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**The Agency of Wives in High Medieval German Courtly  
Romances and Late Medieval Verse Narratives:  
From Hartmann von Aue to Heinrich Kaufringer**

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*In some secular medieval literature married life increasingly gained respect and literary traction, as illustrated by the rise of genres such as verse narratives (fabliaux, mæren, novelle, tales), early prose novels, didactic literature, and Shrovetide plays. In that world we encounter many discussions about the proper relationship between husband and wife, about the individual's role within society, and also about economic and financial aspects that had a large impact on private life, and hence also on the gender relationship. The phenomenon of female agency within marriage, which this paper will investigate, comes to the fore in more texts than we might have suspected so far. The question that I will pursue here pertains to a married woman's range of options to determine her own destiny and to push for her own decisions in order to preserve her chastity, her honor, but then also her economic well-being, and this in a specifically patriarchal society. To illustrate and support this thesis, I will take into view Hartmann von Aue's Erec (ca. 1170/1180), the anonymous Mai und Beafloer (ca. 1280), and the verse narratives Der Borte by Dietrich von der Gletze (Glesse, Glezze), Ruprecht von Würzburg's Von zwei Kaufleuten, and Heinrich Kaufringer's Die unschuldige Mörderin (all from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries).*

**Introduction: Gender Issues in Medieval Literature**

In much of secular medieval literature, whether in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* or in Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, in Marie de France's *Lais* or in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, we easily recognize how much the poets explored the relationship between the two genders, bonded together erotically and sexually, but then also economically, politically, religiously, and socially, here disregarding those cases where violence interrupts the free exchange and creates terrible imbalance, mostly to the disadvantage of the female victim.<sup>1</sup> As to be expected, the focus commonly rests on the male

<sup>1</sup> The case of incest would be only one of many examples; see Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*; Classen, *Sexual Violence*. See also the contributions to *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*.

protagonists and their chivalric and knightly accomplishments, but we would unjustifiably ignore the female characters if we regarded them only as secondary figures, as the popular *Partonopeus* (or Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Meliur*) and Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* signal, and as the pan-European narrative of *Apollonius of Tyre* confirms as well.<sup>2</sup> Married life became the more central focal point only in late medieval literature, but then the wife regularly seems to emerge as a nasty, badgering, vile, gluttonous, or simply pacified and mute creature.<sup>3</sup> The hatred of marriage and especially of the wife was rampant, so it seems, if we follow a specific genre of misogynous literature.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, however, married life increasingly gained respect and literary traction, as illustrated by the rise of genres such as verse narratives (*fabliaux, mæren, novelle, tales*), early prose novels, didactic literature, and Shrovetide plays.<sup>5</sup> In that world we encounter many discussions about the proper relationship between husband and wife, about the individual's role within society, and also about economic and financial aspects that had a large impact on private life, and hence also on the gender relationship. The phenomenon of female agency within marriage, which this paper will investigate, comes to the fore in more texts than we might have suspected so far. The question that I will pursue here pertains to a married woman's range of options to determine her own destiny and to push for her own decisions in order to preserve her chastity, her honor, but then also her economic well-being, and this is a specifically patriarchal society.

Already in the first half of the thirteenth century, the otherwise unknown but highly prolific poet Der Stricker offered a broad gamut of relevant texts, often satirizing foolish husbands and giving praise to worthy wives, without ignoring the misogynous tradition either,

2 See, for example, Krause, "Generic Space-Off," 93–136.

3 See the rich anthology, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*. The focus, however, rests primarily on women at large, and not on wives, that is, on the gender relationship.

4 Wilson and Makowski, *wykke wyves*.

5 *The Making of the Couple; Ordnung und Lust*; Classen, *Der Liebes- und Ehediskurs*.

playing with both quite freely, obviously for his audience's great entertainment and instruction (*prodesse et delectare*).<sup>6</sup> As to be expected under those circumstances, laughter peels throughout that entire time period, very often at the shrewd but contemptible wife, mirroring deep-seated misogyny and simply male fear of the strong woman.<sup>7</sup> Of course, we also encounter many foolish husbands, truly silly men who do not know how to handle themselves and who rely excessively on traditional gender roles to affirm their own identity within marriage, so they tend to fail in living up to the social expectations, requiring help from their own wives, after all, or who need to learn quickly that they are not much better at all than their spouses. This finds most vivid expression in Hans Sachs's very late Shrovetide Play "Der Fahrende Schüler im Paradeis" (1550), the message of which can easily be projected backwards, especially because this Nuremberg cobbler drew so much of his literary material from the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, increasingly women raised their own voices in the literary discourse, which has fortunately forced us to rewrite the literary histories and to make much more room for women at large in our annals.<sup>9</sup> Intriguingly, as we have learned through recent research (Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Maxo Karras eds.), both in legal and political terms women gained a much stronger profile in the late Middle Ages, either as singles<sup>10</sup> or as married

6 Der Stricker, *Verserzählungen*, vol. I. See also Der Stricker, *Erzählungen, Fabeln*. See also *Die Kleinepik des Strickers*. However, our interest in the gender relationship and wives, in particular, is not mirrored here. Der Stricker's verse narratives have survived in thirty-nine manuscripts; see <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/367> (last accessed on Nov. 13, 2017).

7 Coxon, *Laughter and Narrative; Laughter in the Middle Ages*; Velten, *Scurrilitas*. The literature on this topic is legion, by now, but there is fairly little attention paid to laughter about the wife.

8 <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/drei-fastnachtsspiele-5218/2>; or: [https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/16Jh/Sachs/sac\\_fahr.html](https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/16Jh/Sachs/sac_fahr.html) (both last accessed on Nov. 9, 2017). For the latest biographical and literary-historical investigation, see Brunner, *Hans Sachs*.

9 Classen, *Reading Medieval Women*, esp. the introduction with its critical review of the relevant research literature, 7-50.

10 *Young Medieval Women*. See now the contribution to Bennett and Maxo Karras.

partners,<sup>11</sup> meaning that historical evidence regarding women's considerably higher stakes in inheritance regulations and family properties can be supported by the literary observations, and vice versa.

### **Wives' Subordination or Self-Determination**

Significantly, already since the high Middle Ages, poets projected strong wives who, through their personal agency, succeed in contributing rather powerfully to the happy development of their marriage by way of assuming control, steering their husbands into a new direction, and demonstrating that a good marriage is only possible if both partners strongly subscribe to such fundamental aspects as good communication, community, commitment, compassion, collaboration, cooperation, and compromise, the seven Cs, to which we could easily add courage, courtesy, or company, etc. Observing many, or all, of those ideals could lead, as countless medieval poets underscored either directly or indirectly, to the achievement of individual happiness.<sup>12</sup> The literary evidence from the early modern world does not necessarily expand on this phenomenon, but there are strong narrative features highlighting especially the strong role assumed by the female characters.<sup>13</sup>

In a previous study I already outlined how much agency in the case of Isolde in Gottfried von Straßburg's famous romance, *Tristan und Isolde* (ca. 1210) emerged as the central tool for the female protagonist to maintain not only successfully at King Mark's court in Cornwall, but much more importantly to pursue her almost elusive love for Tristan, although this represents adultery; yet, tragically, her lover at the end is forced to depart from her, probably never to come

11 See, for instance, Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*; D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage*. The most seminal study remains Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society*. See also the contributions by Sheehan, *Marriage, Family*.

12 Classen, "The Erotic and the Quest for Happiness," 1–33.

13 See, for instance, Nivre, *Women and Family*. She points out, however, that increasingly the notion of the witch and the focus on the shrew that has to be tamed imposed new restrictive measures on sixteenth-century women, as both reflected in literature and in the historical records.

back.<sup>14</sup> In fact, as I will argue in this paper, slightly moving beyond Gottfried's romance more often than not wifely actions, prove to be very important and effective and allow the husband or lover to sustain himself and to continue with all of his actions and efforts as a knight, as a leader of his people, and as a marriage partner.

Here I would like to argue that previous scholarship has paid too much attention to the male characters only, even though their female companions matter often just as much, if not more than the men. To illustrate and support this thesis, I will take into view Hartmann von Aue's *Erec* (ca. 1170/1180), the anonymous *Mai und Beafloer* (ca. 1280), and the verse narratives *Der Borte* by Dietrich von der Gletze (Glesse, Glezze), Ruprecht von Würzburg's *Von zwei Kaufleuten*, and Heinrich Kaufringer's *Die unschuldige Mörderin* (all from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries). These Middle High German examples from two different but closely related genres can subsequently be used to develop our observations further and to apply them to contemporary European literature where we also observe the emergence of the highly virtuous, self-determined, and independently-minded wife.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the literary examples do not necessarily confirm the true extent to which late medieval women could exert their own agency, but the fictional projection of such strong wives in individual cases underscores at least the poets' and their audiences' interest in, fascination with, and maybe also abhorrence of self-assured, self-directed, and independently minded female individuals. In most cases, however, as we will recognize, the wife proves to be a highly respectable individual her husband certainly has to reckon with, particularly because she contributes essentially to his own sense of hap-

14 Classen, "Female Agency and Power," 39-60. See also Smith, "Textual and Visual Building Blocks," 165-74; Battles, "Amended Texts," 323-43; Christi, "(Extra)Ordinary Woman," 93-100.

15 See, for example, the anonymous *Reinfried von Braunschweig*; cf. Classen, "Ehelob und Preis," 95-112; see also the contributions to *Married Women and the Law*. For women in the early modern age, see now Koch, *Verspottet, geachtet, geliebt - die Frauen der Reformatoren*. For a longitudinal study of this topic, from the late Middle Ages to the early modern age, see Becker-Cantarino, *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit*.

piness and self-fulfillment by means of her self-directed decision-making. The focus will not rest on marriage as a social institution, and not so much on marital love and children; instead the interest that I will pursue here concerns, above all, the wife's agency within marriage, which can also shed light on the wider social, economic, and political context.

As we will observe many times, manly virtues are praised, of course, and idealized in many different contexts, but in a subtle, yet highly significant way neither the husband nor the wife can achieve their social ideals and goals without the other. Partnership, in other words, emerges as the new role model, meaning the practical realization of the seven Cs (communication, cooperation, commitment, collaboration, community, compassion, coordination). The treatment of the actively performing and self-assured wife by such a large range of male authors might allow us to understand more in detail what the actual gender relationship might have been in the late Middle Ages and how poets wanted their audiences to view intelligent, virtuous, and respectable wives.

### ***Anonymous Mai und Beafloer Erec***

Already in Hartmann von Aue's *Erec* (ca. 1170), the central issue quickly comes to the fore, with the husband Erec badly abusing his wife after he had fallen victim to his own uxuriousness, which led to his social failure as the leader of his people.<sup>16</sup> While he is subsequently trying to compensate for his previous shortcomings, his excessive dedication to sexual and amatory pleasures with his wife Enite, he is forcing her, as a punishment for her presumed wrongdoing, which led to his own neglect of his social and political obligations, to accompany him on his journey through the forest on the quest for adventures. However, every time he encounters robbers or hostile opponents, she needs to come to his rescue and warn him in time. Erec regards this as shameful and then punishes her even

<sup>16</sup> Rushing, "Erec's Uxuriousness," 163-80.

further, but at the end he succumbs to utter exhaustion and extreme loss of blood in his fight against the two giants.<sup>17</sup>

In that situation, the focus suddenly shifts more directly toward Enite who breaks down in sorrow and pain, assuming that her husband has died. She laments loudly and soon is prepared to commit suicide when Count Oringles of Limors appears and prevents this in the last minute. He takes Enite with him to his castle in the hope that he might be able to force her to sleep with him and to join hands in marriage with him. He also has Erec's corpse transported back with him, without burying him immediately. Erec, however, is still alive, and when the count begins to hit Enite in her face because she refuses to eat with him, whereupon she shrieks loudly and calling for help, Erec awakes from his coma, grabs a sword and kills the count.

The couple can escape and they begin to talk with each other for the first time, and this in a meaningful, communicative manner, with Erec finally acknowledging her as his partner in marriage who deserves to be treated equally because he needs her desperately. Unfortunately, this does not mean the end of their suffering, and Erec faces deadly dangers ahead of them, but ultimately, he triumphs over all his opponents also because he receives Enite's full emotional and other support. As we can read in the text, for instance, "With Lady Enite's help—for she showed him the way—he turned back to the road on which he had come on the bier" (128); "King Erec then asked Lady Enite how he had fallen into the hands of the count" (129), and, most importantly: "Immediately the distressing strange matter came to an end, as well as the peculiar pretense with which he had treated her up to that day without cause" (129). Erec then embraces and kisses his wife, promising her a better life, and she forgives him under tears because she loves him dearly (129).

17 Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*. See now also the edition by Manfred Günter Scholz, trans. by Susanne Held. *Bibliothek des Mittelalters*, 5 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2004). For the English translation, see *The Complete Works of Hartmann von Aue*; for most useful studies in English, see *A Companion to the Works of Hartmann von Aue*. See also Bumke, *Der "Erec" Hartmanns von Aue*.

In many ways, as we could argue, Enite's steadfast love for her husband, her disregard of all the mistreatment, and her physical and spiritual strength in all those life-threatening situations make it all possible for herself and then also for Erec to overcome their enemies and to regain the joy of the court on behalf of the entire society.<sup>18</sup> This, however, is only possible because Enite helped Erec to find the right balance in his life and to accept both marital responsibilities and bliss as well as his social and military duties.<sup>19</sup> She achieved that goal by first submitting quietly under him, then by defying all his death threats when she warns him of imminent danger, subsequently by deeply mourning his presumed death, and finally by resisting the count and screaming for help, which awakens Erec from his physical and spiritual coma.

All this finds its peculiar, but highly meaningful expression in the extensive description of Enite's saddle, a masterpiece of ekphrastic strategies in medieval literature. Even though the images included in the saddle do not tell much about Enite's own actions, they reflect on the entire world history upon which courtly society was predicated and visually associate the owner, Enite, with the greatest heroes and lovers from the past (136-38). The narrator underscores that Enite fully deserved to have received this saddle as a gift because she is identified as "the most beautiful woman alive at that time" (138), but in light of her previous performance, her bold fight for her husband's happiness and honor, and her unshakable loyalty to Erec even in the worst conditions force us to read this laudatory formulation slightly differently.

She earned this saddle, and gained this ekphrastic praise because she is the most worthy lady on earth, a powerful individual who is perfectly qualified to ride on that saddle insofar as she has proven to be Erec's partner in all of his social and personal struggles. While Erec has the obligation to fight with his sword for his honor and the well-

18 Christoph, "The Language and Culture of Joy," 319-33.

19 Sterling-Hellenbrand, *Topographies of Gender in Middle High German*; she examines, above all, the spatiality of the gender discourse, which is, however, not quite the same as agency as displayed by Enite.

being of courtly society, Enite rises to the occasion and becomes an equal spouse, drawing from her own strength and qualifications, as indirectly mirrored by the images on the saddle.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Anonymous *Mai und Beaflo***

My other example among many others is the anonymous *Mai und Beaflo*, composed at the end of the thirteenth century, which has survived in only two manuscripts and might not have achieved much popularity, and this until today since even modern scholarship has not paid much attention to it.<sup>21</sup> While there are numerous fascinating aspects that would deserve to be discussed at great length, such as incest, the crossing of the sea in a rudderless ship, falsified letters, an evil mother-in-law, crusade in Spain, an assassination attempt, matricide, council for the ruler, and the like, here I want to focus on the way how Beaflo operates both as wife and as the female protagonist. In many ways, she emerges as independently minded, as strongly willed, deeply devout, and as loving as Enite in Hartmann's *Erec*, but it also deserves to be mentioned that here we observe a remarkable intensification of emotions as the driving force throughout the entire romance.<sup>22</sup> Beaflo's long series of suffering almost make her to a saint, but since the narrative is mostly secular, the emphasis really rests on her inner strength, her religious devotion, and dedication to her husband Mai.

The romance traces the very difficult life of Beaflo, the daughter of the Roman emperor who tries to rape her after his wife's death. Differently than in *Apollonius of Tyre* where the incest actually occurs,<sup>23</sup> the young woman knows how to resort to cunning and can

20 For this phenomenon, see Wandhoff, *Ekphrasis: Kunstbeschreibungen und virtuelle Räume*, 157-79; Bussmann, *Wiedererzählen, Weitererzählen und Beschreiben*.

21 *Mai und Beaflo*, ed., trans., and commentary Classen; see also the edition by Christian Kiening and Katharina Mertens-Fleury, online at: <http://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/17304/1/MaiundBeaflo-1.pdf> (2008); for critical discussions, see Classen, "Kontinuität und Aufbruch," 324-344; Deibl, *Die Meeresüberfahrten in "Mai und Beaflo"*.

22 Classen, "*Roman Sentimental*," 83-100. For a broad study of this genre around 1300, see Herweg, *Wege zur Verbindlichkeit*; he touches on *Mai und Beaflo* only in passing. See also the contributions to *Hybridität und Spiel der europäischen Liebes- und Abenteuerroman von der Antike zur Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Martin Baisch and Jutta Eming (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2013).

23 Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre*. This text was highly popular throughout late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance.

thus hold back her father and eventually escape before the crime might happen. She also proves to be decisive, forward-looking, energetic, resolute, and courageous in all the subsequent events, and thus arises from early on as a major female character who knows from early on how to handle her own life despite countless challenges of an egregious kind. As the narrator comments once, which applies to Beaflo throughout, “Si was witzich vnd chark” (936; she was smart and strong). In fact, she impresses everyone in her social environment, including the senator Roboal and his wife Benigna, through her determination, virtues, and intelligence. However, she is in constant need of help, which regularly comes forward as well because she impresses everyone through her innocence, piety, beauty, and ideal character.

Once Beaflo has arrived in Greece, she is immediately wooed by the Count Mai, but her future mother-in-law regards her soon with greatest suspicion, although she had arrived with greatest treasures, fearing that she might have been expelled for some sinful behavior or been exiled as the product of some shameful act (2655-2709). Nevertheless, Mai pursues his goal energetically, disregards his mother’s strong objections and the warning of his councilors, and marries the stranger woman. Tragically, although the marriage then develops most harmoniously, leading soon to her delivering a child, Mai’s mother plots against her, and even tries to get her killed during her son’s absence on a crusade in Spain by means of falsified letters that spread entirely fake news, as we would call them today.<sup>24</sup>

In that peculiar situation, Beaflo demonstrates, once again, her foresightfulness, her circumspection, and ability to strategize in order to prevent the murder to happen, bravely accepting the advice of two counts who administer the country in Mai’s absence. She departs from Greece with the same boat in which she had arrived, leaving behind a grieving court, a mournful people, and, soon enough, a suicidal husband who must believe that his wife and son have been

<sup>24</sup> Wenzel, “Boten und Briefe,” 86-105; here 101-04; Bußmann, “Im Bann der Inszenierung – Lachen,” 101-28. She focuses, however, more on the elements of masking one’s identity and subsequent revelation.

killed, allegedly because he himself had ordered this as a punishment for falsely claimed adultery that she had committed. Mai then even kills his own mother once he has realized that she had manipulated the letters and can thus be identified as the true culprit in the death of his wife, not knowing that Beaflo had managed to escape in time.

This female protagonist takes the most dangerous sea voyage upon herself, along with her son Schoifloris, and she manages, with God's help, to return to Rome, where she lives, in hiding, in the house of her foster-father, the Senator Roboal. Years then pass, and eventually Mai and his companions arrive in Rome as well to ask the pope for forgiveness, which ultimately makes it possible for the couple to meet again and, after some playful retardation, to recognize each other. Beaflo perfectly plays the game as a stranger, but finally the secret is revealed and the couple reunites in complete happiness.

Admittedly, formally Roboal assumes the central role in this theatrical comedy as the 'stage director,' but Beaflo performs her own role exceedingly well, which allows all the emotions involving the two people to come fully to the fore. After the denouement has occurred, Mai and Beaflo assume the government of the Roman Empire and live a happy life as a couple in harmonious company. We do not learn much about her own contributions in that function, but the poet sheds enough light on her for us to understand how much she continues to determine her own life and understands how to assure that things develop in a reasonable, logical fashion. For instance, when the Greek nobles want to return home, they request that the couple's young son accompany them and take over the rule in their country, but his mother resolutely refuses this and orders them to accept the rule by the two noblemen, Corneljo and Effeide (9632-35), who had already proven their loyalty back in Greece and had taken every possible effort to protect Beaflo from the threatened execution as allegedly ordered by her husband (as a result of Mai's mother's falsification of the letter).

More important, however, proves to be Beaflo's agency during the time of greatest trials and tribulations when she is facing near death as a result of her husband's command, as spelled out in the letter. She accepts her doom, but then follows the advice to leave the country secretly, and thus she can rise to the occasion and demonstrate through her own existence the workings of God. In fact, everyone, both back home in Rome and in Greece deeply reveres her and regards her as the most virtuous person ever. This is, however, also matched by Mai's inner virtues, and the couple at the end joins in a happy union again because they are equally strong and passionate about each other, and also display the greatest character qualities.

Altogether, this proves to be a rather sentimental verse romance, but it is predicated centrally on the idealization of the wife who is obedient and loving, energetic and trusting in God, and who thus can, at the conclusion of the romance, surprise Mai with the fact that she is still alive. As much as she always seems to be the victim of external forces, her resoluteness and piety, her devotion to God and love for Mai make her to the outstanding female protagonist who dominates the entire romance. As submissive and obedient as she appears to be, we can consistently recognize a deep inner self-determination to protect her own honor, virginity, and agency.

The departure scene in Greece, when she is supposed to be executed upon her husband's order, formulated in the fateful, falsified letter, seems to imply her complete filial piety and subordination under the Count. She immediately accepts her death penalty and begs the two knights not to sacrifice themselves and their families only in order to protect her. Beaflo even goes so far as to defend her husband, identifying God as the one who really wants her to die (5876), while she declares Mai to be innocent in all this (5895-96), although she does not know anything of the true circumstances resulting from her mother-in-law's evil machinations.

Re-emphasizing her own humility, she affirms that her own death would not matter much, whereas the destiny of the two knights and their families concern her most. She only begs them to preserve her

child as a completely innocent victim and to put herself to death (5916). In fact, no one would ever blame them for their actions which they would have carried out as loyal servants of their lord. Beaflo almost recognizes here an opportunity to die as a martyr and thus to pay for her sins, though she is completely innocent and would be a victim of monstrous murderous intentions. Cornelio and Effraide, however, figure out an alternative, taking her to the boat with which she had arrived, and allow her to escape this way, together with her child and all the treasures with which she had come originally.

As soon as she has disappeared, however, the two counts lose all their confidence and courage, blaming themselves for not having escaped together with her. They are sure that the entire country will accuse them of having committed terrible murder and being contemptible and dishonorable individuals (6063-68). In fact, they are about to commit suicide and can be rescued only in the last minute, while Beaflo floats across the Mediterranean Sea and arrives safely in Italy, always trusting God.

The men, however, including her own husband, constantly demonstrate desperation and despondency, not knowing how to cope with their own emotions. The entire people begins to lament and cry over the terrible loss of the princess, all assuming that the two counts have carried out her husband's order. Deep sorrow sinks on the country, as everyone grieves deeply over Beaflo's and her child's death, allegedly killed as instructed by Count Mai. The latter is completely innocent, of course, and also ignorant about the entire situation, but he then acts the same way as all of his people, completely devastated and ready to commit suicide. He later finds out the truth and commits matricide, but this does not bring back his wife and son. Years pass, in which Mai sinks into terrible depression and self-abandonment, until the bishop urges him to go to Rome and to beg the pope for forgiveness.

At the same time, Beaflo has arrived in Italy, but she would not be willing to get out of the boat unless she knows to be safe from her father's sexual persecutions. Her agency is that of a saintly person,

a martyr, since she would be rather prepared to return to the incertitude of the waves than to stay there where her father could pursue her once again (7271-79). However, Roboal and Benigna take care of her and promise her complete security, which later allows her, once her husband has also made his way to Rome, to reunify with him and gain worldly joys and honors again, especially because by then her father has publicly admitted his guilt and then steps down from the throne, making room for Mai to ascend in his place, becoming the new Roman emperor.

Granted, here as well a male protagonist appears as the leading figure since the Senator Roboal operates as the *magister ludi* at court, arranging the play with fake roles, bringing together Mai and his own wife Beaflo, him being the only one to know her true identity, until days have passed and both have experienced much sorrow. Finally, the secret is then lifted, and universal happiness returns to all protagonists, except for the emperor who admits his guilt which he had caused himself when he had tried to rape his own daughter. Nevertheless, since he then resigns from his post and seeks the pope's forgiveness, even this aspect finds its happy solution.

Beaflo operates throughout the entire scene in a most skillful manner and carries out all of Roboal's instructions without ever breaking her promise not to betray herself. She enjoys highest respect for her virtues, beauty, and piety, but we also recognize in her an individual protagonist who pursues her life's goals strictly, always trying the hardest to protect her virtues and to follow God's commands. Even though Roboal is the one who arranges the deceptive game, it is Beaflo who assumes the central role, teasing her husband with her appearance which makes her look exactly as his presumably dead wife. Her agency is not that of organizing her own life since she follows the instructions both by the Senator and his wife, and, back in Greece, by the two counts, but her highest goal of serving God is her own pilot light, and she does not allow anyone making her move away from Him, whatever the circumstances might be. Beaflo thus proves to be, by way of her deliberate passivity and obedience under

her husband and under God, a saintly figure with a high degree of indirect agency, but she operates effectively here in this world and gains global respect from everyone, except her evil mother-in-law and her own father, the emperor. While Mai at the end earns greatest honor and a universal reputation as a fair judge and a good ruler, his wife Beaflo stands right next to him and shares with him her love (9666-68). The poet has only praise and admiration for her and gives her his highest credit because, ultimately, she steered her own ship, both metaphorically and concretely, across rough seas and succeeded because of her utmost honor and devotion to God and gaining her own happiness and personal fulfillment through her love and commitment to Mai.

### Late Medieval Verse Narratives, *mæren*

From here let us turn to another literary genre, late medieval *mæren*, where we hear more often than not of highly self-determined, self-assured, and independently minded wives.<sup>25</sup> My three prime examples are Ruprecht von Würzburg's *Die getreue Ehefrau*, Dietrich von der Gletze's *Der Borte*, and Heinrich Kaufringer's *Die unschuldige Mörderin*, three almost extreme cases where the wife's agency is strongly profiled and presented as an ideal that even husband ought to acknowledge and respect as most useful and honorable for themselves. As we have already learned, in the first case, Irmengart holds up her own honor against her entire family that proves to be thoroughly corrupt and yet also deeply shortsighted, and can thus defy all traditional prejudices against wives and, at the same time, is thereby capable of preserving her husband's property and business.<sup>26</sup> We can build on this interpretation and investigate further to what extent this wife knows how to bring into play her own agency and pursue both her love and economic well-being within an honorable setting.

25 Fischer, *Die deutsche Märendichtung*; and his *Studien zur deutschen Märendichtung*; Schirmer, ed. *Das Märe*; Ziegeler, *Erzählen im*; Heinzle, "Kleine Anleitung zum Gebrauch," 45-48. For a solid text selection, see *Novellistik des Mittelalters*. Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz und das Chaos*; see now also Classen's English translations *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany*.

26 Classen, "A Woman Fights for Her Honor," 95-113.

### **Ruprecht von Würzburg**

The narrator never leaves any doubt about Irmengart's exemplarity as an individual, as a wife, and as a competent manager of the family business. She and Bertram love each other deeply and trust each other fully. He goes so far as to bet his entire fortune on her loyalty, and he does not want to believe until the end that his opponent, the inn-keeper Hogier, might have succeeded in seducing her during his absence, which was part of their wager to test his wife. Hogier had argued that any woman can be enticed to sleep with a man if the price is just right. Considering how much Irmengart's entire family urges her to accept the huge amount of money for one night with Hogier, we are not surprised about this capitalistic mentality that knows nothing of honor and virtues.

Irmengart is actually totally chagrined to learn that her aunt, her parents, and others subscribe to this ideology and are simply ready to accept prostitution as a legitimate form of earning money. She fights against this attitude with all her wits and knows at the end how to subterfuge the seduction attempt by using the same strategy, inviting her maid to stand in for her, and this for a much more modest price. The maid proves to be a prostitute, and hence has to pay a much higher price than she had expected because Hogier cuts off her pinky after they have slept with each other in order to have proof of his triumph over Bertram and his wife. Irmengart thus beats the seducer with his own weapons and regains her agency, despite all the bad advice by her family. However, what does agency mean in this context?

First of all, her husband can go on his business trip because he knows that he can entirely rely on his wife to represent him fully back at home. Then, Irmengart is faced by a serious challenge when Hogier appears on the stage, and at first she resolutely beats back all the various servants who have been bribed by him to help him in his seduction efforts. Yet, then she faces more difficulties because Hogier ups the monetary offer, which certainly appeals to Irmengart's family who strongly encourages her to accept it and thus to make

much money for herself and Bertram. Thus, she faces a profound dilemma, being caught between the pressure by her family and her own value system. In that moment, she prays to God and receives the advice she has long looked for, entering a new stage in her defense by deceptively accepting the role which Hogier and everyone else wants her to play, that is, the corruptible wife. In reality, however, she creates a double for herself, the maid, and can thus escape Hogier's grip and still appease her family.

Ultimately, and this is the third level in the entire strategy, during the public event in which her opponent argues that his claim holds true that all women can be sexually seduced if the price is right, she simply holds up both her hands and can thus prove that Hogier, and patriarchal society at large, are fundamentally wrong. She powerfully illustrates that she was a loyal, intelligent, and energetic wife who knows exactly how to maintain her virtuosity and honor and who demonstrates publicly and privately her own agency. As in our previous examples, however, Irmengart is exposed to tremendous external pressures and must seek unique and secret measures to implement this agency directly against the patriarchal authorities.

The narrative itself also highlights her considerable problems maintaining herself in face of Hogier's attacks, especially because she is alone without her husband's support. In other words, we also notice specific criticism of the husband who failed in his duties or is simply negligent. Bertram seemingly deserves credit for his enormous trust in his wife's loyalty, but in reality he is responsible for his wife's terrible testing and abandons her in that situation, which forces her to draw on her own agency and thus to save their marriage.

### **Dietrich von der Gletze**

In Dietrich von der Gletze's *Der Borte* this condition is profiled even more pronouncedly, and the wife takes more charge in the marriage than all other female figures discussed above. However, in contrast to the other examples, here the husband, Konrad, proves to be rather insecure and lacking in public reputation and departs

from her in search of fame at a tournament in some distance. While she is alone at home, a stranger knight appears who offers her miraculous animals in return for her love, and finally, since she has steadfastly rejected those and thus his wooing, his iconic belt that guarantees the one who wears it honor and reputation. This magical object succeeds in breaking down her defense since she wants to acquire this belt for her husband, but the odd knight also abandons all of his valuables and departs on foot, no longer owning any of his traditional attributes as a knight.<sup>27</sup> Being nameless and appearing only as a cameo figure, we might speculate that he constitutes an abstract symbol or ideal of knighthood, but in the narrative reality he has seduced the wife, which a servant has observed, who tattles on her to his lord. The young man is enraged, but he does not confront his wife; instead he departs for the court of Brabant without ever returning home. His wife is waiting for him patiently and performs exceedingly well in managing the estate and maintaining her honor despite the one-time infraction, which no one comments on as if the public had not learned of the truth despite the servant's tattling.

After two years without having seen her husband, this wife takes actions into her own hand and pursues him, disguising herself as a knight, using the pseudonym "Heinrich" (Henry). Since s/he owns those magical animals (two greyhounds, a falcon, and a horse), she earns highest fame at greatest ease, while her husband appears to suffer from continuous ignominy, if not incompetence. At a convenient moment, he begs his new friend to gift one of those animals to him, that is, to share a little of his honor and reputation. The wife finally indicates her willingness if Konrad would be prepared to sleep with her.

The young man, not knowing of the disguise, laments that a splendid knight like this stranger would have homosexual inclinations, but declares his readiness, after all out of greed, as she later calls it, or despondency regarding his failed attempts to achieve knightly acclaim. Only then does she finally reveal her own identity and lam-

27 Classen, "Disguises, Gender-Bending, and Clothing Symbolism," 95-110.

basts him egregiously for his foulness, calling him a heretic who would not even hesitate to prostitute himself to another man only in order to gain a valuable object/animal. In her assessment, she committed adultery for altruistic reasons, thinking only of Conrad and trying to help him, while he was only concerned with himself and was callously ready to commit a major crime ‘against nature,’ homosexuality, as we call it today.<sup>28</sup>

The husband immediately acknowledges his own guilt, begs for her forgiveness, which she happily grants, and both then return home, the couple finally having reached mutual understanding and respect. Since she shares the magical animals and also the belt with him, she helps her husband to gain the long desired public reputation.

As brief as this narrative proves to be, it offers an extraordinary example of wifely agency and powerfully profiles her decisiveness, intelligence, rationality, and cunning, all employed to secure her marriage and her husband’s love. We can certainly debate controversially whether she prostituted herself as much as her husband, although it is pretty evident that her action, to which she agreed only after a massive effort on the part of the foreign knight, served to support her husband and was done for him alone. She has no personal interest in the stranger, and very much would have liked to maintain her chastity during her husband’s absence, but the attractiveness of the belt for her husband makes the decisive difference.<sup>29</sup>

This is a wife who very much holds her own, both at the very beginning where she is portrayed as a loving and loyal person, trustworthy and reliable, while her husband feels insecure and quickly proves to be unstable and rash in his decisions. We are not informed about his

28 Even though the homosexual act itself is vehemently condemned here, which was typical of the entire Middle Ages, the narrative proves to be rather extraordinary insofar as homosexuality is even treated in such an open fashion, as if it would not be very unusual for such a sexual sin to happen. Medieval scholarship has worked on this topic for a long time, by now. See, more recently, Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful*; most fundamental, Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.

29 In light of this observation we can entirely dismiss the notion that the belt which she wears herself at the beginning, or the belt which the knight grants her in return for sex represents a chastity belt. See Classen, *The Medieval Chastity Belt*.

life at the court in Brabant, whereas the poet clearly emphasizes his wife's ability to run the estate all by herself despite her youth. She has amassed a fairly large amount of money during those two years and now utilizes it to mastermind her disguise as a knight with a splendid following.

And indeed, with the help of the magical animals (and the belt) she quickly achieves highest honor which makes Konrad desire them uncontrollably. By contrast, she had resisted all the various offers by the foreign knight, constantly being mindful of her love for her husband, not interested in committing adultery at all. Granted, the narrator adds that nature happily responded to that lovemaking in the garden, and she went so far as to give him a loving kiss upon his request, but she badly mocks him subsequently and dismisses him as meaningless. She took the opportunity as it had presented itself, but not for her own enrichment or enjoyment, but on her husband's behalf.

Altogether, here we face a somewhat curious, but certainly impressive example of a wife who secures the couple's happiness by means of pursuing her own agency and struggling with all her might to hold on to her happiness and helping him to secure a respectable social status as a knight. We can be certain that Conrad acknowledges her from that time forward, as the final comments confirm, especially because she had demonstrated to him how much inner strength she possessed and that he could rely on her completely, despite the one time infraction. He himself had failed badly, if not even worse, and now understands how to appreciate his wife despite her shortcoming during his absence. Dietrich projected thus a poetic paean on marriage as a situation in which husband and wife enjoy their love and partnership based on mutual respect and admiration.<sup>30</sup>

### **Heinrich Kaufringer**

My last example presents a slightly different scenario, but the poet's view regarding wives' agency resembles the previous cases considerably, although the female protagonist is badly abused by people

<sup>30</sup> For an early attempt to come to terms with this issue, see Ortmann and Ragotzky, "Minneherrin und Ehefrau," 67-84.

around her. In Heinrich Kaufringer's *Die unschuldige Mörderin* we encounter a young countess who is about to marry the king, but the night before the wedding an evil-minded knight manages to convince her that he is her fiancé and deserves to be let in so that he can enjoy a night of sexual pleasures with him.<sup>31</sup> Tragically for him, after he has almost fallen asleep, he betrays himself, and in her desperation, the princess takes the gruesome action and decapitates him. However, she is not strong enough to remove the body from her bedroom and must ask the guardian for help. The latter proves to be equally evil and demands sexual pleasures before he would assist her. The countess has to submit under him, but later, when they are about to throw the corpse into the well, she surreptitiously lifts him up at his legs and throws him into the water, drowning him. Subsequently, the wedding takes place and everything seems to have worked out well for her, but she has lost her virginity and hence resorts to the traditional trick to ask her most trustworthy maid to substitute for her during the first night with her husband. The maid, however, then betrays her lady after all, insisting on staying in bed with the king because she wants to take on the role of his wife. In her desperation, the countess then sets fire to the bedroom and rescues her husband, locks the door behind her, and so has the maid burned to death.

The truth comes out only thirty years later, and then, surprisingly, her husband forgives her in light of her long suffering and in acknowledgment of her having committed those horrible deeds on his behalf only. Is she a murderess, as we would call her today, or is she a victim of the circumstances? Moreover, is she an individual who acted on her own or is she a victim of the prevalent conditions? Do we feel sympathy for her dilemma or do we judge her according to strictly legal perspectives? This issue does not have to be decided here, especially because the title itself proves to be contradictory, whereas the central matter pertains to her agency which she takes on quickly and resolutely.

31 Ziegeler, "Ruprecht von Würzburg," 418-21.

Although there is multiple murder in place, the narrator paints a picture of a strong female character who is suddenly faced by a series of horrible situations in which she must make fast decisions without any help from anyone else. From her perspective in those specific moments, she has no choice but to defend herself and eliminate her enemies who are about to destroy her life. However, for her entire life she feels deeply guilty, as she finally admits to her husband, and yet she had acted very strategically and without hesitation and thus could overcome the existential danger and terrible abuse by the two men and her own maid. On the one hand it seems that she was justified in carrying out the killing because the perpetrators had broken their fundamental ethical ideals and so deserved to die. Nevertheless, she committed murder, after all, and the narrator leaves no doubt about it, despite extensive sympathy for his protagonist.

She experiences this profound aporia in legal, moral, and religious terms because she refuses to be a passive victim and takes charge of her life, particularly in this extremely critical situation in the night before her marriage and then in the wedding night. Female agency thus results into severe conflicts with the standard legal conditions, which are not satisfactorily resolved and which resonate even with us in the modern world as a huge challenge (manslaughter versus murder).

### **Conclusion**

More often than not medieval authors of courtly romances and late medieval verse narratives project their female characters as endowed with much agency which allows them to pursue their ideals and values, although they operate in their own way and often in private. Beafloer, for instance, never seems to rise to the occasion to determine her own life, constantly being tossed around by destiny, being sexually threatened by her father, and victimized by her mother-in-law through the assassination attempt. Nevertheless, at the same time, by pursuing the model of a near martyr, she gains tremendous agency and can thus determine the course of her entire existence with God's help. Similarly, the women characters in some

of the *mæren* face severe crises but succeed in managing their lives successfully and fruitfully, enjoying happiness for themselves and together with their husbands.

We could, however, also point out literary examples where the opposite takes place, meaning that the female protagonists are victimized and survive only because strong men enter the scene and help them in a critical fashion, such as in Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Sibille* (1437).<sup>32</sup> Our analysis forces us to recognize that the power relationships in marriage was regularly discussed already since the twelfth century (Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*), that this discourse continued well into the late thirteenth century (*Mai und Beafloer*), and that late medieval poets increasingly introduced strong women who command much agency both privately and publicly. The most dramatic but also rather problematic example would be Melusine in Thüring von Ringoltingen's eponymous prose novel from 1456, which later became a true bestseller on the early modern book market once the printers had discovered it as a fantastic product for their business.<sup>33</sup> Here the female protagonist arranges the marriage with Raymond; she commands the necessary resources to build many castles and to establish an entire dynasty, which is also underscored by her prolific fertility. However, she is a hybrid creature and has imposed a taboo on her husband not to search for her on Saturdays when she is hiding in a bathhouse.

Tragically for both, once he has transgressed this taboo and subsequently revealed her true nature to the public, she has to depart from her entire family and leave this world, which entirely devastates Raymond because he cannot handle this profound loss.<sup>34</sup> Of course, Thüring drew from an old literary tradition (Couldrette, Jean d'Arras, Gervasius of Tilbury, and Walter Map), but the novel's enormous popularity probably mirrored the fascination with and

32 *Der Roman von der Königin Sibille*; see also the comprehensive study by von Bloh, *Ausgerenkte Ordnung*.

33 Thüring von Ringoltingen, *Melusine*.

34 Tang, *Mahrtenehen in der westeuropäischen und chinesischen Literatur*.

also fear of the strong, independently minded wife who operates with a high degree of agency and yet fails at the end because her husband cannot live up to his own promise and pledge.

The examples of self-assured and powerful wives in the *mæren* underscore, by contrast, the extent to which the figure of the strong and independently-minded wife, controlling and exerting her own agency with the purpose of securing her own happiness and that of her husband, strongly intrigued late medieval poets, as we can also observe in the case of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Poggio Bracciolini's *Facetiae*, and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*. This, however, already takes us into the middle of the sixteenth century, which would require a separate investigation of the contemporary literature in light of female agency.

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*Portrait of Hartmann von Aue  
Codex Manesse. Fol. 184v.*