Communication and Social Interactions in the Late Middle Ages: The Fables by the Swiss-German Dominican Ulrich Bonerius

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There are many possible and useful approaches to the study of literature. One very effective way proves to be to study literary texts as platforms to explore the meaning, relevance, and workings of human communication, or the very opposite, miscommunication. Such an approach proves to be rather productive both for medieval and modern texts, from the western and the eastern tradition, whether we are reflecting on entertaining, moral, didactic, religious, or political texts. The literary work consists of words exchanged, and thus here we encounter the perfect example of a theoretical platform to discuss human interactions in many different contexts and under countless conditions. This study first theorizes this communicative approach and then elucidates it through a discussion of the fables by the Swiss Dominican poet Ulrich Bonerius (Der Edelstein, ca. 1350). The implications gained here promise to re-establish the relevance of pre-modern literature for the current generation, but the concept also works well for the analysis of modern literature.

Theoretical Reflections

At the risk of stating the obvious, it still deserves to be emphasized that one of the major reasons why we study and teach (the history of) literature consists of the realization that it offers us unique opportunities to explore the nature and properties of social interactions and the meaning of communication both in the present and in the past. Of course, literary texts are mostly characterized by their fictional character, but they provide us with unique narrative platforms to investigate the meaning of human existence, to identify specific conditions in certain social contexts, to identify extreme forms of behavior and hence dangers to individuals and society at large, and they also, by the same token, offer valuable models of good or bad communication, sociability, coordination, and compromise (and the lack thereof), which all make human existence (im)possible in the first place, at least in (de)constructive terms, within a working or dysfunctional community. The more popular a certain text from
the past has been throughout time, the more it offers an opportunity for us to reflect upon the reasons for this popularity and what it might tell us about its effectiveness among the readership (history of reception; for the theoretical foundations, see the famous concept developed by Jauss).¹

Here disregarding the obvious factor that certain narratives simply appealed to the audiences because they contain exciting, stirring, or uplifting messages and content, we can investigate the phenomenon further and identify the text’s effectiveness and relevance – here not yet differentiating between genres, historical periods, or styles – by focusing on its potentials to teach lessons, to explore certain social conditions, or to convey spiritual, ethical, moral, and religious ideas, not to forget political, economic, or military concepts. One of the most important features of all literary texts might well be communication as illustrated by the protagonists’ interaction with their social environment, or miscommunication, which then leads to a crisis, if not catastrophe (e.g., Nibelungenlied; and for a positive contrast within the same genre, see Kudrun). In modern terms, relevant literary works reflect the operations of communal networks in the past and signal why those functioned well or broke down.²

If we accept this fairly straightforward premise, we will suddenly find ourselves in the opportune situation of no longer having to worry about chronological barriers between the various literary periods or differences in genres because then – e.g., in the history of German literature – both Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival (ca. 1205) and Sebastian Brant’s Narrenschiff (1494), both Grimmelshausen’s Simplicissimus (1668) and Lessing’s Nathan der Weise (1779), and so forth carry meaning and invite their critical scrutiny not only by the respective scholars invested in those specific literary-historical time frames, but by all readers. Drawing from such a theoretical platform allows us intriguingly to bring to the same conversations

¹ Jauss, Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik.

² See, for instance, the contributions to Bérat, Hardie, and Dumitrescu, ed., Relations of Power.
the works by Herta Müller (b. 1953) or Felicitas Hoppe (b. 1960) and those by medieval authors such as Hartmann von Aue, The Stricker, Mechthild of Magdeburg, or Konrad von Würzburg. Vice versa, this would then also apply to literatures in other languages.

Of course, there are many philological and historical challenges to be considered because language is always in a constant process of change, and even if we know well how to translate Old or Middle High German (e.g., “Hildebrandslied,” ca. 820, Heinrich Wittenwiler’s *Ring*, ca. 1400, or the letters by Argula von Grumbach, ca. 1520–1530) into New High German, we would still not have easily or fully grasped the meaning of the words or the content. Undoubtedly, we also would have to keep in mind the social-historical conditions of each literary work before we could successfully proceed to interpret the text today and draw from it for our own intellectual enrichment.3

Nevertheless, by emphasizing communication as a key element in literary works, we will suddenly discover innovative and powerful arguments with which to convince the new generation of readers to accept the challenges also of older texts for us today, if not primarily those because the issue of communication appears to have been of a rather critical nature in pre-modern texts.4 This does not mean that we would necessarily be able to identify specific moments in a narrative where the very nature of communication is addressed from a linguistic and philosophical perspective, although there are certainly specific cases such as Andreas Capellanus with his *De amore*, ca. 1180, or Juan Ruiz with his *Libro de buen amor*, ca. 1330. Instead, as I suggest here, the presentation of the events in a narrative, often dialogic context enables us to recognize communicative situations that either succeed or fail (Thüring von Ringoltingen’s *Melusine*,

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3 Still pertinent and rather relevant today, see Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, 5; cf. also Ziolkowski’s excellent introduction, xx-xxi; cf. also the approach pursued by Wellbery and Ryan, ed., *A New History of German Literature*.

4 Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung*. 
1456; or Jörg Wickram, *Rollwagenbüchlein*, 1555). By raising the issue of who is talking when and how, why someone does not make his/her voice heard, or what specific comments addressed to an individual might mean and entail, the poets regularly invite the audience to reflect with them on their own attempts to reach out to their social environment by means of words, gestures, mimicry, etc. Communication is hence practiced both within and outside of the text, when the narrator addresses his/her audience and illustrates the messages conveyed through the poem or romance.

Such an approach to both premodern and modern literature together would not be anachronistic because all human societies have struggled with the fundamental question of how its individuals can cooperate with each other effectively, either in the public sphere (the community of the court, the community of the monastery, or the community of the family) or in the private sphere (friendship, lovers, marriage partners), not to forget the world of mysticism where the religious authors report of their communication with a saint, the Holy Spirit, or the Godhead and yet cannot be understood by the ordinary people, such as in the case of the Flemish mystic Hadewijch (thirteenth century). 5 Courtly love, for example, perhaps best illustrated by Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* (ca. 1210), was always predicated on the ideal of the two lovers being able to engage in their own secret language, or communication, using words, gestures, signals, etc., which no one else could fully understand. 6

The entire treatise *De amore* by the Parisian cleric Andreas Capellanus (ca. 1180), a critical witness for our argument, is predicated mostly on dialogues, hence on men’s efforts to reach out to the admired

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5 As to this problem, see Schnell, “Vom Nicht- und Missverstehen im Mittelalter,” 580-81; cf. also for more global perspectives, Keller, *Communication avec l’ultime*; see further Raymond, *Conversations with Angels*.

lady communicatively and to convince them to accept them as their lovers,\textsuperscript{7} which virtually does not succeed, however. Wolfram von Eschenbach specifically focuses on the communicative gesture by his protagonist Parzival in the eponymous romance (ca. 1205) who needs to learn the basics of empathy and compassion in the presence of suffering, which in turn needs to be expressed with a question.\textsuperscript{8} Of course, no community is possible without language, whether verbal, deictic, haptic, mimicry, or audio. In fact, as I suggested twenty years ago, much medieval literature is predicated on the fundamental concern with communication, an issue that challenges each generation anew and needs to be worked through over and over again.\textsuperscript{9}

The entire world of medieval and also modern preaching, i.e., sermons, depends on persuasion, a rhetorical, intellectual, and communicative process,\textsuperscript{10} but we discover communicative strategies virtually everywhere in the literary documents, whether in the form of verbal exchanges, as gestures, or iconic symbols.\textsuperscript{11} Most of the conflicts dealt with by pre-modern poets can be reduced to communicative issues that need to be worked out before society at large could address its larger issues, whether we think of the anonymous \textit{Gesta Romanorum}, the \textit{lais} by Marie de France, the \textit{maerchen} by The Stricker, the large corpus of \textit{fabliaux}, late medieval verse narratives (e.g., Heinrich Kaufringer), the \textit{Decameron} by Boccaccio, \textit{The Canterbury Tales} by Geoffrey Chaucer, or the vast corpus of early modern \textit{Schwänke} (e.g., Hans Wilhelm Kirchoff). After all, the entire history of humankind is deeply impacted by

\textsuperscript{7} Knapp, trans., annotations, and epilogue. Andreas aulae regiae capellanus.

\textsuperscript{8} Bumke, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Urscheler, Kommunikation in Wolframs “Parzival.”

\textsuperscript{9} Classen, \textit{Verzweiflung und Hoffnung}; cf. the contributions to Günthart and Jucker, ed., \textit{Kommunikation im Spätmittelalter}.

\textsuperscript{10} Pansters, \textit{Franciscan Virtue}; Muessig, \textit{Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages}.

\textsuperscript{11} Burrow, \textit{Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative}. 
social strife, misunderstanding, and a lack of mutual respect, which has regularly meant the inclusion and, much more commonly the relevance, of evil within the literary discourse.

We are, hence, best advised, following Emmelius’s suggestion, to consider many of the extant literary texts as media for community building, for the practicing of communication, and for educating the audience in moral and ethical issues. Pursuing these topics as fundamental in literature, we gain valuable categories for approaching both medieval and modern texts within the same interpretive framework, especially in those cases where a poet intensively interacts with his/her audience and toggles between the actually narrative determined by dialogues and the epilogue where s/he addresses the readers/listeners. True communication would thus be decided not only by verbal exchanges, which can so easily be determined by lies, deception, illusion, or pretenses, but much more critically with subsequent actions which lead to changes in the social interactions because moral and ethical criteria enter the linguistic community, as most famously theoretically elaborated by the Frankfurt sociologist Jürgen Habermas.

A Case Study: Ulrich Bonerius and His Fables

As obvious as all these observations might be, they help us to strengthen our understanding of the global literary discourse better, both in the past and in the present. To illustrate the strategy to be pursued, approaching literary analysis by means of a communicative lens, here I want to examine a highly influential corpus of didactic texts from the Middle Ages where this perspective is intricately developed in practical and theoretical terms. This corpus comprises the fables by the Bernese Dominican, Ulrich Bonerius, collected in his

12 Emmelius, Gesellige Ordnung; for more global perspectives, see the contributions to Evdokimova and Marchandisse, ed., Le texte médiéval dans le processus de communication; cf. also the studies assembled by Adamska and Marco Mostert, ed., Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside.

13 Habermas, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns; Habermas, Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln.
Edelstein (ca. 1350), which easily prove to be a crucial contribution to that genre and are ideally situated between the high Middle Ages and the early modern age. Bonerius (also: Boner) drew, of course, from the ancient Greek tradition established by Aesop via ancient early medieval translations by Phaedrus, Babrius, Avianus, and Romulus (= Anonymus Neveleti). He himself then exerted a huge influence well into the sixteenth century, when his fables were increasingly replaced by those composed by his successors, such as Heinrich Steinhöwel, Johannes Pauli, Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Luther, Hans Sachs, Hans Wilhelm Kirchhoff, and others. After a hiatus of ca. 200 years, the reception of Bonerius’s fables set in again fully at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when major writers and philologists including Jakob Bodmer, Johann Jacob Breitinger, Johann Joachim Eschenburg, Georg Friedrich Benecke, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Franz Pfeiffer, recognized their outstanding literary quality.

There would not be any need to revisit the basic elements of the genre of fables, since scholarship has discussed it so extensively already. In fact, any significant encyclopedia, in print or online, includes useful articles on the fable, one of the most universally appreciated types of literary works enjoyed by readers/listeners all over the world and throughout time. Moreover, although Bonerius composed mostly fables, there are also a number of verse narratives that would not fall under the narrow category of the fable, irrespective of the highly didactic intentions shared by all contributions to that collection. But if the premise holds true that communication models constitute some of the critical elements in literature at large, then we can be certain that the Edelstein served that purpose

14 Stange, ed., Ulrich Boner. Der Edelstein; for the English translation, see Classen, trans. The Fables of Ulrich Bonerius

15 Grubmüller, Meister Esopus; Classen, trans., Ulrich Bonerius, x-xi, xiv-xxii.

16 See, e.g., Blackham, The Fable as Literature; Elschenbroich, Die deutsche und lateinische Fabel in der Frühen Neuzeit; Grubmüller, Meister Esopus; Wright, ‘Hie lert uns der meister’; for a bibliography of older scholarship, see Carnes, Fable Scholarship.
excellence, especially because the poet favored to predicate his texts on dialogues.¹⁷

Bonerius was a friar priest (Dominican) and must have listened to countless confessions throughout his professional career, so we can be certain that he drew inspiration for his stories both from the classical tradition and from what he had learned throughout his life in his engagement with people of all walks of life. Highly central, however, seems to be the poet’s concern with the question of how people communicate with each other and how this engagement could lead to a constructive form of community, unless, which is also often the case, deliberate lying, deception, or pretenses enter the picture. Of course, every human society relies fundamentally on verbal or written exchanges, whether we think of sermons, lectures, discussions, public talks, printed texts, manuscripts, etc., and as much hope there is that those channels can achieve their purpose, as much the opposite can be the case. We will also observe how much the poet was concerned with addressing his audience and to establish a communicative network with them, perhaps more than many other fable authors before or after him.

**Manuscript Illuminations as a Key to Communication**

Significantly, the cover of the English translation by Classen (2020) illustrates this aspect dramatically, showing us a scene from fable no. 94 (fol. 97r, Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek, Codex Pal. germ. 794, ca. 1410–1420). We see two people involved in a conversation, the one on the right apparently a monk – maybe a direct reference to Bonerius himself – and the other an ordinary person expressing considerable grief with his head bent down. The monk has both of his arms extended, with one finger of the right hand pointing to the other, obviously giving him a lesson about the danger of being deceived by false illusions and of hence mistreating or neglecting one’s own friends.¹⁸ Here, a bad situation proves to be fruitful for


a good lesson about the values of true friendship and mutual trust as explored through the conversation and discussion of those two people.

By contrast, the edition by Stange shows a very different scene, here fable no. 33, but from the same Heidelberg manuscript, depicting an angry-looking wolf standing outside of a castle tower talking to a well-protected goat, both being on very hostile terms. In that fable, a mother goat has left her child behind in the stable to go feeding in the pasture, warning the young goat to be on its guard against the wolf, above all, but even against all ‘people’ who might knock at the door to be let in. When the wolf then arrives, the kid immediately recognizes who he is because the voice betrays him. As it tells the wolf, he could use German or French, but nothing would help him to get into the stable: “dich hilfet weder tiutsch noch wälsch” (22; neither German nor French will help you), a statement which directly leads over to the epipmythium in which the narrator offers his interpretation of the implications contained in this fable.

Bonerius is deeply worried about people’s use of honey-sweet words to deceive others and to lie to them badly: “si triegent, liegent valscheklick” (38; they deceive and lie badly). While they express themselves in an appealing manner, their actions expose their evil intention, the very opposite of a true form of communication. The world is filled with untrustworthy characters, so the listener/reader addressed here is told to be on his/her guard against them and to engage with them in a careful, discriminating fashion: “guoter huot bedarf er wol, / der sich vor in hüeten sol” (41‒42). The narrator also adds that everyone, irrespective of his/her age, ought to observe closely what the instruction or commands say. We realize thus that Bonerius really addresses communication in this situation and offers concrete recommendations of how to carry it out to the best possible effect for both sides involved, leaving out the hopeless aggressor.

Bonerius did not publish sermons, as popular as those had become by the fourteenth century (Wenzel), but fables and similar verse
narratives of a didactic kind, and this for obvious reasons because they were easy to understand and also entertaining, hence already well established at his time (see the fables by The Stricker, e.g.). However, the author was not only content with reiterating the classical canon of fables, many of which would be recognizable also by modern readers without any significant difficulties. He added to almost every one of his texts an extensive epimythium (an elaborate epilogue) in which he offered his own reading of the events or verbal exchanges, so he combined the mostly literary dimension of his verse narratives with a strongly didactic one, providing more critical comments than many other authors of fables. However, insofar as he mostly composed fables, he found himself in the ideal situation of exploring the many different aspects relevant for human communication and community, fighting vices and evil and outlining ways to create a sense of goodness based on virtues.¹⁹

**Bonerius and Communication**

The argument that I want to develop further hence consists of examining Bonerius’s texts as a medium to practice communication, which quickly make them just as relevant for us today as they were in the late Middle Ages and beyond. Although we have them now available in a good critical edition and in modern German (Stange) and English (Classen) translation, they still fall almost under the category of “vergessene Texte” (forgotten texts), little discussed and hardly ever used in a university seminar.²⁰ Moreover, recent scholarship has begun to pay more attention to the text-image relationship,²¹ and the fifteenth-century print versions by Albrecht Pfister (Bamberg, 1461),²² and Kropik has now pointed out how much

¹⁹ Reich and Schanze, “Wer die biceps merken wil, der setz sich üf des endes zil”.

²⁰ Busch and Reich, ed., *Vergessene Texte des Mittelalters*; neither the editors nor the contributors themselves consider Bonerius but; see [https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/97301365/leseliste_ba_adl_stand_april_2020.pdf](https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/97301365/leseliste_ba_adl_stand_april_2020.pdf).


²² Milde, “Zu den beiden Bonerdrukken Albrecht Pfisterers.”
the poet created a free space for interpretations, offering sometimes apparently deliberately contradictory comments from one fable to the next, especially regarding women. However, when we consider the overall structure of the Edelstein, we discover a unifying concept addressing fundamental concerns in human society, which I identify here as communication within a social context, the establishment of a network.

Let us begin with the same story that I mentioned earlier, no. 94, with the rather confusing title “Von einem der konde diu swarzen buoch” (About a person who was a master of necromancy). Despite the reference to necromancy (‘the black book’), there is nothing negative about the art commanded by a priest who employs his magical skills to test a friend. As Stange notes, the narrative is strongly determined by dialogues, which make up 66% of the entire text. There are no direct sources which Bonerius might have used, and since the protagonist is a priest who is positively portrayed as a highly learned person, knowing not only the seven liberal arts (artes liberales), but also necromancy, we might identify him with the poet himself.

The priest wants to test his friend’s true character and inner strength, so he creates an illusion for him that he is being appointed as the new king of Cyprus. But first he asks him whether he, the priest, could rely on his pledge of friendship in case of him suddenly receiving many riches and a powerful position. The friend affirms this immediately: “ich tæt iu ganzer triuwen schîn” (17), but soon as he is sitting on this imagined throne and is then asked by the priest for a small gift, the king refuses him anything since he does not know him any longer. The priest, frustrated with him, then destroys the illusion and brings his friend back to reality, having learned that

23 Kropik, “mê denne wort ein bischift tuot!”


he would not be able to trust him: “nu ist sô arger iuwer leben, / daz ich iu genzialich rouben wil / des guotes, des ir hânt ze vil” (48–50). As soon as the phantasm is gone, the poor man finds himself back on the meadow with his friend, but things have now changed since the priest knows more about his true character, which is weak and unreliable.

However, the actual teaching and outreach to the audience follows only next in response to the friend’s great disappointment about the sad feelings subsequent to his dream experience. The priest does not chide him personally, but turns the entire game of illusion into a lesson about the true nature of all existence. At closer inspection, the exterior aspects of this world would quickly dissipate since fortune rules, which would be a deeply Boethian reading not surprising for a clerical author, especially from the Middle Ages. He warns his friend about the danger of worldly honors which can easily transform or destroy a person’s inner qualities. Those in a power position quickly forget about their previous friends and the loyalty which they had sworn in the past. What really matters consists of “triuwe” (81; loyalty), that is, the memory of service previously rendered and acknowledging them as a moral obligation (82). The external conditions of this world tend to lead to false praise and painful suffering afterward: “si lobt wol, und git boezes gelt” (88), just as the false belief in having been selected as a king over Cyprus has done, which left him in a sorrowful state, as the illustrator then also depicted dramatically.

The priest, also a necromancer, knew from the start that the entire scene with people arriving and hoisting the friend onto the Cypriot throne was nothing but an illusion he had created, but it worked virtually as he had expected it. As sad and downcast as the friend proves to be afterward, he only confirmed what the priest was fully aware of even before since his own education had probably familiarized him with the teachings of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* from ca. 524, which later became the most important schoolbook
for many centuries even far beyond the Middle Ages. While both individuals are engaged in an open and mutually respectful dialogue, there is a clear difference between them. Whereas the priest is deeply apprehensive about his friend’s character weakness, the other is immediately overcome by the fake impressions and demonstrates a harsh, unkind attitude toward the ‘stranger’ who asks for a donation, which clearly proves the priest’s point, so the latter destroys that illusion and explains to his friend what he has learned about him. The friend would be all people, and the narrative can thus be closely associated with a sermon, or at least with a strongly didacticizing approach within this literary framework.

**Social Criticism as a Basis for the Exercise of Communication**

In one of his last narratives, “Von unwirdigem ampte” (no. 98), the poet turns against the corruption within the Church and demonstrates the effectiveness of open communication when a wise person – perhaps once again standing in for Bonerius himself – speaks up and exposes the bishop’s moral failure, if not hypocrisy, in handling his administrative duties. The latter has a young relative serving at his court, and when one day the position of an archpriest becomes available due to a death, the bishop appoints his relative, whom he likes very much (8) because it is a lucrative job for the relative. As the narrator points out immediately following, this new archpriest is too young and not worthy for this position, which involves the highly responsible administration of numerous parishes: “doch er des amptes was unwert” (12; but he was unworthy of the office). The case rests with that for a while when someone sends as a gift to the bishop a basket full of pears. The latter wants to entrust those to someone for safekeeping, and again his young relative comes forward. This time, however, the bishop rejects this offer simply because he does not trust him in that matter, fearing that the pears would simply be eaten. And he states the plain truth: “‘mich dunkt, du sîst ze tump dar zuo” (28; I think you are too ignorant for that).

The appointment as an archpriest did not have any impact on the bishop’s own income or wealth, whereas the pears are given directly to him, and he wants to keep them for himself.

When a wise man at court hears all this, he bitterly complains to the bishop, pointing out the hypocrisy in his decisions. While the bishop did not hesitate to entrust to the young man the well-being of many Christian souls in his function as archpriest, although he knew too well of his lack of maturity and intelligence, he did not even believe that the relative would be trustworthy enough with such a simple task as guarding the pears. The narrator compares this with the theoretical decision to make the wolf to the shepherd of the sheep: “daz schâf, sô wolf ze hirte wirt” (47).

In the epimythium which then follows according to the poet’s pattern, Bonerius formulates in a paroemiac (proverbial) manner that he who would accept a blind man as his guide would certainly be misled off the road. When both then would stumble and fall down, they would have deserved that suffering. Similarly, picking up the wise man’s opinion, a herd of sheep would easily go astray if a child were to become the shepherd. Further on, the one person who would not be learned enough could not become a teacher. No one should be appointed to watch out for the spiritual well-being of the parishioners who would not care what would happen with the soul after death. The author concludes his ruminations by returning to the sample of the bishop and the pears, warning the audience about the danger of appointing someone to a high-ranking clerical position within the Church who does not enjoy people’s trust (72). God would ultimately avenge such an evil decision.

Granted, Bonerius does not necessarily discuss communication as such, but he presents various communicative situations and combines them to create a complex literary account of great appeal and meaning. There are several groups to be considered; first, the bishop and the young relative; second, the bishop and his court; third, the bishop and the wise man; and fourth, the narrator and the audience. All of them talk to each other, and yet the communication
does not work so well because individual decisions are made, advice is not being asked for, the wise man openly criticizes the bishop, and the narrator then addresses his listeners/readers and attempts to establish a community with them in the assumption that there can be agreement about the bad bishop’s hypocrisy. Bonerius, himself a member of the Church, explicitly lends words to the growing anticlerical sentiment in the late Middle Ages. What appears to go badly wrong intradiegetically, the author attempts to circumvent or prevent for the future, and this now extradiegetically, addressing his audience and providing teachings regarding the case presented here, and this especially with the help of the numerous proverbs with which he wants to illustrate the core problem in this story.

Communication, Ethics, and Spirituality

When we turn to “V on ansehunge des endes” (no. 100), the focus on communication becomes even clearer, although the narrative development proves to be rather complex with shifting roles and locations. First, a wise priest – maybe another self-reference by Bonerius – joins a bustling market where he also offers his wares. Those, however, are not any merchandise in material form; instead, he is selling wisdom. He only pretends to be a merchant, but he is, in reality, a teacher who wants to communicate with people about proper behavior and attitudes in life (13–14). He advertises his ‘goods’ by claiming that only those would achieve the salvation of their souls who would purchase wisdom from him (15–16). The news of this highly unusual offer quickly reaches the king who becomes so curious about it that he sends his servants to the market to make some purchase for him. He would not care about the price and would be willing to pay any amount demanded for wisdom.

The priest writes down a sentence in Latin and hands it over to them in return for the bag full of silver. The narrator then intervenes

27 Dykema and Oberman, ed., Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe; for a critical engagement with the term ‘anticlericalism, see Heß, “A Common Enemy.”

28 For an anthology of medieval statements on wisdom, see Classen, Wisdom from Medieval Europe.
and translates the words into German: “du solt daz end an sehen / dînr werken, und waz dir beschehen / mag dar umbe kümfteklîch” (35‒37; keep the outcome of your deeds in mind and consider what might happen to you in the future). For the servants, the actual value of this statement seems minimal and they are outraged about the large price which the priest demands for them, so here the narrator indicates a split in the larger court community (king versus servants) without going into particular details, especially because the narrator dismisses the servants quickly as irrelevant and focuses on the king who appreciates the wisdom so much that he has it inscribed above the door to his bedroom in golden letters. The narrator then quickly emphasizes that everyone who wanted to enter could not avoid reading the words, and then he adds that those very words later saved the king’s life.

Thereafter we learn about a group of nobles at court secretly planning a coup d’état by bribing the king’s barber to commit the assassination on their behalf. Whereas before we faced a group of servants talking among each other, now we are confronted with a group of nobles who plot the evil deed willing to betray all of their loyalty to the king. They share the same idea and hope to achieve their cleverly conceived plan, not knowing what might counteract it – words of wisdom. The barber, perhaps feeling guilty before he has even committed the dastardly deed, pauses at the door and reads the inscription, which immediately terrifies him so much that he is not able to control himself, trembling all over his body and turning deadly pale, all of which betrays him badly. The king has him arrested and beaten until he confesses what his intentions had been, but he also adds that the words over the door had reminded him of the actual consequences of this intended assassination. We are not told what then happened with the barber, but all the evil nobles have to flee the court (86‒87).

The truly crucial communication, however, then occurs in the epimythium where the narrator explicates the meaning of the
inscription more in detail and thus opens up an exchange with his audience with whom he is actually engaged with all the time. We could call this the extradiegetical communication. First, the person able to reflect on the long-term outcome of his/her deeds would be considered to be a wise one (90) because there would not be any regret at the end. The result of one’s action would be the crowning achievement, whereas all the efforts until then would be nothing but struggles (93). A person able to look ahead and evaluate carefully what his/her work would bring about would earn the highest honors and be strong enough to chase away all sins. As Bonerius formulates it by means of a parallel sentence structure with an aa-rhyme pair, “ein guot end macht allez guot, / guot ende niemer übel tuot” (97‒98; a good ending makes everything good; a good ending never causes harm). He also casts this in the image of a helmsman who stands at the back end of a ship and steers it safely; and finally, we are told, almost as a repetition, that the person who makes himself familiar with the end will not experience suffering (101‒02).

Although we do not hear of any direct exchanges between the king and the wise priest in the market, the words written down and then inscribed over the doorway constitute a subtle communication between both men, which the poet then extends to the audience which is invited to read or listen to those words as well, especially because the narrator then interprets them in the epimythium from a variety of perspectives. The king’s servants remain outside of the internal communication and only carry out the order, although they consider the price demanded by the ‘merchant’ as exorbitant; they do not understand the true value of the words. We do not know for sure what the king really thinks about this statement of wisdom, but he certainly appreciates it sufficiently to have the words inscribed above his doorway, which later saves his life. Ironically, we could also claim that the barber was the one who probably understood the meaning of the inscription best because he became deeply afraid of the consequences of his intended murder for the well-being of his soul, hence for his afterlife. Bonerius thus projects a complex image of communicative groups which are opposed to each other.
But the only lasting group proves to be, across the written words, the one including the king, the wise man, the narrator, and the intended audience capable of understanding the lesson. While the narrative presents this short account in a rather curt fashion, the assumption must be that the listeners were then invited to converse about the message and discuss its meaning from many different perspectives. Bonerius hence projected himself, at least indirectly, as the initiator and leader of a whole communicative community probing a complex moral and religious issue.

Laughing about Failed Communication

Not every fable or narrative proves to be so ponderous as the last one in the Edelstein, but, as we will see, the poet consistently probed the fundamental nature of and need for communication. Bonerius was a skillful author who also had a good knack of changing the tone and the target of his literary accounts, inviting us to smile as well, especially when the communication between two people goes badly wrong. This finds a great expression in “Von üppekeit der stimme” (no. 82) where a young priest is very proud of his seemingly excellent voice which allows him, as he believes, to perform extraordinarily well when singing during the liturgy and at other times. In fact, he considers himself to be the best singer among the clergy, so he is practicing his art many times, although people demur at this painful performance (10–11). He is simply a fool (12), but does not realize how much he is bothering the parishioners who have to tolerate his poor singing. But he is finally told the truth when he observes a woman standing near the altar where he had been singing who is shedding tears. The young priest believes in his haughtiness that his wonderful voice had moved her to tears and inquires with her whether that might be true. He even goes so far as to suggest that he could sing even more for her, but he has then to learn that she began to cry because his singing had reminded her of her donkey which wolves had killed just three days ago. The priest’s voice sounded just like that of her dead animal which she had liked very much: “wenn ir singent sô gar hêrlîch, / sô ist iuwer stimme gelîch / der
stimme, die mîn esel hât” (33‒35; you sing so wonderfully; your voice is just like the one which my donkey had).

The narrator notes that this comment exposed the foolish priest, but he also adds that the priest did not even understand the implications and continued to believe in the absolute beauty of his voice. This then leads over to the epimythium where Bonerius emphasizes that the person who believes to be the best in some areas ought to watch out not to become a victim of foolishness: “dem wont ein gouch vil nâhen bî” (46; he is easily identified with a fool). He himself expresses his amazement that such fools do not recognize their own failure. If they could hear themselves singing through another person’s ears, they would quickly understand what little quality they produce. With a swipe against many of his contemporaries, Bonerius notes that those who sing badly simply compensate this shortcoming with quantity. The less they know how to sing, the more they tend to sing (59‒60).

As is so often the case in literary texts, and especially in Bonerius’s narratives, here is a simple-minded person who cares little about the priest’s official rank and tells him in a straightforward fashion what a fool he is since his arrogance is founded not on some qualities he could be proud of, but on his wrong assumption that he commands a beautiful voice. This communicative situation leads to the priest’s exposure and encourages us to laugh about his dull-wittedness. The conversation between the woman and the priest begins with actions by each one of them, him singing, her crying. Both are connected, but not in the way he believes it to be. By asking her for the reasons for her tears, he has to learn, if he ever does, the true reasons, that is, the miserable voice that resembles that of a donkey. Even though the priest listens to the woman’s words, it remains unclear whether he grasped their satire or whether he would even be able to recognize the unflattering comparison. We face thus an interesting communicative situation in which the exchange between both seems to work well at first, but which ultimately collapses because he has no idea what she really means, and hence there are no further comments about his reaction. Hence, the poet concludes the narrative.
with global advice about people and their foolishness in a clear case of miscommunication.

**Satire and Criticism Via Communication**

In “Von sterki und von krankheit” (no. 83), the poet presents a highly unusual but profoundly meaningful exchange between an oak tree and a reed. This narrative which would not really fit into the genre of a fable but it fulfills the same purpose. The oak is identified as a strong and deeply rooted tree on the top of the mountain which has withstood many storms and bad weather, until one day the northwind (“aquilô,” 14) overpowers the tree after all and makes it come tumbling down into the valley where it ends up resting in a swamp next to a reed, which had not been affected by the violent wind. The oak inquires with the reed how this could have been possible considering the reed’s weakness (“doch vil krenker bist,” 23; you are much weaker). The reed readily responds, but the message is not one which either the oak or we as audience would have expected. As we learn, the reed knows exactly of its own weakness, but also of its flexibility, and hence is fully aware of its own limits: “daz ich nicht wider streben sol / dem, der sterker ist denne ich” (30‒31; that I am not to fight against the one who is stronger than I am). Since the wind was much too strong for the reed, it simply bent down and let it pass, which kept it alive. In response to the oak, the reed also points out that the tree had always insisted on fighting back, and eventually it was bound to lose out: “dîn kraft, dîn hôchvart was ze grôz, / des bist du worden sigelôs” (41‒42; your strength, your arrogance had been too big; for that reason, you were defeated). The oak does not respond, especially since there is nothing to say for it, having lost out already, not being able ever to return to the top of the mountain.

As usual, the real communication sets in with the epimythium in which the poet addresses his audience, advising them that no one would ever be so strong that s/he might not eventually run into a stronger force. Without the willingness at times to give in, the fighter
will certainly at the end have to experience his/her defeat (47‒50). Again, the poet then resorts to some proverbs to indicate that the more someone would rely on his/her strength, the worse might be the fall. What would be necessary in a dangerous situation would be to recognize the conditions and to adjust so as to avoid fighting against a superior power which cannot be overcome. We recognize both here and elsewhere the basic strategy pursued by the poet, presenting a communicative exchange between two sides and then to allow us as audience to follow it and reach our own conclusions about the basic human interaction as presented here.

**Crime and Communication**

This can be observed many times as Bonerius’s fundamental approach in all of his verse narratives, presenting a verbal exchange that either fails or succeeds, and then using the outcome as a basis for the poet’s moral, ethical, and philosophical reflections. We discover this also in particularly clear form in the well-known fable “Von enpfangener gâbe” (no. 27) which the poet adapted, as is so often the case, from the fable collection by Anymous Neveleti (no. 29). Again, there is a verbal exchange between a thief and a guard dog which the former tries to calm down and bribe with a slice of bread, but the dog rebuffs that offer and rejects the thief’s evil strategy. Not only would its master become a victim of a bad burglary, but the dog itself would lose out in the long run because it rather prefers being fed on a daily basis than to receive an extra meal one time at night. So, the issue really rests on the problem with bribery and the danger with gifts which normally come with a hook, or hidden poison (37‒38). The narrator does not reject gift-giving per se, but advises his audience to examine carefully who is giving what gift for what purpose; and then the gift would be profitable after all.

Many of the fables, if not virtually all of them, are determined by this moral thrust and communicative strategy, both here in the *Edelstein* and in many other fable collections (such as in Marie de France’s *Fables*, ca. 1190, or in The Stricker’s fables, ca. 1220). What makes

Bonerius’s efforts stand out for us consists in his constant effort to highlight conversations and to illustrate how individuals talk with each other, leading to a variety of consequences. This is the case in the fable of a lamb and a wolf (no. 30), in the fable of the goat and a wolf (no. 33), or in the fable of the fox and a stork (no. 37). We would not need to belabor this point. Then, however, there are fables like the one of the sheep, the deer, and the wolf (no. 35), where we are confronted with a dangerous situation at court where the sheep has to defend itself against the false charge raised by the deer. The wolf serves as the judge and insists that the sheep is guilty at any cost despite the lack of evidence brought by the deer, so really contrary to the truth because the wolf would like to devour the sheep. In order to escape this dangerous situation, the sheep resorts to a rhetorical trick, admits that it actually owes the money, and swears an oath to pay back the loan in a short while (35‒38).

Of course, there had not been any loan, and the sheep would not be required to pay back anything, but it deliberately resorts to a lie at court to escape from the wolf’s threat to kill it. When the day arrives at which the sheep is supposed to present the money, it refuses to do so and refers to the situation at court where its life had been at stake. The oath had not been uttered in honesty, but out of duress (51‒55), and the sheep points out that God would not punish it for this false oath. The narrator thus presents first the public scene at court, then the private scene involving only the deer and the sheep, and each time the sheep resorts to a different rhetorical strategy which makes it possible it to escape from the life-threatening situation at court. The narrator himself then comments on the legal implications, insisting that an enforced oath would not be worth anything, especially when it has been pledged out of an emergency (59‒61).

**Humility, Patience, and Communication**

The fable of the mule and a gadfly (no. 40) underscores this particular feature well, although the situation is a very different one. The mule,
well-fed and taken care of by its master, pulls a heavy load when a 
gadfly arrives and threatens to make the animal life miserable. The 
mule, undeterred by the threat, dismisses the gadfly, points out that 
if it were not hard at work and tied to the cart, it would have easily 
killed the gadfly and thousand others (25–26). The mule has no 
chance to defend itself in that situation, but quickly sets the record 
straight as to who is to be blamed here and who is really in charge. 
The gadfly proves to be nothing but a braggart (“dīn kelzen,” 27) 
and a nasty character (28), which then takes us to the epimythium.

Bonerius uses this traditional account (Anonymus Neveleti, no. 
36) for larger reflections on social conflicts since he laments the 
evil character of many people who are only bent on causing harm 
to others (35–36). When they are in a fortunate situation (wheel 
of Fortuna), they swarm around the innocent ones and cause them 
many wounds by means of words (41). At large, as the narrator 
emphasizes, those gadflies do much harm with their words: “ir 
wort diu snîdent als ein swert” (43; their words cut like swords), 
and much damage with their actions (44). Again, we are invited to 
reflect on the consequences of communicative strategies aimed at 
hurting the others, and not at reaching out and establishing mutual 
understanding. The fable serves Bonerius to identify a wide-spread 
problem within society: “ir schalkeit merkt man über al” (48; one 
notices their mischievousness everywhere). On the one hand, there 
are those who pursue intrigues, employ lies, and commit treason; on 
the other, there are the innocent victims, the mules of this world. In 
short, Bonerius outlines in a dramatic fashion the good and the bad 
uses of language and reflects through this fable on the problems when 
communication is turned into its opposite. Previous scholarship has 
mostly limited itself to the discussion of moral and ethical aspects 
addressed by that poet,30 which are certainly critically important, 
but adding the component of communication to our analysis makes 
it possible to gain better access to the deeper intentions pursued by 
the poet in his engagement with his audience.

30 Grubmüller, Meister Esopus, 332-49.
In “Von übermuote” (no. 46), a frog and its son are engaged in an intensive conversation resulting from the father’s excessive desire to be as big as a great oxen. Envy fills his heart, and soon enough he begins to blow itself up, although his son immediately warns him of the danger and the uselessness of his effort. In fact, the son refers the father to his natural conditions which he cannot exceed (15–16). Nature would be his limits, and he could not transgress those. For the father, however, there would be no higher goal in life but to gain the same size as the oxen (20–23). Although the son repeatedly appeals to his father to abstain from this foolish effort which could cost him his life, the father does not listen to him, and the outcome is as expected, he eventually explodes. The narrator laconically comments that if he had been content with his life, all would have been good for him. The toxic arrogance, uncontrollable ambition, envy of the big oxen, and even hatred all contributed to the older frog’s death, which serves as a model for people at large, whom the author wants to warn about these common vices.

These remarks in the epimythium underscore global teachings on virtues, as to be expected from Bonerius as a priest. Interestingly, however, he structures the fable in parallel to his own personal comments at the end, addressing the audience and establishing thereby once again a social bond. While we follow the conversation between father and son within the narrative, on the outside there is the conversation, at least indirectly, between the poet and the listeners/readers. The narrator warns the audience not to follow the frog’s example and points out what catastrophic consequences would ensue if envy would fill a person’s mind: “dâ von er würde blâstes vol, / daz er zercklackte (daz wær wol!)” (54; he would become so much blown up that he would burst, a good outcome).

Undoubtedly, the same narrative strategy can be observed more or less in all fable literature, which is fundamentally concerned with using the animal figures as representatives of humans in their moral
and ethical shortcomings. However, Bonerius always makes sure to inject a heavy dose of dialogues into his texts which illuminate what kind of community is supposed to exist within the literary context. Moreover, while the figures/animals within the fable exchange their opinions or express, as is the case here, their worries about an evil outcome, the narrator engages with the audience outside of the fable, that is, in the epimythium. Even though we cannot hear any responses from the actual contemporaries, the poet’s address is explicit, and we find ourselves immediately drawn into the discussion implied here. Little wonder that Bonerius enjoyed such an enormous popularity well into the early sixteenth century (thirty-six manuscripts and two incunabula, the earliest ever printed).

This success was partly based on his skillful selection of traditional fables of great public appeal, but we also discover other narratives where animals assume either no role or only in the background and where the communication between people attracts the most attention. In “Von offenunge des mordes” (no. 61), again borrowed from Anonymous Neveleti, the story focuses on a Jew who requests from the king safe passage through a dangerous forest where many criminals house. The king does not hesitate to provide him with this assistance and commands his royal cupbearer to take over this task. However, the latter is suddenly overcome by greed when he notices that the Jew carries a lot of money with him, so he murders and robs him. But the Jew warns him that birds flying around them would reveal that crime, but the cupbearer considers this to be just foolish and pulls out his sword. At that moment, a partridge flies out of the bush, and mockingly the cupbearer comments that that bird would later reveal the evil deed.

No one seems to have noticed the murder, but soon thereafter the cupbearer has to carry freshly baked partridges from the kitchen to the dinner table and bursts out laughing remembering what he had said to the Jew. For the king, that laughter appears suspicious, and he forces the cupbearer to reveal the reason for it. Having
incriminated himself, the cupbearer is apprehended and quickly executed because he broke the king’s command. We confront here several communicative settings, first with the Jew and the king, then with the cupbearer and the Jew, and at last the cupbearer and the king. Of course, Bonerius then concludes with his epimythium and thus involves the audience once again. As it has been pointed out recently, the poet approached the case of Jews quite objectively, insisting that no murder would ever be justified, and that Jews had to be treated like everyone else, enjoying the same privileges of all laws, and this at a time when pogroms actually took place almost every day all over the Holy Roman Empire, and also in Switzerland following or during the Black Death.\textsuperscript{31} For him, murder remains murder, and religious differences would not matter in the judgment of this crime: “Wer unrecht tuot dur gîtekeit, / wirt der erhangen, wem ist daz leit?” (69‒70; when someone commits a wrong out of greed and his then hanged, who would feel sorry about that?). He warns his audience to guard itself against an evil mind-set since it would ultimately lead to that person’s own demise (71‒72). The cupbearer committed murder, and thus God made him suffer the justified punishment, execution.

**Best Practices of Human Behavior**

For a final example illustrating the fundamental strategy by Bonerius to project communicative situations and to have individuals argue with each other to learn the truth, let’s examine briefly the narrative “V on sitten und von unstüemekeit” (no. 66), which again is not a fable in the narrow sense of the word. Here the sun and the wind argue against each other over who would wield more power. The origin of this fight is immediately identified: arrogance and vanity (3), and both are associated with the rudeness and raw violence (11), whereas the sun claims to be determined by moderation and self-control: “vil stolzer ist mîn meisterschaft / denn dîn grôz unstüemekeit” (12‒13;

\textsuperscript{31} Classen, “Ungewöhnliche Perspektiven auf Juden”; cf. the historical study of late medieval Jews in Switzerland by Gilomen, “Kooperation und Konfrontation.”
my mastery is much more superior than your rambunctiousness). The wind gets so irritated that he demands that they both seek a judgment at a legal court, to which the sun agrees. Jupiter assumes that task and decides to use a test case to find out who would really be stronger and hence able to force a person to take off his coat. They use a pilgrim for this case, but the wind can blow as much as it wants, and cause more coldness, the pilgrim simply ties the coat more firmly around his body (35).

When it is the sun’s turn, she sends warmth to the pilgrim, so he happily unbuttons the coat, takes it off, sits down for a rest, and enjoys his time. The outcome of this experiment is evident, as Jupiter then decides. The sun with its softness has won the victory over the wind with its harshness and force (46–49), which closes the case. The wind is not given any room to argue against the judgment; instead, the narrator comes forward again and addresses the audience, underscoring the great importance of learning from this lesson that crude force can never achieve anything good (51), that it knows of no good manners, and that there cannot be any good outcome of it (53–55). Bonerius appeals to his listeners/readers to observe how much kindness, patience, and a soft approach can achieve in this world. His conclusion states clearly: “wer gestân wil und genesen, / der sol nicht ungevüe wesen” (59–60; he who wants to live a good life must not display a rude behavior).

Of course, this is, as usual, his final lesson drawn from this narrative account, and it seems to be as one-directional as a sermon. Nevertheless, it is an important speech act with which he reaches out to the audience and invites them into the larger discussion about proper behavior within civilized society. The simplicity of the ‘fable’ based on people’s common experience makes it immediately possible to enter into a discussion about the essential modes of behavior within any group setting. Bonerius is strongly promoting peacefulness, kindness, and tactfulness within all human relations because those tools would facilitate the establishment of a harmonious society.
Conclusion

We would give Bonerius too much credit if we singled him out as the only fable author to address communication as the central point within a social community. The purpose here was not at all to compare him to his sources, his predecessors (Marie de France, The Stricker, etc.), his contemporaries (e.g., Heinrich von Mügeln; anonymous, *Magdeburger Äsop*), or his successors (Heinrich Steinhöwel, etc.). I also did not intend to claim that fables were more specifically geared toward the exploration of communication compared to other texts since we find countless valiant examples in many different genres, including the religious legend, the *Kalendergeschichte* (calendar story), and in anecdotes. The central argument that I wanted to develop is that we can use literary texts from all historical periods and of all kinds of genres to explore the essence of communication and community. Those are universal values and can be studied particularly well through a literary lens.

Our analysis has, however, demonstrated that Bonerius’s fables illustrate this approach particularly well because he is constantly relying on dialogues within the texts and implies dialogues with his audience in the epimythia. Whether he drew on animals as model for human behavior, or developed his own narratives about people’s interactions with each other, these texts invite discussion, stimulate reflections, and engage the audience to learn something about what went wrong in the conversation, and what could be done in similar situations.

Since the plots presented here are quite simple, regularly drawn from everyday situations in urban or rural life with people and/or animals interacting with each other, both the narrator and the listeners/readers find themselves immediately involved and can thus explore the moral, ethical, religious, and also philosophical implications. Studying these fables facilitates the discovery of the fundamental necessity of pursuing a good communication (with communicative actions à la Habermas) in order to establish a functioning community, a central concern especially in fables, but then also in late medieval verse.
narratives, *Schwänke*, anecdotal narratives, and Shrovetide plays. These insights can be well applied to many other texts both from the Middle Ages and today and provide better answers as to why we teach literature, especially from the pre-modern age.\(^{32}\) Unfortunately, this fundamental question is no longer too abstract and irrelevant since the Humanities are precariously poised today and need to answer ever-more growing challenges in a world determined by academic corporatization and the politicization of the university.\(^{33}\)

Bonerius’s fables ultimately prove to be so meaningful in our context because they conveniently straddle the fence separating the Middle Ages from the early modern age and strongly appealed both to philologists and writers at the turn of the nineteenth century. Some of his fables entered the world of fairy tales (Brothers Grimm), others still await their rediscovery by scholars and general readers alike. I have focused on them not just for their own purpose and with the intention to reintroduce them to modern audiences. Instead, these fables and other verse narratives illustrate powerfully how much we can use literary texts to examine fundamental issues in all social life, consistently predicated on communication as the essential tool that holds us all together.

If these perspectives can be confirmed, we would have valuable epistemological instruments available to approach many other literary texts from throughout the ages and recognize them as narrative model cases to explore really the question of why they matter so much to us today. Medieval and modern plays, from fifteenth-century Shrovetide plays to Shakespeare’s tragedies, for instance, those by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing or by Bertolt Brecht, to mention just a few names, operate, of course, on a similar level, presenting communicative situations on the stage. In the case of Bonerius, in particular, we observe the poet’s deliberate strategy to address ethical and moral issues through dialogic narratives and

\(^{32}\) See, for instance, the contributions to Miedema and Sieber, ed., *Zurück zum Mittelalter*; Pugh and Aronstein, ed., *The United States of Medievalism*.

\(^{33}\) *Kintzinger, Wagner, and Runde, ed.*, *Hochschule und Politik*. 
then to engage with the audience by means of the epimythium.

We could also draw from Niklas Luhmann’s concept of language as a foundational social system, but we can content ourselves with a rather straightforward notion of literary language establishing communication, which in turn establishes community, and vice versa, with miscommunication destroying that very community. All this happens, of course, on a daily basis throughout our lives, but we can also approach this process by way of studying literary texts as model cases for the constructive formation or failure of communication. From this perspective, we can acknowledge, once again, the superior literary qualities of Bonerius’s fables, the distinct significance of fable literature at large, then also the relevance of pre-modern literature for us today, and, ultimately, the critical importance of literature per se as a medium for the exploration of good strategies of communication for the sake of the community.

To advocate for the value of literature is, of course, tantamount to carrying owls to Athens, at least for us academics, but the focus on the contributions by this Bernese Dominican poet illuminates these particular potentials of pre-modern verse narratives for the exploration of fundamental needs of all people to operate in a meaningful socializing manner very well. Regarding literature at large through the lens of communication provides us with a highly effective tool to restore the relevance of our field. Medieval literature is particularly challenged, of course, considering the differences in language and the social-cultural context. If, however, the critical examination of Bonerius’s fables in light of this approach succeeds in reaching out to the present generation of students, then there is good reason to conjecture that we can rejuvenate the academic standing of all literature studies effectively. It thus proves to be relevant and insightful for all of our explorations of human communication.

34 Luhmann, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie.*

35 See the contributions to von Moos, ed., *Zwischen Babel und Pfingsten.*
The further back we go in that process, the more challenging the fictional mirror becomes, as we all know, but this growing alterity represents also a unique opportunity to present unusual cases of (mis)communication and to explore the critical issues in a literary context far removed from us today. Medieval literature, and hence medieval fables, such as those by Ulrich Bonerius, thus proves to be an immensely important medium for social, ethical, moral, philosophical, religious, and spiritual investigations about the communicative interactions between people.

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