse that contains the wealth of all possibilities of how to think about, speak about and deal with childlessness. The other is a category of identity that determines a person's self-conception, but without definitively fixing it. Thus, the term (in)fertility includes the entire spectrum of doing, being, and self-understanding.

Key Concept: On the Plurality and Diversity of (In)Fertility

As a literary scholar, I am less interested in facts and figures than discourses and narratives. This book is not about what it was 'really like' to be childless in the medieval and early modern Europe, nor how many couples in certain regions have been affected by infertility. It is generally difficult to collect statistics, as premodern historical sources provide only limited information and that is mainly about the situation of the high nobility. But even if we could determine the reproductive behaviour of different social groups, what would we do with the statistics? We need other testimonies and information to reconstruct their cultural significance. My aim for this book is to understand how, in different eras, the category of (in)fertility shapes people's positions, behaviour, and self-perceptions. How do authors in medieval and early modern Europe talk about fertility and infertility? What evaluations and patterns underlie their interpretations? By answering these questions, I seek to classify and clarify contemporary debates in the light of cultural history.

In the book, I draw on texts from Antiquity to Early Modernity, focusing on German-language sources from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, since the demand for fiction and nonfiction has been growing steadily throughout Europe since the late Middle Ages, and with it the number of written, translated, and surviving texts.[22] The abundance of material makes it impossible to examine every source, so I focus on Christian literature, excluding Islamic discourses, and selecting only a few Jewish narratives. Instead of claiming to be exhaustive, I provide examples. To this end, I distinguish five areas of knowledge that decisively shaped medieval evaluations of childlessness and which changed, sometimes strikingly, in the early modern period: theology, medicine, law, demonology, and ethics. Although these areas partly overlap and are by no means internally homogeneous, this approach draws major lines of enquiry along which to interpret the past. My aim is to make visible the plurality, heterogeneity, and diversity of views on (in)fertility in medieval and early modern Europe and thus to relativize the dominance of reproductive medical approaches today. A cultural history of childlessness will emerge from this overview of arguments and discourses of (in)fertility; it is not monolithic, but a mosaic of diverse, intertwined, and contradictory interpretations. The categories of gender, race, and class are not treated

separately, but encountered again and again in all chapters in new power constellations.

The study begins with theological controversies and their biblical foundations, in which longing for and refusing parenthood compete. In the Bible, assessments of childlessness are contradictory. Genesis is dominated by a negative attitude towards childless couples, since they do not fulfil the creation mandate to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28). The suffering this causes, especially for wives, is repeatedly addressed in the Hebrew Bible; infertility is considered a misfortune and a disgrace. In the New Testament, the commandment to procreate is not abolished, but it is devalued. For Paul, the main purpose of marriage is to avoid fornication. Those who want to order their desires should marry, but chastity is considered a greater good. This critique of family and the tensions between the call to reproduce and the ideal of chastity are reflected in the writings of the late ancient and medieval clerics. From a theological point of view, infertility appears to be primarily a problem for women, since they do not seem to fulfil their divine destiny. While high medieval theologians privileged the model of Joseph's marriage and idealized a life of chastity, this changed fundamentally during the Reformation. In Luther's view, the sex drive compelled humans to be fertile, so the only choice was 'marriage or fornication.'

Medical writings did not highlight the noble ideal of chastity, but the physical constitution of childless people. Sterility was a theme in medical compendia, pharmacopoeias, and treatises on gynaecology, based on teachings about procreation in Antiquity and the gynaecological medical writings of the Latin and Arab Middle Ages. In vernacular recipe collections and treatises, infertility was explained by a constitution that is too cold or too hot, too fat or too lean—or by too frequent or infrequent sexual intercourse. Physical illness, problematic sexual behaviour, and demonic magic were also considered to prevent conception. Ways to promote it included moderate eating, massages, stimulating substances such as animal testicles and breast milk, and certain body positions. Recipes for herbal potions, baths, and incenses have been handed down. But in the Middle Ages, ritual practices were also recommended to conceive a longed-for child, so the transitions between medicine, religion, and magic were fluid. A clear imbalance between men and women is emerging: in medical contexts, wives without children were pathologized. Every effort was directed to making them fruitful in a narrower

physical sense, as evidenced by the medicine bill of the infertile Queen Anne of Bohemia.

If infertility proved untreatable, a biological phenomenon could become a legal case. Childlessness was discussed in the context of marriage, inheritance, and criminal law. According to Catholic canon law, a marriage still cannot be dissolved because of its sacramental character, even if a couple does not have children. But impotence is considered a fundamental impediment to marriage, so that a marriage can be retroactively annulled after an exhaustive review process. The decisive factor is usually a woman's desire to become a mother. Medieval court records document various marriage trials in which men had to endure the shame of examinations to prove their potency. Only in the early modern period did it become possible for people who did not have children to legally adopt, but social kinship remained secondary to biological kinship in adoption or 'chosen family.' Fertility had high value, as can be seen from the early medieval schedules of fines, but by no means counted equally for all.

As a category, (in)fertility received much attention in early modern discussions about witches and demons. Heinrich Kramer focuses intensely on the sexual and reproductive practices of alleged witches in his sinister *Hammer of Witches* (*Malleus Maleficarum*, 1487), accusing them of devil worship and penis stealing, and blaming them for impotence and stillbirths. In the context of witch hunts, (in)fertility became a matter of metaphysics, with inquisitors carefully distinguishing between permitted and non-permitted ways to reproduce. Demonologists disputed whether and, if so, how women could become pregnant from sex with the devil. Since demons were generally believed to have no procreative power of their own, some authors indulged in bold speculations as to how the devil could obtain and transfer male semen by means of a sophisticated technique. These considerations caused other problems such as how to deal with devil children, changelings, or witch children. Some specific issues debated in the demonology literature of early modern times have returned with a vengeance via modern reproductive medicine. Besides desired and refused parenthood, demonologists also narrated cases of people who regretted their motherhood or fatherhood and took drastic measures to release themselves from this bond.

Ethics discusses how people should live a good life, including whether or not parenthood is preferable. While ancient philosophers, early and medieval church scholars emphasized the advantages of a life without

marriage and warned against the heavy burden of having children, praise of the family dominated the early modern age. Marriage tracts, wedding speeches, and Reformation sermons sketched out an ideal which equates marital and parental happiness. In these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts, children were praised as a gift from God, pledge of love, and ease of all burdens. They provided support for their parents in old age, ensured they would be remembered, and demonstrated their state of grace. The spouses' obligation to procreate went so far that the meaning of life seemed dependent on the existence of children. This idealization of parenthood led to the formation of a specific infertility catechesis in Protestant congregations. While women who did not have children were offered comfort, they were confined to the role of the unhappy would-be-mother.

In the epilogue, I outline prospects for future research. What conclusions can we draw from the unequal visibility of women and men around (in)fertility? How can stories of childlessness and longing for parenthood be analysed if the tellers adhere to accepted narratives and want to make things easier for their listeners? Comparative (in)fertility research proposes answers to questions that have been asked far too rarely.

This book is based on the first, discourse-historical part of my German-language monograph *Kinderlosigkeit. Ersehnte, verweigerte und bereute Elternschaft im Mittelalter* (Childlessness: Desired, Refused, and Regretted Parenthood in the Middle Ages), which was published by Metzler/Springer in 2020 and which I have revised for publication by Palgrave, especially to integrate more English literature. I sincerely thank all those who have made it possible for this work to be published in English: Sam Stocker and Supraja Ganesh, who oversaw this publication at Palgrave Macmillan, Nadine Lordick, who gave me great support in all the editorial work, and especially Kate Sotejeff-Wilson, who discussed many detailed linguistic issues with me and translated the entire book into English.

Notes

1. 'PRB's World Population Data Sheet 2021', URL: https://interactives.prb.org/2021-wpds/europe/#intro (accessed 31 March 2022). On the impending dangers of an ageing society see, e.g., Frank Schirrmacher, *Das Methusalem-Komplott* (München, 2004); Thomas Straubhaar, *Der*

Untergang ist abgesagt: *Wider die Mythen des demografischen Wandels* (Hamburg, 2016).

2. Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, *Vol. 1*, transl. from the French by Robert Hurley (London etc., 1981, Reprint 1998), pp. 103–104.
3. Thietmar von Merseburg, *Chronicon I 19*, ed. by Robert Holtzmann, 2nd ed (Berlin, 1955) (MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, NS 9), p. 24: *Ve populis, quibus regnandi spes in subsecutura dominorum sobole non relinquitur […]*. See also the intercessory prayer in the 960 Mainz coronation ordo: *Frugiferam optineat patriam, et eius liberis tribuas profutura*, in *Le pontifical romano-germanique du dixième siècle*: *Le Texte I*, ed. by Cyrille Vogel and Reinhard Elze (Città del Vaticano, 1963) (Studi e Testi, 226), pp. 246–261, here p. 250, lines 15–16. See also Cordula Nolte, *Frauen und Männer in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt, 2011) (Geschichte kompakt), pp. 120–121.
4. 'Letter 70: Five Abbots to Hildegard', in *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*: *Volume I*, transl. by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York and Oxford, 1994), pp. 152–153, here p. 153.
5. For a thorough discussion of the problem, see Karl Ubl, 'Der kinderlose König: Ein Testfall für die Ausdifferenzierung des Politischen im 11. Jahrhundert', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 292 (2011), pp. 323–363.
6. Hans-Werner Goetz, 'Lothar II.', *LexMA,* 5 (1991), cols. 2124–2125; Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographei oder beschreibung aller länder/ herrschaften/ fürnemsten stetten […]*, Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1553, p. lxvij. In contrast, Edward the Confessor's (c. 1004–1066) attempt to separate from his wife Edith failed because her family resisted, argues Ubl, 'Der kinderlose König', p. 336.
7. Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983) (Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture and the State), pp. 43–44; Britta-Juliane Kruse, *Verborgene Heilkünste: Geschichte der Frauenmedizin im Spätmittelalter* (Berlin and New York, 1996) (Quellen und Forschungen zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte N.F., 5), pp. 155–156; Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, transl. by Chaya Galai (London and New York, 1992), p. 36; Gabriela Signori, *Vorsorgen – Vererben – Erinnern: Kinder- und familienlose Erblasser in der städtischen Gesellschaft des Spätmittelalters* (Göttingen, 2001) (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 160), p. 361; James A. Schultz, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100–1350* (Philadelphia, 1995) (Middle Ages Series), p. 108. According to a recent survey, 12% of married couples in Germany between the ages of 40 and 69 are childless—whether intentionally or not. Carsten Wippermann, *Kinderlose Frauen und Männer: Ungewollte oder gewollte Kinderlosigkeit im*

Lebenslauf und Nutzung von Unterstützungsangeboten (ed.), Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (Paderborn, 2014), p. 32.

8. Mireille Othenin-Girard, *Ländliche Lebensweise und Lebensformen im Spätmittelalter: Eine wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung der nordwestschweizerischen Herrschaft Farnsburg* (Liestal, 1994), pp. 69–70.
9. Bernhard Kummer, 'Kindersegen und Kinderlosigkeit', *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 4 (1932), cols. 1374–1385, here col. 1378: *Wer de Welt nich vermihrt, is'n Kirchhof nich wiert*.
10. Tracey Loughran and Gayle Davis, 'Introduction: Infertility in History: Approaches, Contexts and Perspectives', in Loughran and Davis (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility: Approaches, Contexts and Perspectives* (London, 2017), pp. 1–25, here p. 10.
11. Claudia Opitz, *Evatöchter und Bräute Christi: Weiblicher Lebenszusammenhang und Frauenkultur im Mittelalter* (Weinheim, 1990), p. 61. See also Signori, *Vorsorgen*.
12. Jennifer Evans, *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2014) (Studies in History); Daphna Oren-Magidor, *Infertility in Early Modern England* (London, 2017); Oren-Magidor and Catherine Rider, 'Introduction: Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Medicine', *Social History of Medicine*, 29:2 (2016), pp. 211–223, here pp. 215–216; Regina Toepfer and Bettina Wahrig (eds), 'Kinderlosigkeit', *Das Mittelalter* 26:2 (2021).
13. Loughran and Davis, 'Introduction', p. 3. See also pp. 5, 10.
14. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York, 1990), pp. viii–ix; Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, pp. 23–24, 151–152. See also Philipp Sarasin, 'Subjekte, Diskurse, Körper: Überlegungen zu einer diskursanalytischen Kulturgeschichte', in Wolfgang Hardtwig and Hans-Ulrich Wehler (eds), *Kulturgeschichte Heute* (Göttingen, 1996) (Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Sonderheft 16), pp. 131–164, here p. 159. My approach corresponds to historical disability studies, see, e.g., Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400* (London and New York, 2006) (Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture); Cordula Nolte et al. (eds), *Dis/ability History der Vormoderne: Ein Handbuch. Premodern Dis/ability History: A Companion* (Affalterbach, 2017); Joshua R. Eyler (ed.), *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (London and New York, 2017). On interpreting infertility as disability, see Sally Bishop Shigley, 'Great Expectations: Infertility, Disability, and Possibility', in Davis and Loughran (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility*, pp. 37–55; Cordula Nolte and Alexander Grimm, 'Fruchtbarkeit/Unfruchtbarkeit', in Nolte