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# Albrecht Altdorfer's *Susanna and the Elders*: Female Virtues, Male Politics

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## Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse de la signification symbolique et du contexte historique de la peinture d'Albert Altdorfer, *Suzanne et les vieillards* (1526). Deux parties s'opposent dans la composition: l'architecture évoque la culture, la justice temporelle et la masculinité pendant que le jardin, avec sa symbolique mariale inhérente, signifie la nature, la religion et la féminité. A la lumière d'un scandale judiciaire de l'époque (Argula von Grumbach et l'affaire

Seehofer), on découvre les mobiles du mécène, le duc Guillaume IV de Bavière, l'un des «leaders» de la Contre-Réforme. En effet, on peut interpréter la figure de la vertueuse Suzanne et l'insistance sur sa virginité comme une réaction contre le nouveau concept luthérien du mariage. Dès lors, la représentation d'une conception très conventionnelle de la femme qui promeut l'idée d'un souverain catholique, juste et humaniste.

Gender studies in art history seldom deal with the art of early modern times, and when they do, they tend to consider problems of female artists or the representation of female characters such as the virgin or the *femme fatale*. My interest lies in artistic language itself – that is, in the composition of a picture, the grouping of people, their gestures, features and costumes, and in how these symbols are gendered. Therefore, I wish to make certain distinctions regarding my interpretation: firstly, it is important to decode social and political levels of significance and the impetus behind the work of art in order to recognize its relevance and meaning for the contemporary public. Secondly, the interpretation of body language in relation to the composition of the picture allows conclusions to be drawn regarding an unconscious or pre-conscious collective cultural knowledge which is shared by a certain social group. Codified standards, social rules, moral appraisals and statements concerning gender relations can be grasped on this level. Using the example of one painting, *Susanna and the Elders* by Albrecht Altdorfer, I should like to demonstrate the interaction of pictorial language with the subliminal understandings mentioned above. In this iconological analysis I start with a short recapitulation of the biblical story, then look at the architecture and perspective within the picture, the figure of Susanna, the nature-culture dichotomy, the patron and, finally, the femininity-masculinity problem.

The German Renaissance artist Albrecht Altdorfer (ca.1482-1538)<sup>1</sup> is best known today for *The Battle of Alexander*, painted in 1529, which is considered one of the most important works in German art.<sup>2</sup> In particular the spatial depth constructed by colour perspective, the representation of landscape, the realism of detail, the luminous polychromy, the accurate miniature-style brushwork and the intellectually demanding pictorial representations are highly respected. Many of the same characteristics are found in the picture *Susanna and the Elders* (fig. 1)<sup>3</sup> which was

painted three years earlier than *The Battle of Alexander* and which has not yet been thoroughly researched. It probably exceeds *The Battle of Alexander* in its versatility of meaning and is an example of a new type of painting, which gives Christian themes a secular meaning.

Both paintings are now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and both were painted for Wilhelm IV, the Wittelsbach Duke of Bavaria, who lived from 1493 to 1550 and reigned from 1508.

## Susanna and the Elders: The Biblical Story

The story of Susanna belongs to the apocryphal texts of the Old Testament book of Daniel (Dan. 13,1-13,64);<sup>4</sup> it illustrates Daniel's wisdom even as a juvenile and symbolizes the victory of justice. Susanna was the beautiful and virtuous wife of the rich and respected Babylonian, Joakim. Two regular visitors to the house, elders of the people, fell in love with Susanna and agreed to lie in wait for her. One day she intended to take a bath in her husband's garden and sent away her two maids to bolt the gates and to fetch oils and ointments. As soon as she was alone, the two elders appeared and tried to blackmail her, threatening that if she did not comply they would accuse her of adultery with a young man. Knowing that the charges of the two esteemed men would lead to death, she nevertheless declined with a clear conscience. In fact, at the trial the slanders of the two elders were believed, and Susanna was sentenced to death. But God, hearing her prayers, sent young Daniel to her rescue. He interrogated the two old men separately and found contradictions: one of them stated that the adultery had taken place near a cedar, the other said he observed it under an oak tree. Exposed as liars, they were sentenced to death. Susanna's innocence and purity were thus proved and praised.

At first sight there does not seem to be much correspondence between the biblical story and Altdorfer's pic-

Figure 1. Albrecht Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1526. Oil on limewood panel, 74.8 x 61.2 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Inv. No. 698 (Photo: Bayer. Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich).



Figure 2. Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail: Daniel in front of the clock tower.



from the hiding and whispering men at the extreme left to the main scene – Susanna bathing. From there, one's eye is drawn to the exposure of the evil-doers on the extreme right, and then back to the punishment in the middle ground. The judicial happenings are hardly visible in the hurly-burly of the crowd of people. On the extreme right, in front of a tower with a sundial, the childlike Daniel is standing and pointing to Susanna standing between two soldiers (fig. 2). In a telling gesture he is convincing the people of Susanna's innocence. To the left, within the open archway of the middle building, a crowd has gathered, obviously listening to the charge and the hearing against the elders. The execution of the sentence, the stoning, is depicted in front of the palace.

Although the biblical story seems to be transferred to the picture in all its important aspects, some oddities stand out. For example, the illegal act, the actual scene of blackmail in which Susanna and the men are alone in the garden, is not shown at all. In other aspects Altdorfer extends the story. The fact that each scene is interpretable only with difficulty indicates that the painting is meant as a vehicle for further study.

ture. In the picture, Susanna and her maids appear to be rather small, even though they are the protagonists. The two elders, indispensable to the biblical story, can be discovered in the shrubbery to the left of the women only after a careful search. In contrast, the marvellous architecture, which is not even mentioned in the Bible, is eye-catching. Striking also is the vertical division of the composition into two halves, showing Susanna in the garden on the left side, the architecture and a crowd of people on the right.

Altdorfer applied the common medieval principle of compositional simultaneity. The line of sight is directed from left to right, leading in a curve

#### The Palace as a Place of Justice

The picture is dominated by oversized, splendid architecture (fig. 3). Raised on a square, it forms a building of mysterious function. Different parts of the building are symmetrically staggered. The lower storey, which is double the height of those above, consists exclusively of open rooms. Both the hall in the middle building and the adjoining archways are shaped of piers and semicircular arches. Over these a parapet forms a balcony where the following storeys recede. Double- and triple-arched, richly decorated windows organize the two upper storeys and the tower. Strictly speaking, the entire building seems to consist only of arcades and window openings framed by piers, pilasters, railings and entablatures, all without a single wall. Thus, Altdorfer uses the architectural principle of order, the order of columns, metaphorically as a sign of the divine order. Such a building had never been built. Altdorfer was inspired by ideal Italian architecture which similarly had never been realized. It is certain that he developed his phantasy architecture with knowledge of contemporary Italian architectural theory.<sup>5</sup> Formal details correspond with contemporary Italian architecture which was not to be found at that time in Germany. The architecture as a whole, however, composed of various component parts, together gives the impression of a fictive architecture.

Nevertheless, he did not design an arbitrary architecture. Altdorfer depicted typical elements of church, town hall and palace architecture, and combined them in a way that revealed an additional dimension to educated spectators. The ground plan (without annexes), for example, accords with many church plans: the westwork with two towers, a western tower with an open porch, and a nave crowned by a polygonal tower with "Romanesque" windows which resemble ecclesiastical architecture. The conception of the entire complex, however, originates in palace architecture: the interlocking form with numerous annexes and archways, the distribution in several floors, the balustrading, the form of the windows. The clock tower as a symbol of ruling authority and divine order defines the building as a seat of government.<sup>6</sup> The ground-floor arcades are a typical element of town halls which are official places of jurisdiction and commerce and, in addition, serve as locations of standard weigh scales.<sup>7</sup> It is significant that, in contrast to the Florentine print he probably used as a model for the painting,<sup>8</sup> Altdorfer changed the central hall with the court scene into a hall with two naves, as was common for secular assembly rooms.

The combination of different architectural elements results in a synthesis of church, town hall and palace. The

Figure 3. Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail: the palace.

dominance of any one single element has been avoided in favour of a deliberate ambiguity. Functions that are distributed amongst several powers are thus symbolically united and demonstrated: canonical and secular jurisdiction under courtly, that is sovereign control.<sup>9</sup>

The square and the building are frequented by men and women from all walks of life: distinguishable by their costumes are townsfolk, soldiers, young girls, scholars, children and nobility. Their presence in every room and watching from every window delivers the obvious message that this palace is open to everybody as a court of justice.

Ample evidence for the dominant role of the architecture for contemporary spectators is given in the first written description of the picture, dating from 1598: "A panel with gilded frame, in which a huge splendid palace with a tower, all windows and corridors full of people, in front of which palace the chaste Susanna with the two old wantons who afterwards were stoned because of Daniel's judgement, painted by the hand of Albrecht Altdorffer [sic] in the year 1526."<sup>10</sup> The "huge splendid palace" which is "full of people" receives most emphasis here. The story of Susanna takes second place.

#### Perspective as Semantic Sign

The rules of perspective, developed and improved by Italian architects and painters in the fifteenth century, had also been adopted north of the Alps. Nevertheless, in Germany at the beginning of the sixteenth century the mathematically correct construction of linear perspective was rudimentary, and many artists lacked the masterly touch. In numerous representations of architecture Albrecht Altdorfer busied himself with increasingly complex perspective problems.<sup>11</sup> With *Susanna and the Elders* he was the first German artist to succeed in constructing a geometrically exact view of a building whose ground plan lies neither exactly parallel with nor at a 45° angle to the picture plane.<sup>12</sup> Previously, German artists had been familiar with only those two methods of constructing linear perspective. As soon as the alignment of the painted building was made



oblique, producing a more natural impression, the problem of two different vanishing points arose, as in the case of *Susanna*. There are two vanishing points of the building: one lies within the picture, near the top of the most central tree, the second one, to which all diagonal lines lead, is far outside the pictorial field to the right.<sup>13</sup> Apart from some minor inaccuracies, arising from changes for the benefit of picturesque effect, the construction is geometrically exact. Only the foreshortening of circular forms was not in Altdorfer's, nor in many other German artists' repertoire.

It is important to notice that, although Altdorfer constructed the picture accurately, he nevertheless produced the

Figure 4. Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail: the garden.

impression that there were two different perspectives within the garden area and the architectural area: more precisely, he deliberately dispensed with perspective in the garden region. Susanna and her maids are taken out of the linear perspectival construction and are determined instead by means of the traditional medieval perspective of significance, making them taller in comparison to the other people because of their importance. The more elevated position of the architectural sphere automatically gives the garden sphere a separate view point – a view from below.

Whereas the architectural area is dominated by linear perspective, line and angle, the garden sphere defies clarity in many ways. This area does not seem to follow the same measurable rules. I shall return to the meaning of this.

#### Susanna as Mary

The left half of the picture depicts Susanna's garden which is hermetically sealed off by a wall, invisible from the square and thus defined as an area of its own, separated from the palace area (fig. 4). Contrary to the biblical story, Susanna is not taking her bath alone; several maids are assisting her. The required conditions for blackmail, that is to say the absence of witnesses, are not fulfilled, and therefore the two old men dare not leave the shrubbery under the great beech tree. Altdorfer transformed them from partakers to voyeurs, although there is not much to see, as the bath has been changed into a modest pedicure.

In most depictions of the Susanna story, starting in Altdorfer's time in Venice,<sup>14</sup> and through a great popularization of the subject in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

art, the heroine is seen as a beautiful seductress.<sup>15</sup> Usually the picture is concentrated on a Venus-like naked Susanna and the two elders who are propositioning her (fig. 5). The figures, and especially the woman, turn toward the spectator, and often the two elders seem to present the young beauty so that the spectator before the picture slips into a voyeuristic role similar to that of the old men within the pictorial narrative. Although Altdorfer was uninhibited about depicting nakedness and erotic scenes,<sup>16</sup> nothing of this is to be seen in his *Susanna and the Elders*.

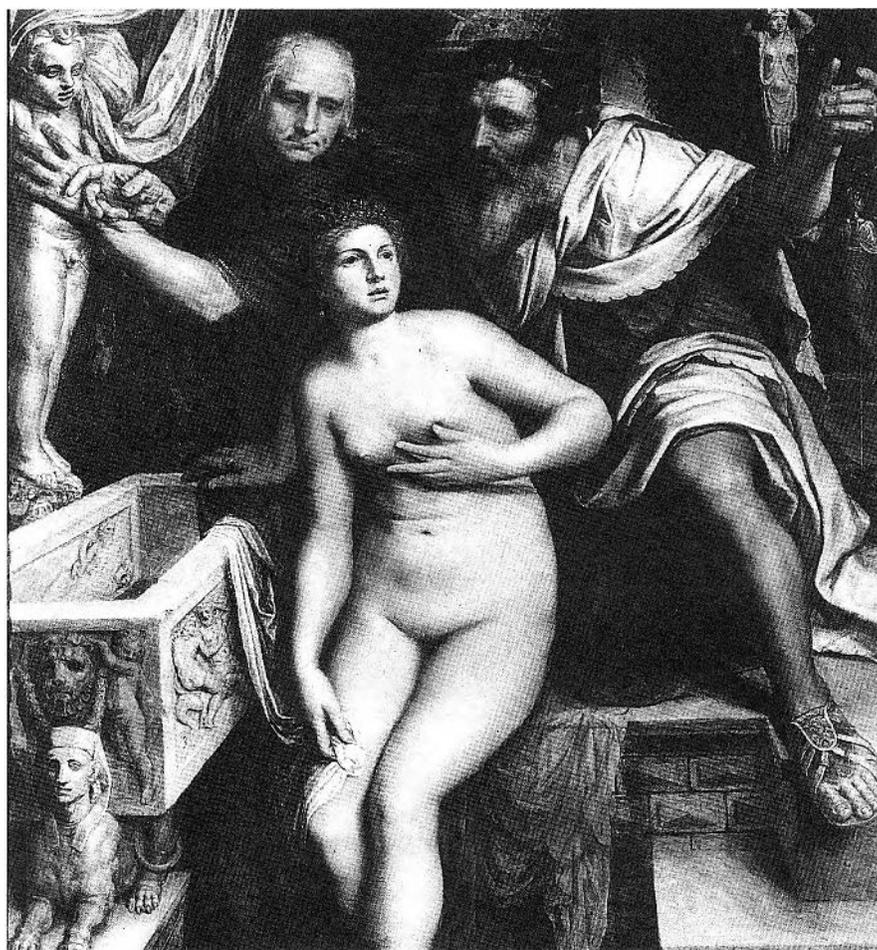
In this picture Altdorfer assimilated Susanna into the figure of the Virgin Mary by the adoption of characteristic iconography: Susanna is wearing a blue and red garment similar to that of Mary, slightly old-fashioned to indicate timelessness; her loose hair emphasized by brushing symbolizes innocence and virginity; the little pet dog, a sign of marital faithfulness, is held like the infant Jesus; and the orange in Susanna's left hand as a symbol of purity derives from the fruit in Madonna paintings. More evident still is the Marian symbolism in the arrangement of the garden. A real contemporary garden, a cultivated place with beds and paths, is not shown but rather a clearing in a wood with plenty of wild plants, tall grass and different kinds of trees. The impression of a transition between garden and wood thicket is provided especially by the oversized tree at the left. Altdorfer takes up a motif from fifteenth-century art, the so-called *hortus conclusus*, depicting Mary sitting in a rose arbour or in a garden symbolizing her virginity or, more particularly, the immaculate conception. Like the rose bush, a spring or a well is a symbolic representation of her vir-

Figure 5. Willem Key, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1546. Oil on oak panel, 115 x 105 cm. Pommersfelden, Collection Graf von Schönborn-Wiesentheid, Inv. No. 296 (Photo: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg).

tues: purity, love and virginity. In the meadow are clearly identifiable plants which in nature do not necessarily grow at the same time of the year, also symbolizing Mary's virtues. All these elements are to be found in Altdorfer's garden: next to the pool in the corner of the wall a rose bush is in bloom, and scattered over the meadow are numerous herbs and plants, each of which is a medieval symbol of Mary.<sup>17</sup>

The most prominent person in the picture is the woman in the right foreground (fig. 6). The white stairs she is about to climb are the brightest and most luminous spot in the picture. She is an ambiguous figure: on the one hand, in carrying a jug, she is defined as a maid, a subordinate position giving her a logical role within the plot of the picture. On the other hand, and this is much more important, she again merges with the persona of the Virgin Mary. The scene itself refers to an occurrence in Mary's youth, the *Presentation of the Virgin*, which in artistic depictions often shows Mary as an adolescent climbing seven, twelve or fifteen stairs to the sanctuary and which is a symbol for Mary's obedience and for her vocation for a pious life.<sup>18</sup>

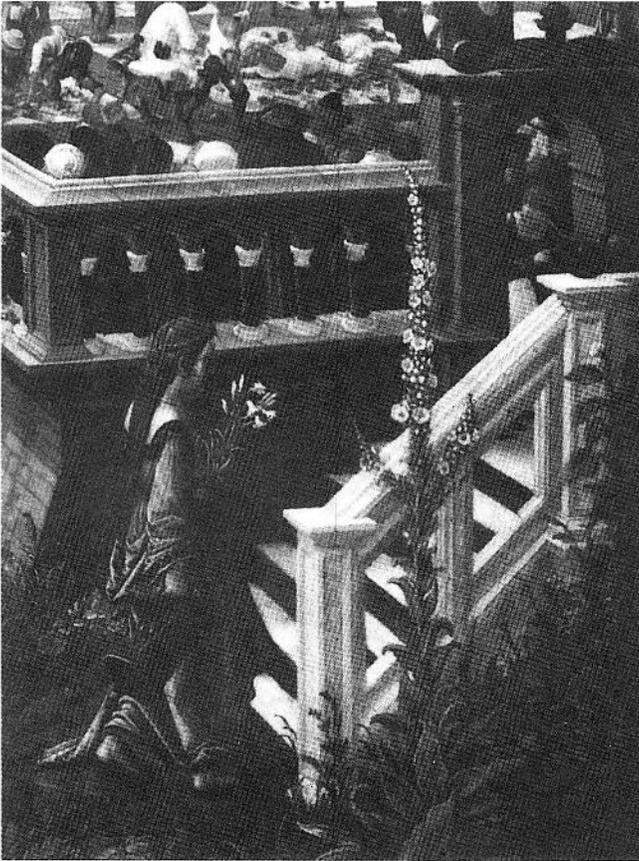
Of course, the figure of the young woman does not represent Susanna or Mary in a literal way – she rather functions as an allegory of all their virtues. An immediate association between Susanna and Mary is established via the plants depicted: the white lily that the allegorical figure is carrying refers to the immaculate conception and in a more extended sense to innocence. At the same time the Hebrew word "Susanna" means lily. The tall mullein flower next to the banisters, "Mary's sceptre," is described in a medieval history of nature as a plant with certain powers: the bearer of a stalk of mullein need fear no dread and cannot be molested by evil.<sup>19</sup> To the right of the mullein grows a nettle, of which the Regensburg prebendary and natural scientist, Konrad von Megenberg, said in his mid-fourteenth-century book of nature: "diu nezzel erwecket die unkäusch" (the nettle rouses the unchaste).<sup>20</sup> Metaphorically, the mullein conquers the nettle, purity triumphs over immodesty, just as Susanna's purity is victorious over the lust of the two elders.



The concentration of the line of sight to the lower right-hand corner is well thought out. The allegorical figure plays a decisive role in the dramaturgy of the picture, linking the separate spheres of garden and palace and encouraging the spectator to follow her in ascending the steps. The gate is opened by another woman who beckons the lily bearer, the "fearless messenger," to approach with a pointing gesture. The symbolic meaning is evident: Susanna shall obtain justice only in the palace, an idea which is reinforced by the monumental mullein whose top is pointing arrow-like to the stoning scene above it.

This interpretation is confirmed by the surviving sketch for the painting (fig. 7). The disposition and creation of the architecture largely correspond with the painting as executed. Changes, however, have been made in the group around Susanna: in the drawing a standing woman has been placed in the foreground, and in a telling gesture, by her raised arm, directs the gazes of Susanna and her maid to the palace. The view of the spectator is much more insistently directed, but at the same time the dualism of Susanna and Mary is lacking. The painting is more complicated and

Figure 6. Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail: the maid.



intellectually more subtle in its clever symbolism, very probably because the patron proposed such changes after examining the sketch.

#### Court Versus City

Susanna's garden has two gates. The one in front is unequivocally a castle portal leading to the courtyard. It is wide open to allow uninterrupted access to the judgment. All the adjoining wall, consisting of an ashlar plinth and an elegant columnar balustrade, is part of the palace area. The rear gate, however, is just about to be closed by a maid (fig. 8). It is shaped in a much more humble style, being a typical town gate which, together with its massive wall, delimits its garden from town. The latter is not recognizable as a particular town, but with its half-timbered houses, church towers and townhouses with Renaissance gables, it is clearly a South German town. In contrast to the Italianate palace, actual built sixteenth-century architecture is shown here.

Susanna's garden borders on palace and town and is thus situated between two dominions. Although both gates lead out of the garden, the one to the town is closing whereas the one to the palace is open. Figuratively, justice is granted

only within the courtly sphere and not in the town. Just as the mullein points to the positive significance of the palace, the dead bough of the beech indicates the negative significance of the town as it towers above the two intruders and above town gate and town.

The courtly moment is emphasized not only in the palace architecture but also in the arrangement of Susanna and her maids (fig. 9). Costume, jewellery and hair-dressing correspond to contemporary early sixteenth-century fashion, but among the women there are precise gradations of rank and social position. Amongst the three maids there is a distinct hierarchy, starting with the most simply dressed and humbly crouching servant, progressing to the lady's maid and finally rising to the standing lady-in-waiting, who is in charge of the keys and therefore defined as a controller of the royal household. The hierarchy of servants symbolizes the princely household in its entirety and so characterizes Susanna as a noblewoman. Further attributes, like the costly carpet, the beautifully worked metal basin and the lap-dog, suggest luxury and idleness.

Two ideas culminate in the figure of Susanna, ideas which I should like to emphasize as I shall return to them: the resort to traditional Marian symbolism, and her ennoblement through elements of contemporary courtly life. The courtly element is emphasized and rated positively in contrast to the town.

#### Nature Versus Culture

In one way Altdorfer goes beyond Christian garden symbolism and establishes another intellectual dimension. The tree at the left edge of the picture is increased to monumental size like the architecture at the right. Optically, it counterbalances the palace, and this distinction highlights the contrast between nature and culture.

Contrary to the courtly appurtenances of Susanna, her garden is not at all in accordance with a palace garden of the sixteenth century. The garden of the Neuveste in Munich was built in 1527-28, and when newly acquired by Wilhelm IV, was described as a walled rose garden with a summer-house, espaliers, labyrinths, water basins, colonnades and a bronze fountain with ornamental figurines.<sup>21</sup> Apart from modest stone seats in the background, nothing of this can be found in Altdorfer's garden; there are no flower beds, no paths, no bowers. The exuberantly growing meadow, stony and full of wild plants, adjoins dense wood and was considered by the contemporary public as symbolic of unbridled nature. Rank plant life spreads everywhere – near the big beech and along the wall of the palace – and weeds shoot up between the stones of the water basin. Even

Figure 7. Albrecht Altdorfer, sketch for *Susanna and the Elders*, ca. 1526. Pen and brown ink, 33.2 x 27.4 cm. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf im Ehrenhof, Sammlung der Kunstakademie, Inv. No. KA (FP) 5469 (Photo: Landschaftsverband Rheinland, Landesbildstelle, Cologne).

the water, fountain of life, bubbles unrestrained from the spout into a very simple basin.

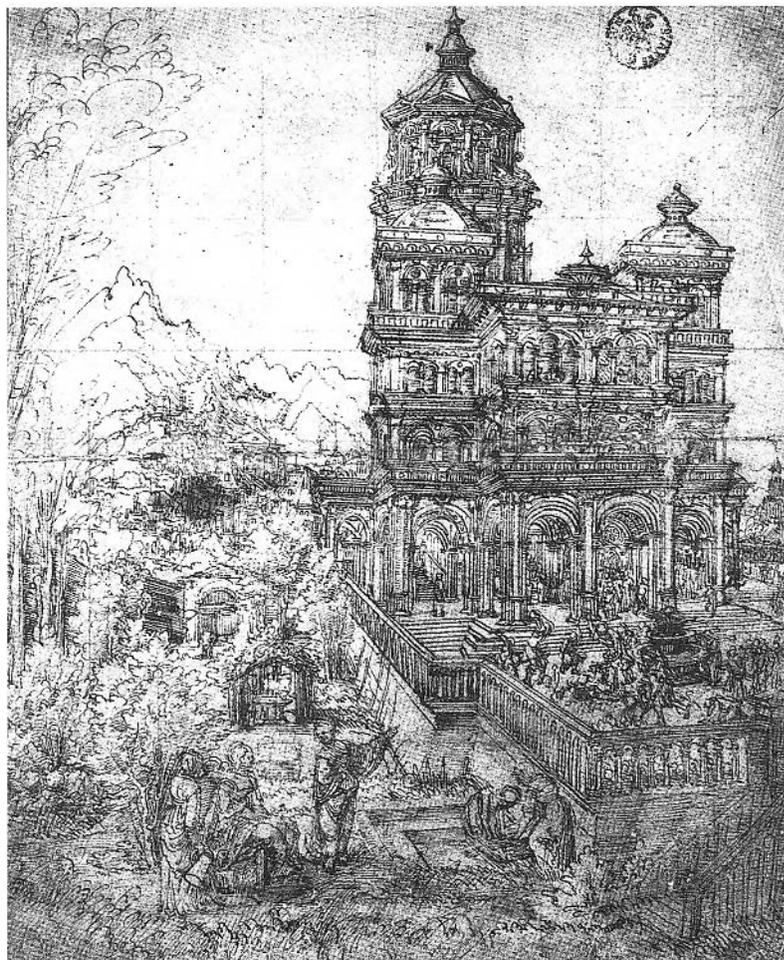
In Altdorfer's mind forests, mountains and water represented powerful, occasionally threatening powers at the mercy of which humanity finds itself.<sup>22</sup> This idea is depicted in his small painting *Saint George and the Dragon* from 1510: a tiny knight, not in the least a shining hero, seems to fight the impenetrable primeval forest rather than the paltry dragon. In the *Susanna* picture the wild area is also connected with danger. The two vile elders are planning their crime under cover of the oversized beech which marks the transition to the thicket and, symbolically, chaos, evil.

The architectural area is depicted in quite a different way. Everything is artificially shaped and decorated by human hands. The determinant feature is the right angle; predominant materials are stone, glass and metal. The variety of people not only signifies the public but is equivalent in its diversity to humanity in general. Just as the variety of plants and the huge tree in the garden represent nature, so the people and the architecture embody culture. Architecture in many contemporary theoretical treatises was considered the most noble of the arts, thus symbolizing the zenith of human creative power – and in the very year he painted this picture Albrecht Altdorfer was appointed as municipal architect of his native city, Regensburg!

Human actions are also linked with nature and culture. The infamous act of the two elders is founded in the unbridled “natural” sexual urge and is restrained only by legal proceedings based on cultural rules. The savage carnal instinct is contrasted with a system of order. The sphere of culture is rated as superior to the sphere of nature: it is, literally, more elevated, and both the course of action and the compositional structure find their culmination in it. The allegorical female figure in the foreground thus fulfils another function: she is climbing the steps into the cultural sphere.

#### The Interests of the Patron

In summary, there is an emphasis on the noble element which, combined with culture and worldly justice, is visualized in the architecture and dominates city and nature. Obviously the patron, Duke Wilhelm IV of Bavaria, attached great importance to establishing “the court” as a ju-



isdictional institution and, in doing so, showed himself to be a just sovereign. As duke, he was indeed the supreme judicial authority in Bavaria. In addition, however, he aimed to expand his power and especially to reduce the rights of the clergy and the Free Imperial City of Regensburg. During his reign significant changes in Bavarian jurisdiction had been made. In 1520 the “Rules of Court for Upper and Lower Bavaria” were published, regulating legal proceedings and striving for the first time for judicial unity in Bavaria.<sup>23</sup> Since the early sixteenth century the ducal court of justice, the principal place of justice and arbitration, had been growing stronger.<sup>24</sup> In the course of reforming church politics, Wilhelm IV even gained, in 1521, a papal privilege allowing the search of cloisters, thus circumventing episcopal jurisdiction.<sup>25</sup>

The palace architecture in the painting can be equated with Wilhelm's claim to control jurisdiction in his country, which is represented symbolically in the Virgin Mary, patron saint of Bavaria. Although Mary had been explicitly named “Patrona Boiariae”<sup>26</sup> as late as 1616, she was never-

Figure 8. Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail: the rear gate and the town.

theless regarded as the most important Bavarian saint and considered by Wilhelm IV as a symbol of the Counter-Reformation. Lutherans rejected the worship of Mary as intercessor and celestial queen. In 1522 Luther condemned the Marian prayers “*Salve regina*” and “*Regina coeli*” provoking Catholics to defend Mary fiercely. The first execution of a Lutheran in Bavaria in 1523 had been justified as combating a “desecrator of Mary,”<sup>27</sup> and in his first Bavarian religious decree of 5 March 1522, Wilhelm condemned Lutheran doctrine because of its “contempt of the Madonna, our utmost kind intercessor.”<sup>28</sup> To provide a clear reference to the court of the Bavarian duke, it was most important that Susanna should have the attributes of the Virgin Mary. Susanna might have abstractly symbolized the search for justice at the ducal court, but she could not alone have symbolized the search for justice of the Bavarian people at the court of Wilhelm IV.

#### Femininity Versus Masculinity

Questions arising from gender studies suggest a deeper interpretation. The garden area is frequented exclusively by women. The two old men are illegal invaders and form a disturbance in this enclosed, peaceful world. It is not mere

accident that the region of nature in the picture is connected with women. On the contrary, this reflects the medieval view of the female gender which by nature is carnal and sexually licentious.<sup>29</sup> But women can and shall triumph over their innate weakness, if they follow the examples of Susanna and Mary – being chaste, virtuous and passive. As a perfect character is mirrored in a perfect body, all the women in the painting are young and beautiful. They are occupying themselves with flowers, culture, beauty and with a pet. All their gestures are calm, almost passive. The gesture of Susanna’s hands folded over her stomach is a typical contemporary sign for female sexual restraint.<sup>30</sup> So within the picture an ideal is exhibited, proclaiming the socially desirable virtues of beauty, faithfulness and seclusion as the “proper destiny of woman.”

Reflection on male and female roles was a most important subject in art and literature around 1500. Encouraged by humanistic ideas, the relation of the individual with regard to heavenly destiny was defined anew; so, too, were gender relations. For the first time the possibility of the fundamental equality of man and woman was discussed, in particular concerning their capabilities of development. In a literary dispute lasting more than two hundred years, and later called the *Querelle des femmes*, misogynyn and eulogy in praise of women were published in all conceivable variations.

Reformation concepts also changed gender relations. For centuries virginity had been considered, theologically, as the most desirable form of life for women. As successors to the sinful Eve, all women except the Virgin Mary were considered as eternal seductresses. The female sex as a whole was devalued and disregarded. Hence virgins choosing Mary as model and making vows of chastity – that is, nuns – were more likely to find the grace of God. The reformers now elevated matrimony and parentage to the ideal social order.<sup>31</sup> For women the revaluation of marriage resulted in considerable restrictions: they were driven more and more from the public labour market into the domestic sphere; they became totally dependent on their husbands, and marriage developed into their sole vocation. The alternative form of life, in a convent, sank in social estimation and finally culminated in a disregard for unmarried old maids. This redistribution of labour provided women for motherhood and intra-familial work under the guidance of men.

The universal enforcement of these concepts required intense persuasion. Innumerable marriage treatises, prints<sup>32</sup> and pictures tackled the problems of power within matrimony and the subordination of woman to man. In pictorial art this was done mostly by depiction of antagonistic couples. *Ill-matched Couples* and satirical motifs such as the

*Power of Women* topos were instrumental in propagating the new gender order.<sup>33</sup> Pictures of this sort often reflect a dualistic principle of reasoning which classifies the world into the dualities of good and evil, man and woman, reason and sensuality.

The subject of gender was also of immediate interest to the Catholic court of Duke Wilhelm IV. For instance, between 1528 and ca. 1540, he and his wife, Jacobäa von Baden (1507-1580), commissioned from several well-known artists a famous cycle of sixteen history paintings, of which fourteen panels still survive in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, and in the National Museum of Stockholm.<sup>34</sup> Eight of them represented successful battles of heroes of Antiquity, among them Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexander*. They were contrasted with eight stories of Antiquity and Christian heroines, illustrating just or unjust sovereign actions brought about by women or to which women have fallen victim. What had initially been shown concentrated in a single picture – *Susanna* – was transferred three years later to the cycle and split up among different paintings. In the *Susanna* picture women's and men's worlds appear on one panel; in the history cycle they are segregated.

The respective gendered spheres are consistently depicted: all panels depicting male heroes (fig. 10) are in vertical format; vast detail is shown; a bird's-eye view permits a panorama; and vast assemblies are always featured, in which individuals, including the male hero, are hardly distinguishable. This is already evident in the architectural sphere of the *Susanna* picture. On the other hand, the panels dedicated to women (fig. 11), as in *Susanna's* garden area, present much more intimate detail, appear closer to the spectator, and always exist in a horizontal format.<sup>35</sup> Although crowds of people are also depicted, lending the scenes some dynamism, the heroines themselves always deport themselves calmly: Helena is shown kneeling and praying, Lucretia standing and lying dead on the floor, Esther kneeling and pleading, and so forth. In each of the female panels the more old-fashioned device of simultaneity is chosen, whereas the male heroes are shown in single, momentary actions, thus suggesting activity. The backgrounds of the female scenes are limited by architectural side-scenes; the male battle scenes, on the contrary, allow a view into infinite distance, symbolizing the expanded scope of men.

#### A Woman's Fate during the Counter-Reformation

In addition to these general ways of depicting gender characteristics, these works, and the *Susanna* picture in particular, also represent a more specific commentary on women's virtues from a Catholic standpoint. An incident in the reign

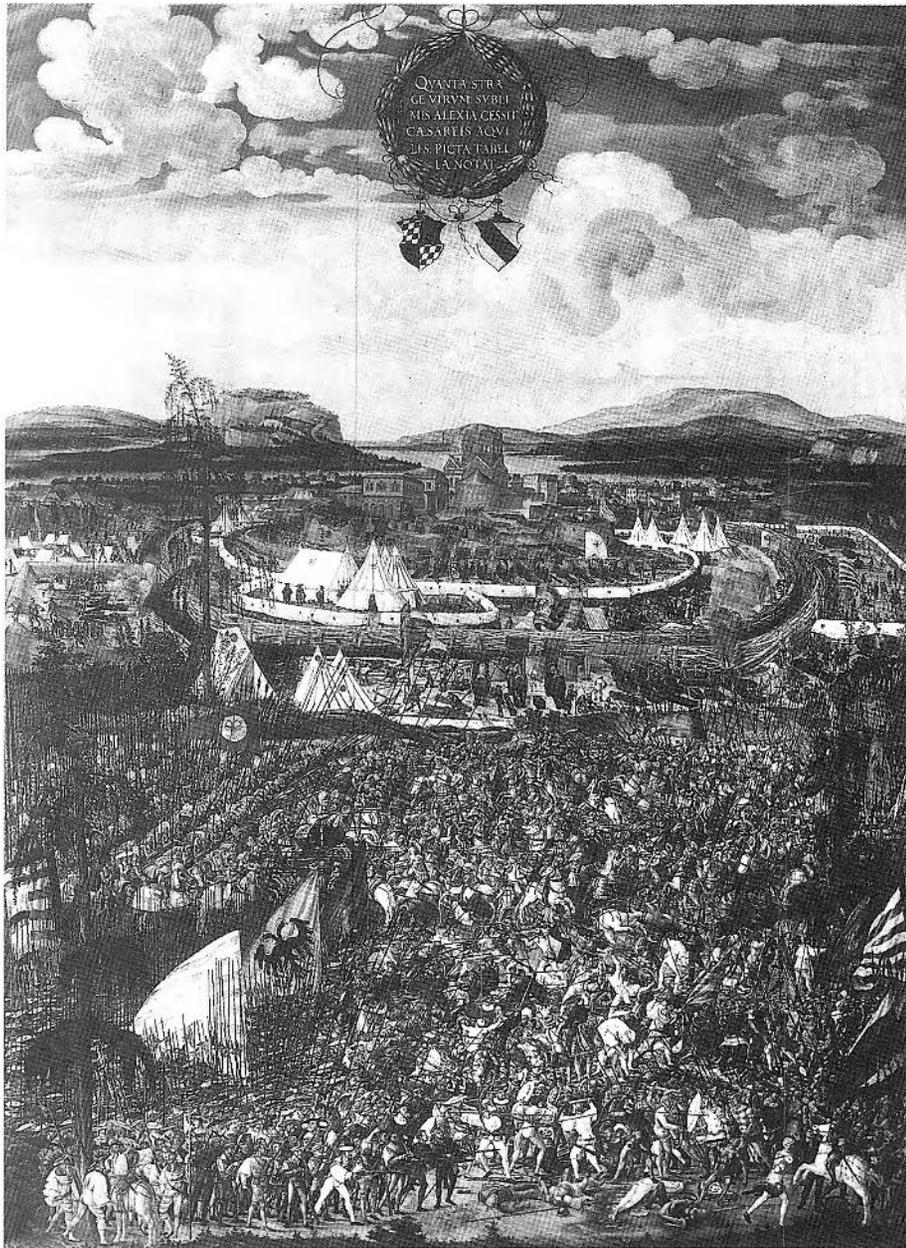
Figure 9. Altdorfer, *Susanna and the Elders*, detail: Susanna and her maids.



of Wilhelm IV, considered one of the first and most determined Counter-Reformers, explains his attitude toward women in public life. Although he wanted drastic religious reforms, he believed that they could only be realized within the Catholic Church and in the strengthening of secular authority.<sup>36</sup> In 1522 he published the first decree against the dissemination of Lutheran doctrine. Only a year later the "Seehofer" affair caused tempers to run high: Arsacius Seehofer, a student from Munich, having become a Lutheran *magister* at the university of Wittenberg, returned to the Bavarian university of Ingolstadt to teach.<sup>37</sup> In 1523 he was arrested on the charge of "Lutheran deceit." Usually, this meant surrender to the ecclesiastical court of justice, a trial for heresy, and the death sentence. In this case the Duke's counsellors saw a chance of curtailing clerical jurisdiction in favour of ducal jurisdiction and offered a compromise: Seehofer should abjure in public and then retire to a cloister, which he did after earnest persuasion.<sup>38</sup>

Soon afterwards two printed editions of Seehofer's seventeen theses and his revocation were circulated and discussed. Subsequently, a Bavarian noblewoman intervened. Argula von Grumbach (ca. 1492-1554), a former lady-in-waiting at the Munich court and now married to Baron Friedrich von Grumbach, addressed letters to the university of Ingolstadt, to Wilhelm IV, and to several other important sovereigns. She reproached them that Seehofer had been forced to revoke against his conscience and that his theses had, in fact, not been refuted. She offered to plead at the university for Luther's and Melancthon's theories in a public dispute, if the university would grant her permission to dispute in German, since she had not mastered the university language, Latin.<sup>39</sup> The university asked the duke "to tame the harridan;" and the duke tried to influence her husband. Meanwhile, her letters, as well, appeared

Figure 10. Melchior Feselen, *Julius Caesar's Siege of the Town of Alesia*, 1533. Oil on panel, 162 x 121.2 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Inv. No. 686 (Photo: Bayer. Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich).



Like many women after her, she mistook Luther's belief in self-determination for the right of self-determination in life independent of gender, which Luther never intended. Such behaviour was regarded by both Catholics and Lutherans as inappropriate and extraordinary. An anonymous preface to her printed letters declares in amazement: "... and formerly something like that [came] from the female sex quite seldom; and in our times [was] unheard of..."<sup>41</sup> Finally, not she but her husband was punished. Although he never declared himself a Lutheran, he lost his office in 1524 and, embittered, separated from his wife. Argula von Grumbach lived alone with her four children and had to leave the country after the death of her husband in 1530.<sup>42</sup> The university did actually arrange a public disputation and invited representatives of the reformers; however, since the duke did not guarantee safe conduct, nobody dared to come.

It should be made clear why the duke, knowing Argula personally and remembering this scandal only too well, wanted the noble women of the *Susanna* story to be models of female virtue. The identification of the chaste Susanna with the Virgin Mary shows that the Duke of Bavaria supported the idea of nunneries. The emphasis on virginity, therefore, has to be read as a reac-

tion to the Lutheran concept of marriage. But in both religions there was agreement on the God-given dominance of man over woman.

Such a complicated, theologically sophisticated representation was certainly not invented by Albrecht Altdorfer. As was usual, he would have made a sketch according to Wilhelm's wishes, probably with a learned advisor standing by. This could have been the court historian Aventinus (1477-1534),<sup>43</sup> who, it is assumed, was also active in the conception of the history cycle.<sup>44</sup> The way in which the desired effects have been produced, however, is due to

in print and thus even reached Luther. Whereas Lutherans praised her as the "new Judith," Catholics insulted her, and in a libellous poem she was given to understand that she should better deal with the distaff, with knitting caps and weaving braids.<sup>40</sup> The militant baroness had offended against social rules in several respects and therefore created a sensation: as a woman she interfered in politics; she ventured upon interpreting the Bible; she dared to criticize the duke and the university scholars; and she took advantage of her nobility, using her connections for the benefit of a commoner.

tion to the Lutheran concept of marriage. But in both religions there was agreement on the God-given dominance of man over woman.

Figure 11. Jörg Breu the Elder, *The Story of Lucretia*, 1528. Oil on panel, 103.5 x 148.5 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Inv. No. 7969 (Photo: Bayer. Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich).



Altdorfer's perfect command of different modes.<sup>45</sup> Although the manner of painting and many details strike one as medieval, the composition itself and his pictorial notion testify to modern ideas: for example, he endeavours to achieve spatiality in depth and uses linear perspective.

Entirely new is the subject: although a biblical story, it is not an altarpiece; strictly speaking it is not even a religious picture intended for personal devotion. Rather, religious symbolism was used to express claims of supremacy. In this way the biblical parable of divine justice has been transformed into a suggestion for a new scheme of earthly judicial procedure. The Counter-Reformation message in the *Susanna* should be understood as a largely statesmanlike demonstration rather than his personal expression.

The use of popular Christian iconography for secular, political purposes can be explained by the function of the painting as a ducal cabinet-picture. It was intended for a noble, learned audience who were forced by the small format to study it at their leisure in small groups, and thus to decode it and enjoy its subtle allusions. Nobody could es-

cape the picture's Counter-Reformation appeal, and it should obviously be understood as a warning to courtiers sympathizing with the new religion who were increasingly to be found at Wilhelm's court.<sup>46</sup>

The patron, Wilhelm IV, and his brother Ludwig X were both devotees of the new humanistic ideas and were well informed about Italy and Italian architecture, which they quickly copied. The new ducal city residence in Landshut, for example, begun in 1536, was the first German Renaissance palace in pure Italian style.<sup>47</sup> It must be supposed that Altdorfer learned correct linear perspective at the court of Bavaria.<sup>48</sup> In any case we can assume that Wilhelm was up to date concerning art. The use in *Susanna and the Elders* of both modern representational techniques and a number of old-fashioned Gothic ones strongly suggests that the former were used to convey progressive ideas and the latter conservative values. In this way a very traditional picture of woman was designed as a counterpart to the new Lutheran ideas, in order to present an image of a modern, just, Catholic sovereign with humanistic ideas.

## Notes

- I would like to express my gratitude to John Wilcockson of Marburg, Germany, for his kind help in translating the text, and to Janice Helland of Montréal and Jim Bugslag of Winnipeg for their excellent copy-editing.
- 1 The biographical and bibliographical data are summarized by Franz Winzinger, "Albrecht Altdorfer," *Allgemeines Künstler Lexikon (AKL)* (Munich and Leipzig, 1992), II, 671-75.
  - 2 Most recently Wolfgang Pfeiffer, "Zur Ikonographie der *Alexanderschlacht* Albrecht Altdorfers," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, XLIV, 3 (1993), 73-97.
  - 3 Signed AA and dated 1526 on a tree trunk at the extreme left; oil on limewood, 74.8 x 61.2 cm.
  - 4 The Bible edition I used is the German standard translation: *Die Bibel: Altes und Neues Testament; Einheitsübersetzung* (Freiburg, Basel, Vienna, 1980).
  - 5 Altdorfer borrowed the primary form of the middle building with receding annexes from an anonymous Florentine engraving from ca. 1495, 28.5 x 42 cm, adding further storeys. See Franz Winzinger, *Albrecht Altdorfer: die Gemälde* (Munich, 1975), Cat. No. 49, appendix 43. Details such as transverse arches, rosettes, figure-friezes, impost ledges, wheel-windows obviously originate from an engraving by Bernardo Prevedari dated 1481 which reproduces a Bramante drawing depicting the ideal interior of the *Templum Salomonis*. See Peter Murray, *Architektur der Renaissance* (Stuttgart, 1975), fig. 169. The clock tower possibly has its origin in a motif Bramante developed for St Peter's in Rome; see Peter Halm, "Eine Gruppe von Architekturzeichnungen aus dem Umkreis Albrecht Altdorfers," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, II (1951), 127-78, esp. 147.
  - 6 The clock tower is not depicted in the initial sketch and was probably added according to the patron's wishes.
  - 7 See, for example, the town hall of Oudenaarde, 1527-30.
  - 8 See note 5.
  - 9 In this context it is noteworthy that a representation of the *Templum Salomonis* (see note 5), which the wise and just King Solomon had built in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant, served as a pattern.
  - 10 "Ein dafl mit verguldem geleist, darinnen ein groß herrlich Palast mit einem Thurm, alle fenster vnd gäng volckhs vor welchem Palast die keüsch Susanna mit den 2. alten Puelern, welche darnach durch Daniels Vrtl versteinigt worden, von handen Albrecht Altdorffers gemahlt Im Jar 1526." Ficklersches Inventar (inventory of Fickler), 1598, no. 2715. Quoted from *Albrecht Altdorfer und sein Kreis: Gedächtnisausstellung zum 400. Todesjahr Altdorfers*, exh. cat. (Munich, 1938), cat. no. 49.
  - 11 See, for instance, the construction of the interior decoration in his painting *The Birth of the Virgin*, ca 1520, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, and in his etchings depicting the synagogue of Regensburg, 1519.
  - 12 Joseph Harnest, "Das Problem der konstruierten Perspektive in der altdeutschen Malerei," Diss. Ing., Technische Universität München, 1971, esp. 86-97.
  - 13 Harnest, "Das Problem der konstruierten Perspektive," fig. 80, publishes a sketch of the *Susanna* picture showing the inserted lines of perspective.
  - 14 Michaela Herrmann, *Vom Schauen als Metapher des Begehrens: die venezianischen Darstellungen der "Susanna im Bade" im Cinquecento* (Marburg, 1990).
  - 15 Numerous examples from several centuries are reproduced in Jean-Claude Prêtre, *Suzanne, le procès du modèle* (Paris, 1991).
  - 16 See, for example, his very last picture, *Lot and his Daughters*, 1537, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
  - 17 See Lottlisa Behling, *Die Pflanze in der mittelalterlichen Tafelmalerei*, 2nd edn (Cologne and Graz, 1967), 131.
  - 18 See Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 4,2: *Maria* (Gütersloh, 1980), esp. 67-72.
  - 19 Behling, *Die Pflanze*, 129.
  - 20 Konrad von Megenberg, *Das Buch der Natur: die erste Naturgeschichte in deutscher Sprache*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer (Stuttgart, 1861), 423.
  - 21 Adrian von Buttlar and Traudl Bierler-Rolly, eds, *Der Münchner Hofgarten: Beiträge zur Spurensicherung* (Munich, 1988). A typical sixteenth-century garden is depicted, for example, in Hans Schöpfer's picture *Susanna and the Elders*, 1537 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek), which was likewise painted for Wilhelm IV, forming part of the history cycle.
  - 22 Altdorfer's attitude toward landscape is discussed in Christopher S. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (London, 1993); Andreas Prater, "Zur Bedeutung der Landschaft beim frühen Altdorfer," *Aufsätze zur Kunstgeschichte: Festschrift für Hermann Bauer zum 60. Geburtstag* (Hildesheim, 1991), 150-68; Larry Silver, "Albrecht Altdorfer and the German Wilderness Landscape," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, XIII, 1 (1988), 5-43.
  - 23 Max Spindler, ed., *Handbuch der bayerischen Geschichte*, vol. 2: *Das alte Bayern: der Territorialstaat vom Ausgang des 12. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1966), 586.
  - 24 Karl-Ludwig Ay, *Land und Fürst im alten Bayern: 16.-18. Jahrhundert* (Regensburg, 1988), 119.
  - 25 Ay, *Land und Fürst*, 196.
  - 26 A bronze sculpture of the Virgin by Hans Krumpper adorned the main façade of the new Munich residence. See Hugo Schnell, "Die Patrona Boiariae und das Wessobrunner Gnadenbild," *Das Münster*, XV, 5/6 (1962), 169-204, 232-39.
  - 27 "Schänder Marias." Cited in Theodor Kolde, "Arsacius Seehofer und Argula von Grumbach," *Beiträge zur bayerischen Kirchengeschichte*, XI (1905), 49-77, 97-124, 149-88.
  - 28 "... verachtung der muter Gottes, unser allergütigsten fürsprecherin ..." Cited in Ernst Dorn, *Der Sang der Wittenberger*

- Nachtigall in München: eine Geschichte des Protestantismus in Bayerns Hauptstadt in der Zeit der Reformation und Gegenreformation des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1917), 45.
- 29 Most medieval medical treatises agreed with the notion that women enjoyed the sexual act to a higher degree than men because they were able both to emit and to absorb semen. See Shulamith Shahar, *Die Frau im Mittelalter*, trans. Ruth Achlama (Frankfurt, 1983), 81.
- 30 See further pictorial examples in Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Frau Ratgeb und die Kunstgeschichte: kunstgeschichtliche Anmerkungen zur Situation der Frauen der Bauernkriegsgeneration," *FrauenKunstGeschichte: zur Korrektur des herrschenden Blicks*, eds Cordula Bischoff et al. (Gießen, 1984), 63-78.
- 31 Fully discussed in Heide Wunder, "*Er ist die Sonn', sie ist der Mond*": *Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 1992) and Barbara Becker-Cantarino, *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit: Frauen und Literatur in Deutschland von 1500-1800* (Munich, 1989).
- 32 A variety of examples is published by H. Diane Russell, *Eva/Ave: Woman in Renaissance and Baroque Prints*, exh. cat., Washington, National Gallery of Art (New York, 1990).
- 33 See Norbert Schneider, "Strategien der Verhaltensnormierung in der Bildpropaganda der Reformationszeit," *Kultur zwischen Bürgerum und Volk*, ed. Jutta Held (Berlin, 1983), 7-19.
- 34 Volkmar Greiselmayer, *Kunst und Geschichte: die Historienbilder Herzog Wilhelms IV. von Bayern und seiner Gemahlin Jacobäa: Versuch einer Interpretation* (Berlin, 1996), and Barbara Eschenburg, "Altdorfers *Alexanderschlacht* und ihr Verhältnis zum Historienzyklus Wilhelms IV.," *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, XXXIII (1979), 36-67.
- 35 In Altdorfer's *Susanna* the balustrade of the square divides the picture into a vertical rectangular section (palace and square) and a horizontal rectangular section (the garden with its walls). A clear transverse orientation is produced by the step-climbing servant in the right foreground.
- 36 Dieter Albrecht, "Bayern und die Gegenreformation," *Wittelsbach und Bayern*, Vol. II/2: *Um Glauben und Reich: Kurfürst Maximilian I.: Beiträge zur Bayerischen Geschichte und Kunst 1573-1657*, exh. cat. (Munich, 1980), 13-23.
- 37 For the following, see Götz von Pölnitz, "Die Untersuchung gegen Arsacius von Seehofer," *Historisches Jahrbuch*, ed. Görres-Gesellschaft, LX (1940), 159-78.
- 38 After several years in custody at the cloister of Ettal, he led a restless travelling life until finally, in 1538, he became a preacher in reformed Württemberg. He died in 1542.
- 39 Karl von Prantl, *Geschichte der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Ingolstadt, Landshut, München*, 2 vols (1872; repr. Aalen, 1968), 154.
- 40 "... Wiltu aber mit eren bestan / so stell ab dein muet und guet dunckel / Vnd spin dafuer an einer kunckel / oder strick hauben vnd wirck borten / Eyn weib solt nit mit gottes worten / stoltzieren vnd die männer lernen ..." Cited in Kolde, *Arsacius Seehofer*, 108 f.
- 41 "... vnd vormals von weiplichem geschlecht dergleichen gar wenig, vnd bei vnsern zeyten nie gehört ..." Cited in Kolde, *Arsacius Seehofer*, 77.
- 42 Her second husband died in 1535. She continued to correspond frequently with Lutherans. In 1563 she was arrested on a charge of public preaching but not prosecuted because of her old age. She died in that same year.
- 43 Being a follower of the Lutheran doctrine, he fell into disgrace in 1528 and had to go to Regensburg. The "Baierische Chronik" (Bavarian Chronicle) ordered from him by the Bavarian dukes was censored, as Aventinus criticized the dukes' politics severely. Eschenburg, *Altdorfers Alexanderschlacht*, 54.
- 44 Gisela Goldberg, *Die Alexanderschlacht und die Historienbilder des bayerischen Herzogs Wilhelm IV. und seiner Gemahlin Jacobaea für die Münchner Residenz* (Munich, 1983), 7.
- 45 This can be observed in other pictures from his hand, as well, for example in his liberal imitation of Byzantine Madonna topoi for the Regensburg pilgrimage image *Schöne Madonna* (Beautiful Madonna), ca. 1519/22 (Regensburg, Kollegiatstift St. Johann).
- 46 Among them the court trumpeter Erhard Gugler, the court jester Löffler, and the court composer Ludwig Senfl. See Claus-Jürgen Roepke, *Die Protestanten in Bayern* (Munich, 1972), 20.
- 47 Otto Hartig, "Die Kunsttätigkeit in München unter Wilhelm IV. und Albrecht V.: neue Forschungen," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, X (1933), 147-225, esp. 150.
- 48 Harnest, *Das Problem*, 97.