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Anachronism as a means of critical pedagogy: Late medieval German verse narratives as tools of social, ethical, and spiritual investigations in matters of love

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Throughout time, love, sexuality, and marriage have mattered centrally in all of literature, and hence all of human existence. Although there seems to be an endless number of relevant guidebooks, counselors, and advisors who promise to help us navigate through the world of love, the real learning process in that regard begins within ourselves in direct confrontation with society or other individuals. Love is always dialogic. Late medieval (German) literature proves to be one of the most useful strategies in dealing with those powerful issues, perhaps surprisingly and certainly refreshingly. As this article illustrates through a close analysis of a sample of texts by three meaningful but also unusual poets, the study of those poems makes available a significant body of messages about human nature, and thus about virtues and vices. Love can hardly be imagined without some pain, struggle, and a sense of utopia, and these German poets, in close parallel with their European contemporaries, can thus be recognized as great inspirators for continuing the discourse on love even today.

Keywords: medieval literature, Dietrich von der Gletze, Ruprecht von Würzburg, Heinrich Kaufringer, cross-dressing, literary communication, female agency, virtues, vices

Introduction

At issue here is the question of how to bridge the divide between the past and the present for pedagogical and epistemological purposes without becoming prey to anachronism. When we teach literature, we always face the question of how far back we should go and whether we should also incorporate texts from the pre-modern era and still manage to maintain a sense of relevance for our students today. For a medievalist, this is a self-evident concept, of course, but most colleagues in the humanities are trained primarily in modern and post-modern literature and tend not to be aware of the enormous potential inherent in medieval and early modern texts for discussing pressing contemporary issues through an unusual, i.e., historical-cultural lens.

After all, medieval culture proves to be foundational for everything we do today in ethical, social, and philosophical terms. Not only have many contemporary poets drawn directly from medieval literature, but we can also observe that the entire spectrum of our ethical values and ideals is based on teachings from the early and high middle Ages. Because of the heavy impact of modern technology, we tend to believe that we really live in a post-modern world, but in reality, our roots go back hundreds of centuries. To realize our own dreams of happiness, it often proves to be essential to retrace what medieval poets had to say about it, warning us, for instance, about the transitoriness of all life, the dialectic nature of love, and the need to develop sophisticated communication strategies to develop a socially embedded identity.

Undoubtedly, it would amount to preaching to the converted or to the proverbial choir trying to convince pre-modern scholars that the texts composed during their period of investigation should be taught today as well. But it is one thing to accept a medieval narrative or poem as such and acknowledge it for its own sake in cultural-historical

terms, and another thing to discuss it meaningfully and appropriately with a modern audience in mind. In other words, at the risk of committing a form of anachronism, medievalists must also try to move beyond their historical limitations and confront their texts or documents as valuable statements from the past that continue to speak to us today, certainly a difficult but important epistemological challenge which addresses the existential legitimacy of Medieval Studies as an academic field all by itself [see the contributions to (1); and (2)].

For modernists, however, such efforts at establishing relevant links between both periods might appear to be anachronistic and artificial because those older texts seem to be like exhibit pieces in a historical museum that have no direct connection with the present. They are mostly composed in an ancient version of the modern language; they have survived in manuscripts, so the texts are hard to read, and their social-historical context is difficult to understand for contemporary audiences.

In the same way, medieval history, philosophy, art history, and other related fields constitute a daunting challenge; they are generally accepted as culturally important, aspects of the past, but would we really still need to engage with them in the twenty-first century? At issue, hence, is the problem of how to move forward today and to handle the urgent tasks of our own time and the near future without cutting off all of our past. After all, we exist at the crosspoint or intersection of the horizontal (present) and the vertical (past). Hence, the case to be made below consists of arguing for the relevance of pre-modern literature for global discussions today regarding fundamental issues in human life. Significantly, to illustrate the true importance of medieval philosophy through one example, we could not even begin to engage with the question regarding individual happiness without first considering the statements by the late antique Roman philosopher Boethius, especially his *De consolatione philosophiae* (ca. 524). Many of the answers we might be looking for regarding fundamental issues in human life were already formulated in the past by him and then by many different thinkers, poets, artists, and composers, so we would just need to unravel, to unpack, or to translate them to understand their true meaning and then to explore the issues at stake, which are timeless at any rate and not even limited to specific cultures or languages (3).

I will address this question by focusing on a specific selection of texts within my special research field, medieval German literature, but I will claim centrally that past works can serve exceedingly well as mirrors of human life throughout time. Mirrors, however, do not only reflect the outside; they also cast an image of the self, which might be unexpected and concerning. The image used here becomes more understandable when we recognize that medieval mirrors were not as smooth as modern ones, and so they refracted the image in unusual or surprising ways. To formulate it in contemporary physical terms, and hence to explain the metaphor better, we are dealing with concave or convex mirrors.

Literature at large serves many different purposes, but it is not limited to simple entertainment or esthetic ideals (the beauty of the language, the verbal images used, the motifs, or themes, the musicality of the sounds, etc.). Every serious literary text, including humorous, satirical, ironic, or otherwise comic narratives or poems, addresses human life and probes critical perspectives, offering a fictional medium to experiment with many options or alternatives. We might also want to use the metaphor of the labyrinth to capture this peculiar nature of a fictional work. The reader or listener is not required to identify with the characters or the themes presented in the text, but the latter invites the audience to reflect upon the issues dealt with here, either for confirmation of one's own values or to learn new ones that might shed important light on one's own existence.

Human life is rife with problems, either material or psychological or spiritual, and communication proves to be one of the most central challenges. It would be difficult to identify any literary text that would not consider miscommunication and strife in one way or the other (4). Interestingly, while the number of conflicts in our existence appears to be almost infinite, the majority of them can be categorized into seven groups, traditionally identified as the so-called "seven deadly sins," that is, pride, greed, anger, lust, sloth, gluttony, and envy (for an excellent survey article, with good illustrations and bibliography, see).[1] If we concentrate on more specifics, we could limit it all to the following: the fear of death, the quest for God, the issue of love, and the search for meaning.

For the present article, I want to focus on the issue of love alone because it allows us, from a pedagogical and sociological point of view, to isolate one of the central topics discussed in the Middle Ages and beyond that also continues to concern us today. But love itself is a vague term; instead, we have to consider a whole complex of issues, involving sexuality, marriage, communication, happiness, and community. On the surface, love appears to be an emotion, above all, but upon closer analysis, we can recognize that it is the result of many different discourses, which medieval poets and philosophers had already observed and discussed at great length (5, 6).

Undoubtedly, there would be an infinite number of modern literary examples available to study this broad topic. Here I suggest drawing from a handful of late medieval German verse narratives, *maeren*, where we are confronted with extraordinary situations that force us to reflect more deeply on the essential features relevant to all human relationships, particularly in marriage. By isolating the critical issues addressed there with all the difficult questions associated with them, we can then proceed with examining

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins

the possible analogies and models of behavior that find parallels in our own world.

Granted, there is nothing intrinsically relevant that would force us to consider those medieval tales all by themselves, but they belong to our literary-cultural heritage and anticipated in many different ways the fundamental problems we continue to face until today. Both their strangeness (medieval) and their familiarity (universal topics of love) invite us to rely on them for many different purposes, both pedagogical and epistemological, sociological and philosophical, and thereby to come to terms with some of the essential and critical issues of human life both then and today. These *maeren* are part of a larger European context of lais, fabliaux, novelles, and tales, which means they reflect common concepts, values, and ideas relevant to the urban class in the late Middle Ages in a variety of ways (7). While scholars have predominantly examined the examples provided by famous poets, such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Marguerite de Navarre, the *maeren* are not well known at large, although they offer a plethora of valuable literary material.

Cross-dressing, gender debates, and identity

Dietrich von der gletze

Through a collective effort, many of those *maeren* have finally been made available in a solid critical edition [(8); along with an English translation by Coxon; but see also (9)]. They belong to the wider European narrative tradition and find many parallels in other languages before or after they have been composed in Middle High German. Whereas the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had witnessed the growth of courtly romances and verse narratives, such as the *lai*, the late middle Ages were much more determined by entertaining, didactic, erotic, and religious tales appealing to an urban audience (10). On the surface, all this seemed to reflect a trivialization process, with satire and irony permeating many of those stories, in which the themes focused increasingly on sexual and marital matters. In reality, however, as I will demonstrate subsequently, most commonly, the issues of individuality, ethics, happiness, and, ultimately, love were the central objectives of the various authors.

Moreover, as we can observe many times, the medieval poets were already deeply concerned with gender issues and presented intriguing cases of cross-dressing (11). The most famous example for this phenomenon might be Heldris de Cornwall's *Roman de Silence* (ca. 1260–1280), but we could also turn to the rather obscure but simply brilliant account, "The Belt" ("Der Borte") by the very little-known poet Dietrich von der Gletze, or Glesse (ca. 1350).

In both cases, the female protagonist finds herself forced to change her external gender identity to pursue her personal life goals, but while in the French text, Silence, as a cross-dressed woman, tries to protect her inheritance, which is limited only to male heirs, in Dietrich's verse narrative, the woman faces a husband who has abandoned her out of anger over her involuntary act of adultery and refuses to return home. Let us investigate this story more closely to gain deeper insights into the range of topics concerning married life and personal happiness as discussed in the late middle Ages (here quoted from Classen, *Erotic Tales*, No. 3).

The text has survived only in four manuscripts: Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek, Cpg 341, early fourteenth century; Heidelberg, Cpg 4, ca. 1466/1478; a copy of the older Heidelberg manuscript, formerly in the library of the Kalocsa Archbishopric library, today in Geneva-Cologny, Bibliotheca Bodmeriana (orig. A1 XI; now Msc. 1), and Klagenfurt, Universitätsbibliothek, Perg.-Hs. 64 (a small fragment) (for a listing and description, see https://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/999), which might signal that the contemporary audience did not appreciate it much, or felt uncomfortable with some of the content [for an edition, see (8), vol. 1/2, pp. 103–126, No. 43].

The author presents a happily married couple that suddenly faces a critical problem because the young man feels insecure in his position as a knight and travels to a tournament at some distance to prove his true strength. His wife fully supports him and stays behind when she is visited by a strange knight who immediately falls in love with her and wants to enjoy her body at any cost. He offers her, first, as a reward for her love, his valuable goshawk that would catch any bird, then his two magical greyhounds that would overcome any prey, then his valuable falcon and his horse that would outrun any other animal. The lady is aghast at these offers, insisting on her honor that she would not sell it for any of those miraculous creatures. Finally, however, the knight goes one step further and throws in the belt as a gift for her, which commands special properties: "Whoever wears the belt onto which the stone is embossed will never lose honor and will always enjoy happiness (310); he will never be slain; he will never despair; he will always win the victory whenever he enters a fight. The stone helps against fire and water (315). If you let me have my wish, lady, the belt will be yours, and so will my hawk, the horse, and the dogs: just heal my wounds (320)."

This is too much for the poor lady, she has to give in, especially because she wants to acquire that belt for her husband as a guarantee for gaining honor, which he desperately needs. Although she will subsequently use all four objects for her own strategy—that is, to win back her husband—those are all trappings for a knight, not for a lady. The narrator does not specify that she was thinking only of her husband when she agreed to the deal, but the subsequent events and the outcome underscore this reading.

Unfortunately, the lady and the knight have been spied on by one of the servants, who immediately tattles this to her husband. Without even thinking of confronting her,

investigating the charge, or questioning the servant, the young man immediately leaves the tournament and his country and disappears in Brabant, without returning home for more than two years. The narrator, however, emphasizes the extent to which she successfully manages the estate and demonstrates her high level of intelligence and maturity in that situation: "The lady stayed alone without her husband, that is true, without knowing (415) where he had gone. Whatever property she had under her control she managed well. She planned everything carefully. She was courageous and bold (420) and yet hardly twenty years of age. No one had anything (negative) to say about her comportment."

The mysterious knight who had seduced her never returns, and we have no reason to assume that the lady felt anything for him in erotic or sexual terms or was attracted to him in the first place. In fact, she mocks him bitingly when he leaves, deprived of all of his trappings as a knight, so we might even assume that he was nothing but an allegorical figure, a catalyst to bring about the crisis in that marriage. Maybe we could call him the husband's alter-ego, controlling all those features that would make him respected in public. Even in the distant land of Brabant, with its spectacular court center, this poor man does not demonstrate the level of manliness and knightly prowess that he would like to possess. He is easily defeated by opponents, and when his wife suddenly shows up, though in the disguise of a man, he desperately begs him or her for one of those animals that would allow him to secure at least a minimum of public recognition: "If I would learn from you, my friend, that you would give me the greyhounds, or the goshawk or the horse (715), then the river of love would have flowed well toward me. If you grant me this wish, I'd thank you."

His new friend, that is, his wife, whom he does not recognize, at first refuses to budge and does not want to share, but then formulates a requirement for any gift. Playing with traditional gender roles, he states that he would grant him his request only in return for an act of sexual union since he would not like to sleep with women. The disguised knight thus pretends to be a homosexual, which her husband laments as deplorable, but since he is so desirous of getting any of those amazing animals, he agrees and submits, although he thus would have to prostitute himself: "I will suffer everything (765), and not refuse anything, whatever you desire from me. I want to and have to accept it all in return for the greyhounds and the bird of prey."

Of course, once that point has been reached, his wife reveals her true gender identity, but she badly condemns him for his lack of morality and ethics. She points out that his actions would have been so much worse than what she had done, especially since she had submitted to the foreign knight only because she had wanted to help her husband. The latter, on the other hand, clearly did not care about ethics or morality and was willing to go to any length to gain at least a modicum of public recognition: "You have brought shame on yourself! The wrongdoing that I committed was human frailty (795), whereas it was a crime against Christianity what you would have done voluntarily. You are a corruptible man considering that you would have abandoned, just for two minuscule gifts, your honor. I tell you, I am furious about that."

Her miserable husband acknowledges his guilt, begs for forgiveness, and they both establish a peace agreement. She loves him; she had pursued him after two years of unsuccessful waiting; she had put on the male disguise to test and also to expose him; and she had achieved victory over him, proving, at least in her mind, that her own failure was minimal compared to his own major shortcoming. Since he completely submits to her, knowing only too well what guilt he carries, she forgives him, turns over all the animals and the belt, and they both return home as a happy couple: "From then on they closely guarded their honor and good manners in a most pleasant way (820), and lived every day without any worries until the end of their lives" [cf. (12, 13)].

The poet engaged with a host of intriguing topics, such as gender-bending, cross-dressing, assumed homosexuality, the quest for masculinity, economic conditions at a courtly estate, and personal identity. Most importantly, however, proves to be the relationship between husband and wife, one of the central themes in all of late medieval literature. Although both seem to love each other, the husband's personal insecurity about his social standing threatens their marriage. In essence, hence, marriage is at stake, and the two people struggle against all odds to maintain their legal relationship, which is threatened by external conditions. Happiness in love, sexuality, and marriage are at stake. In fact, much of medieval literature deals with this essential aspect, the elusive essence of love. Each generation has struggled with this issue ever since antiquity and much of literature is dominated by the question concerning personal identity and meaning. This medieval narrative proves to be so insightful also for us because marriage is identified here as a social union determined not only by emotional conditions but by both partners' willingness to commit to each other and work out, despite all the difficulties, and the many differences.

We observe here in most dramatic terms the extent to which the young wife is determined to fight for her happiness in marriage, which requires her to accept heavy sacrifice and to pursue her husband as an obviously unwilling partner. She assumes a fake role as a male and can thus expose him to a seductive situation in which he then reveals his own character weakness. She, in turn, does not demand him to go through the entire process of prostituting himself, as she had to do on his behalf, but she indicates, through her playful strategy, the extent to which he would fall for such a temptation. However, whereas her weakness is explained through her effort to help her husband gain honor by means of any of those magical objects or animals, he wants to "purchase" one of them through prostitution.

Thus, Dietrich forces us to reflect deeply on the issues of personal identity, honor, and values within married life.

His account proves to be an extreme case, of course, which demands extensive discussions on the part of the recipients or audience about identity, gender roles, one's value system, and basic ethics. However, the issue of love is not even at stake here since she never wavers in her feelings for him despite her bout of adultery, a functional process she accepts to gain the magical belt for her husband. And he demonstrates, despite his stubbornness and recalcitrance, his love for her even after two years of separation. Marriage, as discussed by Dietrich, proves to be a complicated, perhaps even contested form of cohabitation involving many external and internal factors. Although *Der Borte* was composed ca. 800 years ago, it continues to address fundamental concerns for marriage partners, such as communication, the quest for identity, meaning of life, public respect, honor, and love, of course.

As this verse narrative illustrates so poignantly, marriage works out only when both partners are strong enough to give and take in more or less equal measures, when each person has achieved a high level of maturity, when the individual has established his/her own personality and understands how to balance internal and external demands. Whereas the husband in our story simply flees from his obligations and commitments out of disappointment over his wife's act of adultery, she maintains herself, keeps operating their estates very effectively, and then pursues her husband in disguise to teach him a lesson. She then also hands over those animals and the belt, thereby symbols of public esteem and honor, which implies that she helps him to find himself and to gain self-respect. Whereas she castigates him for his character weaknesses, i.e., his willingness to prostitute himself in return for a magical tool to acquire public recognition, she also demonstrates her readiness to forgive him and to grow into a worthy knight enjoying esteem at court.

This tale reveals the extent to which all partnerships depend on good communication, compromise, commitment, cooperation, and compassion. The lessons of Dietrich's narrative for us today are obvious, even though we would have to translate them slightly into our own life conditions. The advantage of the medieval framework consists of the slight alienation and the mirror function, which allow us today to reflect upon the critical issues addressed here and then to probe their applicability to our own world. Of course, there is the danger of anachronism when we try to draw parallels or analogies between that text and the situation for people in the twenty-first century, but "Der Borte" is a literary medium from the past through which we are invited to enter into fundamental discussions concerning ethical, communicative, and moral aspects (14).

Ruprecht von Würzburg

Marriage also figures centrally in the verse narrative, "Die Treueprobe," or "The Two Merchants," composed sometime in the late thirteenth century. The text has survived in only one manuscript, today kept in Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek, under the call number cod. Chart. A 216; the novella is contained on folios 76vb–82rb (cf.).[2] Although research has hardly paid any attention to Ruprecht, whose biography is unknown to us, his story proves to be highly effective in isolating some of the key issues in married life through the problematization of the relationship between husband and wife (Bertram and Irmengard). Neither social nor economic conflicts matter here, and we can be certain that the couple is in full love with each other. But through the husband's actions, she is severely challenged and tested in her honor, ethics, and morality, which could be blamed on him because he is engaged in a wager with another man (Hogier) who claims that all women can be seduced if they are offered enough money or gifts. The misogynist attitude is self-evident, but the poet does not really subscribe to that notion and demonstrates rather the opposite. However, the narrative still pursues strong criticism, which is directed at urban society at large, here represented by Bertram and the entire family [for the latest research, see (15)]. Once the conflict has been overcome, just as in Dietrich's story, the couple comes together once again and enjoys their shared life without being challenged again. At issue are Bertram's naivete and ignorance concerning other men's attitudes toward women and then also the entire family's capitalist thinking, overruling all traditional ethical or moral concepts.

While on a business trip, the young merchant faces a group of men, led by the owner of the tavern where they all stay, who irreverently ridicule their wives and expose their vices. Bertram, however, sings a song of the highest praise of his Irmengard, which provokes Hogier to challenge him, offering him this absurd and dangerous wager. Both men staked their entire fortunes on their claims about the wife. Whereas Bertram claims that she would resist all temptations and uphold her honor even under the worst circumstances, Hogier argues that no woman, not even Irmengard, would be able to resist his seduction attempts. So he dares him, and Bertram is weak enough to respond in kind: "pledge everything that you owe in return. If you lose, you will from then on (410) have nothing but the shirt on your back. To match that, I wager all my property, which will be yours in the opposite case. Whoever loses will be obligated (415) to turn over all his goods that he previously owned or might gain in the meantime to the other, based on sworn oaths."

Out of pride regarding his wife, Bertram debases her as the prize for the wager and thus reifies her, without fully understanding the foolishness and great danger of this arrangement. While he then stays away, Hogier moves to Verdun and begins to woo that honorable woman, who soon finds herself in a most difficult situation, being pursued by this stranger and not finding any support either among her servants or her family members (16).

[2] https://handschriftencensus.de/werke/3793

However, Hogier discovers that all of his efforts fail because Irmengard resists all of his wooing. When he bribes her maid and male servants to speak in his favor, she forbids them to do so. When he offers a considerable amount of money to Irmengard, she rejects it. In his desperation, Hogier blows up his offers so much that it would seem absurd not to accept them. After all, the story is embedded in the world of merchants and money, so the critical question focuses on the contrast between wealth and personal honor, that is, on the tension between the private and the public, or between material possessions and individual values and honor.

The poor woman finds herself under enormous pressure because of Hogier's attempt to prostitute her. In her desperation, she finally turns to her various family members and always receives the same response. Her aunt, for instance, emphasizes: "Keep quiet. If you let pass such a rich award (605), neither my heart nor any of your relatives will ever feel kindness toward you. Even a rich empress can do this without losing her honor. Once this man will have left you (610), you lock the door and then you will be just the same as you used to be before." Irmengard is horrified by his strong suggestion, so she turns to her parents and explains the situation to them, but her father instructs her in unmistakable terms: "Oh, dear Bertram, if only my daughter Irmengard would be sound in mind concerning this issue (625) so that she can win this money before we will lose it! Listen, my dear daughter, drop your soul-searching and comply with his wish, or you will lose my love. If this money gets lost (because of your refusal), I will show you my great wrath, and when God will send Bertram back home, you will truly be blinded" (635).

Everyone among her elders holds the same opinion and believes that a one-night stand with Hogier would be totally forgivable considering the large amount of money that she could gain thereby. However, Irmengard feels deeply chagrined and refuses to accept any of their advice because she is rightly afraid of losing her honor and ethics, not to speak of her morality. In her desperation, she resorts to a curious strategy which we know from previous literary texts, such as Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210). Since she knows that her maid Amelin is not married and cares little about her own virginity, she bribes her to take her place in bed and thus to deceive Hogier, which actually works well. Amelin receives a tenth of the price offered by the tavern owner for one night with Irmengard, and the latter can thus keep her integrity, seemingly complying with the wishes voiced by all of her family members.

The deception works, and Hogier and the maid spend the night together, fully enjoying each other sexually. However, he is very mindful of his actual purpose and asks for a ring from her, which he later wants to use as proof of his victory over Irmengard and hence over Bertram. Poor Amelin does not have anything with her, so Hogier brutally cuts off her little finger, which destroys all the joys that the foolish woman had during the night. This finger then serves Hogier to demonstrate at a festive dinner organized by Bertram, who had returned home in the meantime, to demonstrate that he had seduced Irmengard and that, hence, his claim was correct that all women could be bought to sell their bodies sexually.

Only then does the family realize the true purpose of the money offered for one night, and they are horrified when they have to realize that the real wager was based on the entire estate. Full of anger, they try to reprimand Irmengard: "All the relatives reprimanded the lady (910) and accused her bitterly." To everyone's shock, however, she then upholds both of her hands and shows that she did not lose her finger, which thus makes Hogier lose his wager and hence his entire property. Bertram, however, allows him to marry Amelin and to take on the role of a servant.

The poet concludes his narrative with a rather curious advice to women at large: (930) "I have told you this story as a lesson for women and maids, that they should bridle their wild desires by means of chaste habits, which will help them not to lose their good reputation." Considering Irmengard's long struggle fighting against Hogier's many attempts to seduce her, her resolute attitude not to submit to this tempting offer, and her horror at her family's attitude, we must actually reach a different interpretation. Ruprecht's nod to patriarchal society, that is, to his literary patrons, makes sense within the social context of his time, but the story itself speaks a very different language, giving the highest praise to the female protagonist who takes energetic actions to protect her personal honor, ethics, and morality against the opinions of her entire family (17).

In fact, as we can observe clearly, the narrative formulates sharp criticism of the capitalist mentality determining the entire urban world as depicted here. Although the early part of the verse novella presents a rather idealistic image of the two fathers who are bonded together through deep friendship and have only the best interests of their children in mind when they marry them, the outcome reveals a different situation. As her father-in-law emphasizes upon her request for his opinion, "Daughter, listen, do what they have advised you, otherwise I will let you feel it (645) with all my might, and your back will receive a great beating. "If you do not gain this money, you will truly have to die once Bertram will have come home" (650). Once she has called the entire family together, they all agree and push her hard to accept the money and to sleep with Hogier for one night. In other words, none of them has any hesitation in prostituting this poor woman, who finds herself all alone and struggles hard against this capitalistic thinking.

Of course, her husband had completely trusted her and wagered his entire property on her morality and love for him. This means, however, that he then exposes her to a terrible seduction attempt through which he might achieve an enormous gain or lose everything he owns. In a way, Bertram makes his wife a commodity and bets on her, which then proves to be successful. In fact, when she observes his frustration and sadness upon his return, believing that Hogier had actually won, she informs him: "Now be well,

your heart should no longer mourn (890). Hogier's cunning cannot help him at all. His property fully belongs to us." In other words, she deeply delights in the major win for her family, especially because she has been able to preserve her honor and integrity.

In short, she also appreciates the acquisition of all that wealth for her family, and she never criticizes Bertram for his rather insidious operation of instrumentalizing his own wife for his personal enrichment. The narrative also contains implicit criticism of the wager itself, of the lambasting of wives and Bertram's bragging about his impeccably virtuous wife, clearly urging the audience that marriage partners should not commodify each other in the way as Bertram did. Most prominently, however, Ruprecht strongly condemns the entire family for its capitalistic thinking and greed, and hence their utter disregard of honor and personal integrity. Prostitution hence emerges as an acceptable business practice, especially because the parents and parents-in-law believe that they have complete control over Irmengard and can commandeer her to sleep with the other man because he offers so much money (18). Neither the ethics of marriage nor public reputation seem to matter here; only money rules society in every respect. Nevertheless, Irmengard, as the protagonist, knows how to help herself and thus to overcome the utterly commercial interests of her entire family, and she can thus maintain her honor and marital chastity. There are no reasons to suspect Bertram of having acted differently, especially since he trusts his wife so completely. However, as the narrative also indicates, he deserves considerable criticism for exposing his wife to such emotional hardship and social distress. Simultaneously, as the poet also comments indirectly, the individual can find itself in a very difficult context, suffering from terrible peer pressure, although their own value system is completely opposed to the suggestions presented by the others.

Love and marriage in the narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer

Self-deception, pipe dreams, and too high expectations tend to undermine the simple strategy to establish a harmonious relationship with a marriage partner, whether in the Middle Ages or today. People are easily dissatisfied with their own situation, contrasting it with an unrealistic ideal that might never come to fruition. Married people might love each other deeply, but if their communication does not work effectively, all efforts to achieve a harmonious relationship might not work out. This finds its superb expression in one of the *maeren* by Heinrich Kaufringer, briefly testified in Augsburg around 1400.

Recent research has begun to explore his work from a variety of perspectives, such as the legal background, the social context, or the political and religious conditions (19). There would be many approaches to Kaufringer's works worth pursuing, which probably ought to be placed next to Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* despite the absence of a frame narrative, but here I am only interested in his protagonist's quest for meaning and happiness in married life (20). Similar to the poets mentioned earlier, Kaufringer's verse narratives have survived only in a very few manuscripts: (1) Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, mgf 564; (2) Munich, Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 270; and (3) Munich, Staatsbibl., Cgm 1119.[3]

Most fitting for our topic here might be "The Search for a Happily Married Couple" (No. 16 in Classen, *Erotik Tales*), where a husband is so frustrated with his excessively frugal wife that he decides to abandon her and not to return home until he has found a truly happily married couple. The issue causing a conflict between them is that he enjoys inviting his friends over regularly, whereas she chastises him for his spendthrift attitude. The two of them seem to suffer from irreconcilable differences: "If he pulled toward one direction, she pulled toward the other. She was too miserly, he was too generous (45). But I do not reprimand the wife because she was submissive to him in all other respects." In fact, both the narrator and all the other citizens in the story are full of praise for this honorable lady; only her husband feels frustrated and cannot understand the jarring differences in opinion regarding money. Only once he had found the "ideal" couple would he feel satisfied: "two virtuous and pure married people who are so much of one mind that each of them agrees with the other (75) whatever she or he might think of, without them ending in a fight and struggle." It is not clear what this would ultimately help him with respect to his own marriage, but the narrator uses this plan to confront us with social reality and the pragmatics of married life, with all of its tensions, conflicts, disagreements, and fighting.

Indeed, the protagonist spends years searching for that elusive married couple, and he is obviously not successful in achieving his goal. Finally, he believes he has finally met such an ideal couple and is about to return home, where he may condemn his wife by presenting her with the counter-example when he is told the true story. On the surface, that couple lived a harmonious life, but in reality she had committed adultery with a priest, and both had then been caught *in flagrante*. The husband then murdered the priest, stole his skull, and now forces his wife to drink wine from it every evening.

The protagonist thus keeps searching and then comes across another couple, seemingly perfectly happy. Upon further investigation, however, he learns that the husband had to deal with a wife who was excessively in need of sexual pleasures, putting shame on him through her whoring behavior. To put a lid on these transgressions and thus also on the many bad rumors, he then organized a sex slave for

[3] https://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/4096

his wife, capturing a strong peasant and keeping him locked away in his cellar, always ready for his wife's needs. As he then laments to the protagonist: "Dear guest, look at my children whom I have under my care. Everyone assumes (440) that they are my own. This is the cause of great pain for me because they are the peasant's offspring, all six of my children."

Through his many years of foolish quest, the protagonist finally realizes the true lesson he had to learn. There is no perfect union of husband and wife; people tend to have different opinions and pursue different lifestyles, and one should not look for an elusive ideal that would not exist in the first place. As the innkeeper tells him in the end: "I advise you, honestly, do not stay away any longer (450) from your virtuous and good wife. You behave badly toward her indeed. She does not deserve to be treated this way because she is not guilty of any disloyalty. Her miserliness cannot be reprimanded (455). If you intend to travel around in the country, you will squander your wealth and lose it entirely before you will find, believe me that (460), what you have been looking for."

Indeed, as he then begins to understand, people are different, and complete harmony and agreement cannot be found here on earth. This then leads to the narrator's own comment in his epimythium: "Every good man ought to disregard this little shortcoming of his wife if he cannot discover any other blemish in her character except for her miserliness (500). He should be resigned to it and should not cause her any pain or irritate her since it is the least shortcoming a woman might suffer from (505)." Nobody is perfect, as we all know, and as Kaufringer also underscored through this story, and many others. Aiming for perfect marital happiness thus proves to be rather foolish, whereas acknowledging the partner as what he or she is, with all of his or her shortcomings and virtues, when no major conflicts exist, would represent the first major step toward real happiness.

In the introduction, the narrator had outlined the ideal itself: "They are supposed to be in such a union that if one of them wants something full-heartedly (10) and really takes pleasure in it, then the other should agree to it as well. This might then be called a pure life and can truly be counted as a perfect marriage (15)." However, the literary account provided examples of real-life situations and thus corrected this dream image. As Kaufringer suggests, in other words, true happiness would be achievable by a pragmatic approach, accepting the bad with the good and aiming for a compromise, as is also the case with the protagonist: "When he carefully considered everything, he realized that both (of) their lives which he and his wife enjoyed were free of shame and suffering (490). He accepted it when she got angry with him because of his excessive generosity (literally: carried the crown of generosity), and tolerated her chiding." Through give and take, he and his wife were then able to establish a certain degree of harmony and could enjoy their lives together.

Conclusion

In some respects, all the examples examined earlier reflect forms of social existence far removed from our present reality. Reading and studying those *maeren* might thus appear as a form of anachronism because the plots and material conditions appear to be "too medieval," as some might say, to be transferrable to our own lives today. However, as we have realized as well, in essence, each poet endeavored to come up with fictional examples as a platform to reflect upon ordinary situations in human life, especially within marriage. These verse narratives present conflicts and challenges, and they illustrate specifically where and why things can go wrong. We regularly receive clear messages about people's imperfections and shortcomings, which tend to endanger marital relationships. Personal failures are more the norm than the exception, but once both sides collaborate and communicate with each other productively, a certain degree of happiness can be hoped for.

We also learn from some of these accounts how important individual maturity and identity prove to be. To maintain a strong love relationship would require, as Dietrich, Ruprecht, and Heinrich indicate, each in his own terms, a considerable inner strength to develop and uphold a compromise, to work out differences, and to share values and ideals with the partner; it would finally also depend on the individual's ability to give from him or herself without any demand for reciprocity. Love is not a contract, but a voluntary partnership (12).

What would be anachronistic about engaging closely with any of those verse narratives? In fact, we could easily extend our investigation to the vast body of related works, whether the *fabliaux* or the stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The literary discourse serves as a distant but illuminating mirror for universal human problems and questions. Drawing from late medieval answers to those issues establishes a healthy epistemological distance and yet also clarifies the problems at stake. Laughter erupts regularly as a result of our realization of the foolish nature of various individuals. But ultimately, that laughter really pertains to us and makes us realize that we are just as liable to make the same or similar mistakes as those committed by the various literary protagonists [(21–23), "Laughter"].

One of the most popular and most urgent themes in all of world literature has always been love, including sexuality and marriage. We are the heirs of that long tradition, and we continue to struggle with the difficult issues involved. Drawing insights from late medieval verse narrative in that regard would not be an anachronism, but a creative and relevant alternative to our ongoing efforts to come to terms with our desire for personal happiness.

It remains a mystery why all the examples examined earlier have come down to us in so few manuscripts. But irrespective of that paucity of textual witnesses, we can certainly claim that all those narratives carry great significance and oddly appeal to us today, perhaps even more than in the middle Ages. One of the reasons for this curious phenomenon might be that we can better recognize the universal meaning and messages contained in those texts. We are not committing an act of anachronism; instead, we are building an important case for the relevance of the past literary world in our efforts to come to terms with our own existence.

In this regard, we could even go so far as to suggest that these late medieval German verse narratives command a global outreach by appealing to people in many different cultures since the issues addressed pertain to married life, the relationship between the genders, women's agency, the sense of communication and community, the importance of compassion and compromise, among other critical values that allow us to maintain a dignified existence today in the company of those whom we love.

Although the late middle Ages seem to be a cultural period far removed from us today, there are obviously very meaningful and constructive epistemological bridges between us. The fact that all of these verse narratives are also determined by a deep sense of humor certainly facilitates their reception until the present time even further. Through the analysis of those texts, we can lay the foundation for critical pedagogy, reaching out to our audience, addressing not only the narratives as such, but bringing to light some of the most burning issues concerning our lives, such as love and hatred, marriage, and sexuality.

As in the case of any good literary text, the three examples discussed earlier stand out through their entertainment, intrigue, and flagging critical issues. It might sound anachronistic to fall back to those medieval verse narratives as a medium to discuss modern-day issues pertaining to love and marriage. In reality, however, here we face the intriguing opportunity to examine fundamental aspects of human life, particularly those concerning individual and communal happiness within an erotically driven partnership. Since those tales were composed such a long time ago, they allow the modern-day readers or listeners to discuss the problems and challenges through a fictional mirror, but that mirror then ultimately brings back to us the crucial elements that determine our own existence today.

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