CHAPTER SIX

HEALTH

If marriage was not an expectation in a relationship, then a pregnant woman had three possible courses of action: she could have the child and hope for the best; she could attempt to abort the child; or she could kill it at birth. It is difficult to determine the rate of infant murder in Eichstätt. Only one case of infanticide seems to have been prosecuted successfully between 1603 and 1627. The rate of single motherhood is likewise difficult to uncover, as are the local attitudes towards it. Motherhood seems to have made Kunigunda Pronner’s situation more precarious than it had been, keeping her out of employment. Her situation only stabilized after the death of her third child, and then through the employment offered by Anna Widman. What the witch-trial transcripts do reveal, however, is the presence of at least one woman in the community who possessed a reputation for terminating unwanted pregnancies. This woman, Anna Harding, had other medical skills too. The transcripts also show that women of all classes used folk medicine as a complement or in preference to the prescriptions of authorized medical practitioners like barbers and physicians. Another medical figure who dominates the earlier interrogations of 1617 to 1619 is the midwife. This is partly because at least two among the first witch-suspects arrested at that time were practising midwives, partly because midwives entered one confession as the godmothers of the suspect, and partly because midwives possessed knowledge of where the bodies of children’s corpses were buried.

1 Margretha N. (known as Brot Wölfin) had had sex ‘with persons of easy virtue’ at Schernfeld and borne a male child in a cow-stall. Margretha had then thrown the baby down a farmer’s well or water-hole where it had been found eight days later, DiöAE, “Urfedebuch”, ff. 57r–58r. The date of this case is not given, but it immediately precedes that of Hans Öder who was executed on 2 September 1606, ibid., ff. 58v–60r.
From her own testimony, it would appear that Anna Harding was trusted as a healer by the women of Eichstätt. Her particular skill, as she informed her interrogators, was to control menstruation in women, both married and ‘young’ (meaning unmarried);\(^2\) she could reduce its flow where it was too heavy or induce it where it ‘failed to materialize’.\(^3\) This she accomplished by dispensing advice that certain herbs (‘Alamander’, ‘Muselblue’ and ‘Galgans’) be taken mixed in a drink an appropriate number of times.\(^4\) Occasionally there was a medical reason why a young woman’s periods ceased. The daughters of Father Johann Reichard’s cook and Margretha Hözler both sought Harding’s advice because they had ‘lost’ their periods at times of fever.\(^5\) It may be, however, that such explanations for the cessation of menstruation were mere pretexts for securing an abortion. Hözler’s daughter was also listed by Harding among those unmarried women whom she had helped because they were concerned that they might be pregnant.\(^6\) The others included Silbereis’s daughter, Maria Mayr, Valtin Lanng’s maid with the red frizzy hair who had slept with a cobbler, the daughter of a bricklayer of Obereichstätt, and Eva (daughter of the Old Spiegel and wife of Biebel Lenz).\(^7\) Several of these women were arrested for witchcraft. Eva Lenz, for example, would have been the Biebel Lenzin who had allegedly had sex with Paul Gabler at a nocturnal gathering of witches; and Maria Mayr’s case is the subject of the next chapter.

Whilst Harding seems to have had no problem helping young unmarried women with their menstrual problems, her attitude to potential clients who were married seems to have been mixed. Harding claimed to have refused to aid the gravedigger’s wife who had also come to her wanting an abortion. Harding’s alleged words to this woman are vague and difficult to interpret: ‘You have a husband, and may perhaps have

\(^2\) StAN, Hexenakten 48 (A. Harding), 21 February 1618 (a.m.).
\(^3\) Ibid., 21 February 1618 (a.m.).
\(^4\) Ibid., 21 February 1618 (a.m.). It is difficult to determine what plants these might be. ‘Galgans’ might, however, be a local name for the mandrake as that plant is associated with both the gallows and medicine.
\(^5\) Ibid., 21 February 1618 (a.m.).
\(^6\) Ibid., 18 June 1618 (a.m.).
\(^7\) Ibid., 21 February 1618 (a.m.), 10 March 1618 (p.m.), 14 March 1618 (p.m.), and 18 June 1618 (a.m.).