

Masculinity Challenged: German Medieval Romances and Verse Narratives Revealing the Underbelly of the Courtly World

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As much as medieval courtly romances and verse narratives idealized masculinity, we regularly observe strange problems and hidden challenges for the hero, and at times even a direct collapse of the protagonist because he fails to live up to the public and self-imposed expectations. After all, the ideal of masculinity was basically the result of a specific public discourse, and courtly poets appear to have been centrally in command of trying to cast seemingly reliable images of the model male figure at King Arthur's court, such as Gawain or Lancelot. However, the literary discourse also reveals deep troubles at court among its male members and significant struggles by the individuals to live up to those projected concepts. This finds its expression already in Chretien de Troyes's Yvain (Calogrenant and even Yvain) and in Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival (Gahmuret), all worthy knights at first sight, but also individuals fraught with many character flaws. In the thirteenth century, the efforts to sustain the increasingly fragile ideal of the courtly male intensified, as we can easily observe in numerous short verse narratives, such as in the fabliaux and maeren. In this study, I will investigate these conflictual struggles by male protagonists in light especially of the anonymous Mauritius von Craun, Dietrich von der Gletze's "Der borte," and Thüring von Ringoltingen's prose version of the Melusine novels (late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). As we will observe, the literary discourse could apparently not fully maintain the old dream of the strong and self-sustained male hero because he soon enough faced deep internal and external challenges and could hardly rely any longer on the myth of masculinity as the all-determining ideal within heroic or courtly society, and this already since the late twelfth century. We might even have to wonder whether masculinity has ever been a stable element in the search for individuality, both in the Middle Ages and today.

Introduction

Theoretical Reflections and a Smattering of Literary Examples from Medieval Europe

One of the potent terms used within gender discourse today, 'toxic masculinity,' addresses probably the worst issue in the relationship between men and women, much too often determined by violence, hegemonic aggression, or a patriarchal ideology encouraging men to aim for dominion over women and/or other men, and this, more often than not, by means of physical and psychological violence

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(Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell 2020; Harrington 2020; McGlashan and Mercer ed., 2023). Unfortunately, these aspects are not novel or unique at all, and we can easily trace examples of such conflicts, that is, this toxicity, throughout the ages (Racette-Campbell and McMaster, ed., 2024), even though recent gender-oriented researchers have incorrectly emphasized that this phenomenon is particularly characteristic of the twenty-first century (Smiler 2019; Figlio 2023). But masculinity – and by the same token, all gender roles – has never been simply written in stone, not even in the Middle Ages, although the iconic image of the courtly knight (or the hero in epic poetry) seemed to characterize the entire culture – at least as modern popular imagination has perceived it (for contrastive perspectives, see Davis 2007) – in those terms (for theoretical reflections, see the major contributions by Butler 1990; Butler 1993). As late as at the end of the fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Malory, himself having been charged of having committed several rapes, still felt comfortable enough to replicate this image of the glorious knight Launcelot du Lake who could deal with women almost just as he liked in his *Le Mort DArthur* (ca. 1469/1470; cf. Field, ed., 2013). Of course, we also learn about several influential women, such as Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's half-sister, and Queen Guinevere herself, but within the homosocial world projected by Malory, we are in fact confronted with a knight who cannot be defeated in whatever battle he might be involved and who at the same time displays a considerable degree of 'toxic masculinity,' that is, male arrogance, violence, and dominance (see, e.g., Martin 2010), irrespective of his commitment to serve and protect women under his control.

This paper, however, does not try to trace this phenomenon in its brutally negative manifestation, as important as that would be; instead, the focus will rest on the question of how late medieval poets projected masculinity as such and what their insights might have added to the global discourse on gender in the pre-modern world (Horlacher 2015). Through recent scholarship, we have learned to recognize behind the mask of the male hero, whom medieval poets generally introduced in positive terms, a rather complex and at times even unstable and weak individual (Hadley, ed., 2000; Karras 2003; Cullum and Lewis, ed., 2004; Föbel, ed., 2020). When we examine, for instance, the Old French *Partonopeus de Blois* (ca. 1170) and Konrad von Würzburg's Middle High German adaptation, *Partonopier und Meliur* (ca. 1285), we are confronted with a significantly complex male figure, who at first is too young to cope in the world of love and chivalry and then loses everything, even his own mind, and who subsequently has to struggle long and hard to recover his identity and then also the love of his lady, the mighty Byzantine princess, by demonstrating his prowess especially as a tournament knight. Ironically, even at the last moment, a Persian prince might have been able to outshine him, which indicates this hero's precarious position at court and his efforts to establish his own identity and social recognition (for interdisciplinary perspectives pertaining to the French and German traditions, see the contributions to Hanley et al. 2004).

One of the best examples for this phenomenon might well be the anonymous, Middle English alliterative romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1387; possibly by Sir John Stanley), where the idealized protagonist performs exceedingly well, but at the end he betrays his own principles of honor because he desperately tries to survive the deadly decapitation game imposed on him by the Green Knight (for a trail-blazing innovative analysis, see now Breeze 2023). The shame Gawain feels when he then learns that the seduction attempt by Bercilak's wife and the knight's pretense at the Green Chapel of aiming for his neck had been nothing but a game, exposes that his own concept of masculinity is rather frail and unstable and a perhaps outdated ideal – at least for him – that is difficult to achieve and to maintain, if not impossible, as the green belt, subsequently assumed by the other members of King Arthur's court as their own sign of honor, visually symbolizes (Vantuono 1991). Significantly, only by accepting his own frailty, love of life, fear of death, and hence by stepping back from the traditional notion of masculinity within the courtly context does Gawain actually recover his honor and individuality.

Already much earlier, the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France had presented several cases in her *lais* (ca. 1190) where the male protagonist seems to be completely in command by way of his extraordinary display of masculinity. At closer analysis, however, many problems emerge and undermine this false impression (Waters, ed. and trans., 2018), probably because the author's female perspectives were strong enough to deconstruct traditional male assumptions.

In "Guigemar," for instance, the protagonist at first appears as badly divorced from real adult life, and hence from love, and only once he has been severely wounded and transported by a mysterious black ship across the sea, does he receive the necessary treatment by a lady who is horribly abused by her old and despicable husband insofar as he keeps her like a prisoner trying to force her to love him. By contrast, the two young people fall in love and enjoy their time together until they are discovered by the husband, which forces Guigemar to leave, with the same ship mysteriously transporting him back home.

However, the night before, the two lovers had created enigmatic knots in their shirt or belt, respectively, which only they themselves would be able to unravel. It then takes two years until the lady can finally escape, and after some significant problems involving a military conquest and the killing of another knight, the two finally find each other and thus are able to untie the concrete and also metaphorical knots. Without the lady's help, Guigemar's life would not have developed constructively, and only once he has met her, do the two develop together and ultimately achieve their intimate happiness. We are left with the intriguing question of who the truly active part in this love relationship might be. But, to be sure, Guigemar needs considerable help from his lady both in medical and emotional terms and does not necessarily cut the best figure in this complicated world of love, although at the end he fights valiantly for his lady and triumphs.

Most intriguingly, in “Les deus amanz,” the issue truly focuses on masculinity in its competitive spirit, here pitting a young squire against his mistress’s father who wants to keep his daughter all for himself (Whalen 2011; Kinoshita and McCracken 2012). The task set up by the father for all potential wooers is to carry the princess to the top of a mountain without taking any rest. No one has ever managed to do so, but she then conceives of a plan to defeat her father, though this all depends on the squire’s willingness to cooperate and to submit under her rational strategy. She sends him to her aunt in Salerno, a Mediterranean center of medieval research since the twelfth century, who concocts a magical potion (a steroid) which is supposed to provide him with enough strength to achieve the desired goal (Yoon 2012). However, in the last minute, when he is finally attempting the feat and yet begins to faint, he suddenly refuses to accept the potion because he wants to demonstrate his masculinity to the king and the entire court company. As the narrator comments: “But I fear that it will avail him little, / for there is no moderation in him” (178–79). He rejects her pleading, does not want to get any help and refers to the onlookers: “These people would cry out to us, / they would stun me with their noise;/they could easily upset me” (193–95). If he cannot demonstrate his manliness in this impossible case, as he claims, he would not feel worthy enough, so he keeps stumbling uphill but then tragically collapses at the summit and dies from a broken heart, only to be followed by his mistress who lies down next to him and exhales her soul out of grief. She had made every possible effort to defeat her father’s strategy, but the squire’s stubbornness and pride in his masculinity undermined it all, leading to both their deaths (see, for instance, Creamer 2013).

Similarly, the great warrior Eliduc in the eponymous *lai* knows exceedingly well how to put up a big show when his truly outstanding military skills are in demand, and he gains much respect by all those whom he helps in their need. But as soon as a new love strikes his heart, this mighty and respectable knight virtually loses his mind, gets deeply confused, and does not know how to handle his own dilemma being in a relationship with two women at the same time, the beloved English princess and his wife back home (Krueger 2022). While crossing the Channel they run into a storm, which almost threatens to lead to their shipwreck. In this desperate situation, one sailor shouts out that what Eliduc is doing, bringing that princess home with him, would be against God’s laws, so they should toss the young woman into the water. In response, Eliduc brutally slays and kills the sailor, pushing his body overboard while the maid faints in horror about her miserable situation, having eloped with a married man. Despite her strong love for him, she sees herself badly betrayed.

Later, only once his wife has found out the truth about her husband’s new love, does a solution emerge. After having revived the maid with the help of a miraculous flower, she decides, out of great respect for Eliduc, to withdraw from their marriage and to create a monastery where she can serve as the abbess. The narrative thus concludes on a happy note, especially because the knight and his

new mistress marry and yet later also join monastic life. Without the original wife's intelligence and willingness to sacrifice herself to grant Eliduc his happiness, misery and sorrow would have ruined everything. The narrator clearly indicates that although this knight knows how to handle military matters, he utterly fails when love strikes him and robs him of his reason. His masculinity supports him effectively when he has to take charge of matters in public life, but in private, emotional terms, Eliduc depends on his wife to find a solution for his painful dilemma, revealing an astounding inability to think critically, to make reasonable decisions, and to perform accordingly.

In short, as these few examples have indicated, already in the Middle Ages masculinity was the result of a complex set of negotiations, compromises, agreements, forceful struggles, and impositions. We would blind ourselves badly if we assumed naively that courtly poets projected a uniform and standard concept of masculinity and idealized it as the norm for aristocratic society. Digesting the vast body of relevant research on masculinity studies (Joan Cadden 2003; Thomas Lacquer 1990); Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage 1996; Joyce C. Salisbury 1990; etc.), Daniel F. Pigg notes that this methodological and interpretive approach still awaits its full development, especially with the analytic lens turned away from some of the literary giants such as Geoffrey Chaucer, to late medieval poets, both in England and on the Continent (Pigg 2010).

Subsequently, following his call for further investigations, I will focus on a selection of late medieval German literary texts where masculinity seems to triumph and yet then becomes exposed as a fake notion that ignores the reality of the gender relationship both at court and within the urban context. Instead of demonstrating their absolute superiority and dominance, in a surprisingly large number of relevant narratives, commonly composed by and for members of the court, the male protagonist tends to expose a troubling sense of inferiority and striking character weakness.

Courtly Love Poetry, Romances, and *Mauritius von Craûn*

As idyllic as the notion of courtly love appears to be, medieval poets more often than not revealed also its dark sides, reflected on the deep frustration, disappointment, and sorrow involved in many cases. In fact, the majority of *troubadours* or *minnesingers* reflected more on unhappiness than erotic satisfaction, here disregarding the unique genre of the dawn song (Kaplowitt 1986). In that context, we also recognize how much the artificially pronounced concept of masculinity entered the picture and created huge problems for many male figures (Classen 2023). Of course, within the courtly context, masculinity needed competition, hence winners and losers, and poets tended to glorify the former as the protagonists in their narratives. Not surprisingly, much depended on the circumstances, since sometimes the focus rests on the conflict between the male wooer and his lady, and sometimes on the

tensions between the knights at court who all hope to gain the highest renown and the king's favor, while love then matters rather less.

All this jockeying for the best position in the wooing process and in the attempts to achieve a most advantageous position at the court often meant the breakout of 'toxic masculinity,' i.e., ruthless in-fighting, slandering, ridicule, mockery, and then also harsh treatment of the lady on her pedestal, as many troubadour and *minnesang* poets reveal. But what happens when the male protagonist simply does not achieve his goal and experiences an internal collapse because he cannot uphold the traditional ideals of masculinity?

Already in Chrétien de Troyes's Old French *Yvain* (ca. 1170) and then in Hartmann von Aue's Middle High German translation as *Iwein* (ca. 1190/1200), for instance, we first hear of Kalogrenant's endeavors – in Hartmann's version – to find a knightly adventure which takes him to a mysterious location with a fountain where he is challenged and defeated by the owner of that location. He even loses his horse and has to walk back on foot, cutting a miserable figure of a knight, as he admits himself. Kalogrenant reports about his experience ten years later at King Arthur which did not reflect well on his prowess since he had lost his claim on masculinity in the traditional sense of the word: "The prize was his, the shame was mine. But whatever shame I gained there, I was at least partly blameless because I had the best of intentions – I just couldn't bring them to bear on him. Owing to this, I was bound to fail" (Tobin, Vivian, and Lawson, trans., 2001, 245).

While the great courtly romances, including Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205), Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210), or Der Stricker's *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal* (ca. 1225) barely reveal the complexities of the ideal of masculinity, we are suddenly starkly confronted by the deep conflicts inherent in this social concept when we turn to the mysterious and anonymous verse narrative, *Mauritius von Craûn* (ca. 1220/1240; Reinitzer, ed., 2000). It was copied down only once, and this extremely late, in the famous *Ambraser Heldenbuch* (1504–1516; Castle Ambras Book of Heroic Poems), which the Innsbruck toll-keeper Hans Ried created for Emperor Maximilian copying from a variety of older manuscripts (Klarer 2019; for a facsimile edition available online, see Klarer 2022). Our text is one of a good handful of other poems that, strangely enough, have survived only in this manuscript and nowhere else. Scholarship, however, has fully acknowledged the enormous literary and social-historical value and meaningfulness of this short verse narrative (Fischer 2006). Here I will draw from it as a further illustration of the deep trouble with masculinity in late medieval literature, whether we want to go so far as to identify it as toxic or not.

The poet describes a huge conflict between the protagonist and his lady, the Countess of Beamunt who wants to grant her love to him only if he organizes a major tournament on her behalf because she has never witnessed one due to her husband's failure in that regard. Mauritius does so, but he quickly exaggerates everything, arriving, first of all, with an artificial ship that moves across dry land, and this like an opera star, then winning every joust as a glorious actor, and finally

giving away all the accoutrements, which results in the slaying of a person. At the beginning of the tournament, the Count of Beamunt had been invited to do the initial joust, but, being not well schooled in this art, he kills his opponent by accident. He is horrified and traumatized, so he withdraws and laments all day and night this tragic development, which will make the protagonist's planned meeting with the countess rather difficult. The protagonist does not care about this fatality and pushes everyone to ignore it because 'the show must go on.' Worse, however, in the evening, Mauritius, dirty, exhausted, and unkempt, falls asleep while he is waiting for his lady who then rejects him and all other men as potential lovers when she discovers him resting with his head in the lady's maid's lap. The countess retires to her bedroom and lies down next to her grief-ridden husband.

Mauritius, not a man to accept a 'no' for an answer, eventually forces his way into her room, scares the husband out of his wits, takes his place in bed, and waits for her to make the first move. She gives in, grudgingly, and they join in lovemaking, but Mauritius subsequently returns the ring she had given him as a token of her love for him, announces the end of their relationship, and departs, never to return. We are told that he subsequently enjoyed considerable fame, but in terms of love, he had badly failed, probably as a result of his 'toxic masculinity,' as we might say despite the danger of sounding anachronistic here. Whatever Mauritius does, he falls into extremes, as the tournament dramatically illustrates, and despite his explicit expressions of love for the countess, in the end, he simply forces her to accept him as a sexual partner, and this in her own bedroom, while her husband has fallen into a coma out of fright about the presumed appearance of the ghost of the knight whom he had killed in the morning. In reality, however, it is only Mauritius in his horrible shape who abuses the situation to his advantage and thus betrays the values and ideals of courtly love. He is truly a 'toxic' male also in the modern sense of the word, which might explain why this verse narrative did not experience any reception. Let us unpack the events a little further.

From the beginning, we get the strong sense that almost everything about him is fake, both the ship and the performance on the field. We are made to believe that he is a triumphant jousting, but the exorbitant outcome signals that he must have prearranged his victories so that he can brag to his lady. He does not care that the count kills his opponent in the first joust, and he urges the other knights simply to continue with their entertainment because the 'show' must go on. Then he unhorses all the others and thus gains the highest accolades, as unlikely as such an outcome would have been even for the best knight in the high Middle Ages.

However, the long preparations for the tournament and the event itself tire him out so badly that he falls asleep while waiting for his lady in the evening. She then dismisses him and all other potential lovers in the future, thus ending the entire process of courtly love for herself, and withdraws from her wooer whom she characterizes as a dead sheep not worthy of her attention (1277, "ein tôtez schâf"). Mauritius's next move, to force his way into the marital bedroom, makes it possible for him to conquer his lady physically, using his surprise appearance for the shock

affect, which leaves her with no freedom to say 'no' in that case. But does the protagonist really love his lady? Does he demonstrate any respect for her as an individual and worthy member of courtly society? Does he try to preserve her honor and physical integrity? The outcome, though it may not be exactly a rape, is certainly a form of forceful sex, or violence against her. Worse even, he subsequently abandons her rudely, rejecting her as unworthy for himself who still believes to be the most glorious knight. The narrator remains ambivalent in that situation, mentioning only at the end that she laments the loss of her lover, grieving her own fault in having been too harsh to Mauritius.

Scholarship has debated this issue already from many different perspectives, but there is no doubt that courtly love by itself has collapsed, with both individuals at fault (Kokott 1988; Classen 2016). With respect to the knight, there is no doubt that he had regarded the night with his lady as a material reward for all his efforts, and not as a gift of love from her. His violent intrusion into the bedroom and his crude rejection of her after their sexual union speak volumes about his character, that is, the failure of his claims to be a noble knight and a worthy member of courtly society, as was still the case in the French source text, a *fablel* (Dimpel 2014; Classen 2017). In fact, here we face a concrete case of 'toxic masculinity' within the context of medieval literature, although this does not exculpate the countess either who operates rather dubiously, promising her love in return for a major public festivity, as love could be 'sold for a courtly performance, then rejecting the hero for a small infraction, finally submitting under him after all, and lamenting her loss which was really her own fault. The author's criticism thus pertained to courtly culture at large, that is, to the pretenses by the two protagonists in their public performances. The tournament has turned into a cheap theater stage for the male hero for his exclusive self-presentation resorting to fake means, as the presumptuous ship reveals with which Mauritius arrives. Worse, however, courtly love has declined so badly that it is identified as a matter of purchase. But the protagonist's various failures are no excuse for the countess to act the way as she does.

Dietrich von der Gletze

One of the most astonishing late medieval German verse narratives (*mæren*), "The Belt" by Dietrich von der Gletze (also Glezze), provides us with a striking example of a male character, Conrad, who appears as surprisingly weak, unstable, immoral, and incompetent as a knight. Little wonder that scholarship has been rather puzzled about this protagonist who never achieves the goal of proving his masculinity until his wife intervenes and provides him with magical animals and a belt that guarantee him honor, whatever that might be worth for him (for an English translation, see *Erotic Tales* 2007/2009, No. 3; for the first edition, see Meyer, ed., 1915; see now the latest edition with a solid commentary and bibliography, by

Ridder and Ziegeler 2020, vol. I.2, no. 43, 103–26; for a more recent English trans. by Coxon, see vol. V, no. 43, 126–33).

However, the situation is much more complicated than that simple solution might indicate. Conrad leaves his wife to attend a tournament because he needs to gain more public esteem, which he enjoys abroad but not back home. The narrator does not tell us anything about the young man's success at the tournament, but later developments at the court of Brabant indicate that he is not successful in jousting. But first, the focus shifts to his wife who, passing her time in a garden, is surprised by an unknown knight who woos her rapidly with all his means available. Since she does not respond to his efforts, he offers her all his magical animals and even his mysterious belt that guarantees honor when worn. The countess finally gives in because she wants to help her husband, but a servant observes the scene and informs Conrad about his wife's transgression, who becomes so enraged that he leaves for Brabant without ever returning home.

After two years, she finally makes a decisive move, disguises as a male, calling herself Heinrich, and follows Conrad. At the court in Brabant, he/she wins all contests because of the miraculous animals, and the husband begs her/him in his desperation to let him have one of them so that he can gain at least one victory as well. The disguised woman then plays a trick on him, asking as a price sexual favors since 'he' loves only men. Although Conrad expresses his sadness that such a worthy knight pursues such 'unnatural' desires, he quickly consents to this request, and then he has to realize his wife's mask that she had used to teach him a lesson. This deeply embarrasses him, but since his wife then forgives him and takes him back home, turning over the animals and the belt to him, he finally gains in public esteem, which concludes the narrative (Ribaj 2009).

In essence, all of Conrad's efforts to establish his masculine identity within a knightly world basically fail. He does not accomplish much, as we may assume, during the tournament in the vicinity of his castle. During his time at the Brabant castle, he does not appear to have achieved much because he miserably fails when a British knight appears and challenges the company. Of course, Heinrich succeeds in defeating him, which makes 'his' new friend even more desperate, as his eager readiness to sleep with this other man in return for one of the magical animals clearly underscores. We might not need to go so far as to talk about 'toxic masculinity' here, or about homosexual desires, but there is no doubt about Conrad's overall weakness and failure to operate effectively as a knight and as a husband, that is, both physically and emotionally, probably because of his immaturity and lack of character strength.

He trusted his servant more than his own wife; he did not even confront her once he had heard the 'rumor' of her having committed adultery, and he simply ran away. It is up to her to follow this poor man two years later and eventually to prop him up enough to establish a minimum of masculinity. The more the narrator suggests paying credit to this young woman who does everything in her power to help her husband, including granting her sexual body to this mysterious knight in

return for the animals and the belt, the more the author reveals his deep frustration with Conrad and with the status of masculinity at large.

In contrast to Eliduc in Marie de France's eponymous *lai*, this young man lacks both in knightly prowess and in character. He naively believes his servant's account of his wife's infidelity; he does not confront her and demand an explanation; he shies away from any investigation and prefers to run away to avoid facing the shame of having been cuckolded, if that would be the correct term here in the first place because she did not really want to sleep with the other man. Moreover, he does not develop subsequently as a person and appears to be a minor character at the court of Brabant who immediately fails when a strong English knight appears and challenges them. Conrad's desperation is written in his face, so to speak; otherwise, he would not ask his new friend, Heinrich, for one of the animals in the hope to 'purchase' thus at least some glory against the other members of the court.

Finally, although he expresses regret over the fact that the other 'man' demands sex from him in return for the magical animals, i.e., a homosexual act, he has no strong moral principles and so does not refuse to submit under the new 'friend.' In fact, he has the mind of a male prostitute and so loses all rights to reprimand his wife for her adulterous affair, as he has subsequently to acknowledge. In particular, as she reminds him, she had slept with the mysterious knight only so that she could acquire the animals and the belt for her husband, having at first expressed strong qualms about the immoral offer. Conrad, by contrast, only formulates a superficial criticism about the nature of the price, but he is actually the one to pursue actively the purchase and so easily accepts the conditions.

Altogether, hence, Dietrich von der Gletze presented an extremely negative picture of this young knight who is a failure both in military terms and with regards to his character, whereas the wife emerges as an astoundingly strong and intelligent individual (Classen 2021). We might suspect that the very little response to this verse narrative could have been the result of the poet's sharp criticism of his male character's inner weakness and his great praise of the young woman, even though she could also be criticized for her moral transgression.

The Fake Knight, Beringer

As long as medieval society embraced tournaments as the most important cultural events where masculinity was performed, confirmed, tested, controlled, and played out, knighthood continued to enjoy highest respect and was the blueprint, so to speak for pre-modern masculinity. As we already observed in the case of Mauritius von Craûn, however, that ideal could easily lose its values and transmogrify into a fake spectacle of no real value. This became particularly painful when poets presented peasants who inaptly attempted to imitate tournaments and thus to demonstrate their own male prowess. The Constance public notary Heinrich Wittenwiler, in his allegorical *Der Ring* from ca. 1400, presented an extreme

example for this phenomenon in which both the village community and knighthood, deeply entangled in the rural world for economic advantages and sexual pleasures, experience a dramatic decline and then complete destruction (Röcke 2012).

A very similar situation occurs in the verse narrative “Beringer” insofar as here the protagonist proves to be a very weak man fearful of any knightly challenges, although he very much wants to enjoy the public esteem associated with knighthood. The discrepancy between claim and reality underscores the fakeness of his masculinity, another literary confirmation of how much this ideal was only propped up by courtly society and not firmly grounded in the social conditions of that time.

Although “Beringer” has survived only in an incunabulum printed by Matthias Brant in Strassburg in 1495, it was probably composed already at the end of the thirteenth or the early fourteenth century, so slightly later than our previous examples, but very contemporary to Konrad von Würzburg’s *Partronopier und Meliur*. “Beringer” was inspired by the Old French obscene fabliau, “Berangier au lonc cul” (Long Butthole Berengier), created by the poet Guérin, who in turn might have drawn from an older, perhaps oral source – here I disregard an additional anonymous version (Crocker 2006). There, the husband, though called a knight (“chevalier”), is a rich peasant’s son who has, because of his wealth, be able to marry a noble lady, which constitutes an egregious mismatch, especially because he is lacking in courtly values and only pretends to be knightly in his appearance and behavior (Dubin 2013, no. 19, 212–29; for the Middle High German text, extensive commentaries, and the latest research, see Ridder and Ziegeler 2020, vol. 3, 865–78; the English translation is taken from Sebastian Coxon in vol. 5). Previously, scholars have mostly identified this literary account as an example of the traditional motif addressing the well-known battle of the genders within marriage, of the persiflage on the ideal of a good Christian marriage, or as an illustration of the consequences of mismatched marriage bringing together two people from different social classes (see, however, the important study by Wenzel 2003).

It would be more appropriate, however, here to recognize a literary reflection on the breakdown of the usual concept of masculinity. Parallel to the protagonist in “Der Borte,” Beringer desires public recognition as a knight, but his character flaws make this impossible. The protagonist in this story is a despicable individual, a greedy and extremely parsimonious person who begrudges anyone in his household whenever they might want to eat something. Worse, however, he pretends to be a successful knight who participates in all kinds of tournaments, but he always withdraws in time to avoid any blows.

Yet, in order to uphold his reputation, he carries out fake jousts far away from the actual events. He gets covered with dirt which makes him look “all belligerent” (420), yet there is no harm to his armor or weapons; above all, he thus can return home without having been wounded in the slightest. One day, his wife realizes that something must be wrong with his postures and claims, so she pursues him

secretly but cannot find him anywhere at the actual tournament. Finally, she discovers him in a forest where he has put his helmet on a stick and charges it as if it were a real opponent. In short, Beringer creates a big show, but he is not the man to dare any real knightly joust. Already Mauritius von Craûn had transformed the tournament into a one-man show where he was the only one to gain fame, triumphing over all other participants. And Conrad in Dietrich's *mære* was equally unsuccessful in gaining respect and fame at a tournament or at court, that is, from his male peers. All these men attempt to embrace the ideal of the mighty courtly knight, and they all fail in that respect.

Beringer's wife, suspicious of his claims, decked out in full armor, follows her husband and thus learns of his cowardly and ludicrous behavior. Resolutely, she then attacks him and belittles him for his foolish behavior. But she does not use a sword to knock him down, only her fist, giving him a mighty blow on his nose, which makes him fall down. Beringer is desperate, fearing for his life, and begs for pardon; he would pledge to do anything his opponent would demand from him, including an extensive pilgrimage. However, his wife does not want anything of that kind; instead, she only demands three kisses on her arse, which he considers a convenient way out of his dilemma, though he is disgusted about this act himself: "Yuck! What a base man I am! I regret ever having become a knight!" (421) (for the element of obscenity, see Ziolkowski 1998; cf. also the contributions to McDonald 2006; Harris 2018). His wife finds the entire situation so hilarious that she bursts out laughing and tells him to stop when he is about to kiss her a third time, but she sternly warns him never to forget this lesson.

However, as soon as she is gone and Beringer's servant has returned, this ridiculous man immediately reassumes his previous bragging, and this even toward his wife once he has returned home. At the same time, once he has lamented about his own hardship in this 'brutal' fight, he swears never again to get involved in any tournament or joust (422). The contradiction in his performance is would not need much further illustration: He wants to enjoy the respect as a knight but refuses to live up to the expectations. In short, he betrays masculinity, himself as an individual, and courtly values at large.

Next, it seems as if the miserable marital relationship would continue, with him being mean and cruel to her, fully in the thralls of 'toxic masculinity,' as we can identify it here most explicitly. When Beringer wants to make her shut up, she demurs, but then she warns him about one of her relatives, a mighty knight, who would immediately come to her rescue if he ever dared to abuse her again. Ironically, as soon as she has mentioned the name of that ferocious knight – with a direct allusion to her own lower body parts – does her husband get so scared that he submits himself entirely under her: "... Henceforth I shall live in accordance with your wishes and be nothing more than your slave! . . ." (422).

This verse narrative does not conclude with what we then would expect, with him being her marital slave. On the contrary, from that day on, this couple begins to treat each other with more respect and honor, and they listen to each other,

accepting any wishes which the other one might voice, without either one being excessive in their demands. If the 'taming of the shrew' actually took place, then it was his taming because she enforces her own agency in that relationship, which finally puts both partners on the same level. We can thus establish a valuable parallel between "Beringer" and Marie de France's "Guigemar." Similarly, Dietrich's "Der Borte" also signals that the young man needs considerable help to find himself, to overcome his character flaws, to gain inner strength, and to handle better the social demands. Yet, ultimately, we are left with strong feelings of discomfort, unease, and uncertainty regarding the traditional concepts of masculinity. Male gender simply does not cut it in a growing number of narratives from the late Middle Ages.

The *Melusine* Novels

Even though the motif of Melusine appears to have been known already since the twelfth century, as the famous mosaic image in the floor of the Otranto cathedral indicates, it did not fully develop until the late fourteenth century. Granted, twelfth-century Walter Map and Gervasius of Tilbury mentioned Melusine, but the first major narrative focused on the hybrid creature of Melusine did not appear until 1393 when Jean d'Arras published his French prose version. That one was followed by Couldrette's verse version from ca. 1400, and the German prose translation by Thüring von Ringoltingen from 1456. Since then, a veritable flood of manuscripts and printed versions appeared, coupled by endless images, sculptures, and even furniture (*Lüsterweibchen*) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The popularity of this text was obviously based on the appearance of this half-human creature, Melusine, who forces her husband Reymund to accept the taboo never to investigate her whereabouts on Saturdays. However, driven by his brother who strongly suspects that she is committing adultery on those days, Reymund eventually investigates and learns, to his horror, that his wife has transformed into a hybrid creature, being human in the upper body part, and being a snake below. At first, however, Melusine forgives her husband his egregious transgression because the truth about herself has remained a secret between them. Later, however, the situation changes radically because Reymund learns that one of his sons, Geffroy, has begrudged one of his brothers, Fraymund, having turned into a monk. In his irrational fury, he then burned down the entire monastery and thus killed all the members. This fratricide incenses Reymund so badly that he publicly condemns his wife as the ultimate culprit for this terrible event, blaming the murder ultimately on her monstrous character. This constitutes the ultimate break of the taboo, which forces Melusine to leave humanity and to return to her secret world, where she will have to wait until Doomsday before her destiny will be fulfilled.

As mysterious as Melusine proves to be, she is extremely powerful and has all the resources available to create an entire dynasty, delivering many children and building castles for them. Tragically, however, she cannot fully control her husband

who ultimately becomes responsible for her destruction. Within the context of our analysis of masculinity, numerous facts pertaining to Reymund's early life need to be considered. First, he is raised at his uncle's court and is thus presented as a young and underdeveloped character. Next, although not fully responsible for the tragedy that strikes his uncle, he is the one who accidentally kills him in a failed attempt to protect him against a wild boar that attacks them in the forest at night.

His uncle foresees his imminent death as indicated by the stars, but Reymund is not simply a tool in the hand of destiny. Instead, as all authors of the various versions confirm, he simply handles his weapon badly in the fight against the boar and kills his uncle instead of the animal. No one ever finds out his guilt in that matter; instead, Reymund receives the privilege from the successor to carve out a piece of land as his own by means of a rope made out of the skin of a deer, as Melusine instructed him to do. This proves to be astoundingly large, which allows the married couple to create their own dynasty. Everything that happens subsequently is the result of her agency, whereas Reymund simply carries out her commands and barely contributes anything to their marriage and estate.

Their conjugal life develops well for a long time, with many sons born to them many of whom later grow up to be worthy knights and founders of their own dynasties. The narrative takes a decisive turn, however, when Reymund's brother instills the idea in him that his wife might commit adultery, which would explain her mysterious disappearance on Saturdays. Reymund naively believes his brother and forgets about the taboo that she had imposed on him, which thus leads to his tragic moves that destroy their marriage (cf. now the contributions to Urban et al. 2017). Similar to Conrad in Dietrich von der Gletze's verse narrative, Reymund does not communicate properly with his wife; he makes a rash move, and then, by promulgating in public what constitutes his wife's true nature as a monstrous being, forces her to return to her world of fairies where she has to wait until Doomsday to recover her humanity. In short, this protagonist gains his happiness and good fortune through his wife's power, and he destroys it all through his own actions that are ignorant, foolish, and outright wrong.

Reymund subsequently suffers deeply, lamenting the loss of his wife, and he never recovers psychologically until his early death. If we compare the early stage of his life with the later one, we recognize strong parallels. It would be too negative to talk about 'toxic masculinity' here, but we still can identify in this protagonist a significant failure who does not understand how to establish and maintain his individuality within a social context. Mauritius had failed because he outdid by far the available strategies to establish his masculinity; Reymund never gains that status and remains dependent on his wife and, sadly, on his brother who both hold authority over him in contrastive manners.

Of course, the family lives on, a full dynasty emerges, with many kingdoms all over the known world claiming a familiar connection to Melusine – not to Reymund, however! The many different versions of *Melusine* continue to paint a powerful picture of this founding mother, whereas the husband increasingly

disappears into the background. Thüring, to focus on one of the various authors, explicitly laments the poor performance of the male protagonist and identifies him specifically as the culprit who brings about Melusine's destruction, i.e., her forceful removal from the world of humanity. Reymund, on the other hand, incompetent in many aspects of courtly life, is characterized as the culprit in his uncle's death – he never admits his guilt and keeps it a secret for the rest of his life – and as a person who simply carries out all his wife's commands. In the end, however, he becomes a victim of his brother's insinuations and thus breaks Melusine's taboo not only once – which she would have forgiven him because no one would have learned about it – but twice, which forcefully catapults her out of human society. We have no other choice but to identify Reymund as a significant failure, as a man who does not know how to hold up his promise even to his own wife, and who transgresses the taboo out of his emotional distress. Significantly, some of his own sons continue with this evil tradition and equally fail, causing misery and suffering.

Although the narrator presents Reymund and his social environment (the knights and the court) in a traditional fashion, the protagonist never emerges as a respected knight or a strong individual. His worst shortcoming is his inability to live up to his own promise to Melusine, but behind that we recognize an individual who is entirely subject to other people and their opinion. Little surprise that the narrator projects him, for instance, as a man completely forlorn and desperate after he has killed his uncle. He is fully aware of what terrible deed he has committed, but he has no idea about what to do in that situation. Melusine, by contrast, knows everything about him and decides by herself what Reymund will have to do so that she can orchestrate her own life. We could thus call this protagonist a rather weak male individual who is subject to external forces or authorities in his life.

We could not apply the epithet of 'toxic masculinity' to him in specific terms, but all medieval authors engaged with this narrative material pointed at him as the one who betrays and thus destroys his wife, Melusine, as a result of his foolish suspicion and fear. Of course, Reymund is not alone in that because his brother had instigated him to spy on her. And early on, before his marriage, the entire court had felt uneasy about this strange woman but had then been muted because she had explicitly expressed her Christian faith.

Even though most of Melusine's sons emerge as mighty knights and founders of new kingdoms – they all show markers of monstrosity in their faces, inherited from their mother – their father ultimately fails altogether and collapses, as we might say, once his wife has disappeared, having returned to her world of fairies. Without Melusine, Reymund would not have enjoyed any particular respect and esteem, and as soon as she has disappeared, this protagonist loses all his dignity, worth, and individuality. His masculinity could develop only with Melusine's help, as the early scene after Reymund's killing of his uncle had demonstrated. He races through the forest without knowing what to do. He does not even direct his horse because he is deeply shocked and desperate over the deadly accident. Melusine, however, knows about it all, and she then takes charge in every respect

saving Reymund from utter humiliation, punishment, and public shame.

We could not apply the concept of 'toxic masculinity' here, but the narrative clearly signals Reymund's helplessness, disorientation, and existential crisis both in his early years and later in his old age. So, his character represents the very opposite to this toxicity, but it also proves to be destructive in the end. As in the case of "Der Borte," this male protagonist depends deeply on his female partner and can carve out his individuality and social position only because of his wife's tremendous help. As soon as she has disappeared, however, Reymund breaks down and loses his sense of identity and public esteem.

It remains a big question why the *Melusine* narratives enjoyed such a huge success both in French and in German over the next centuries (for summaries of the various versions from across Europe, see Zeldenrust 2020). Although some of the sons gloriously continue the dynasty, some also run into huge problems when they deliberately try to break taboos imposed by their aunts or rather their grandmother (Classen 2020), which represents a deeply hidden secret. Wherever we turn, the young men's masculinity is at stake, whether toxic or not. At the same time, the mother's role remains a mystery, although the intrigue of the female fairy or monster had a huge impact in public opinion, as the countless representations of Melusine in furniture, fountains, sculptures, images, and texts confirm. To be sure, however, maybe more than ever before in medieval and early modern literature, the questions pertaining to masculinity, its construction, and threats assumed a central position. We might be able to recognize here a powerful literary expression of male anxiety and the search for identity in a transforming world.

Conclusion

The modern notion of 'toxic masculinity' can certainly be traced back to the Middle Ages, though we might need some modifications and adaptations in light of the various approaches and reflections by individual authors. Scholarship has already identified a specific discourse addressing and criticizing male violence against women. The texts selected for this study, however, have indicated more a struggle for masculinity than a strategy to impose it on the social environment. More often than not, the male protagonists revealed an astounding character weakness, an inability to live up to a certain set of expectations, or a strong dependence on their female partners. Masculinity in the pre-modern world was obviously much more constructed and hence also subject to deconstruction than we might have assumed. Depending on the circumstances, the male protagonists operate aggressively or reveal an astounding weakness, not being able to embrace the traditional ideals of knighthood and hence in need of magical assistance, if not help by their wives.

To proceed from here, we would have to turn our attention to the large corpus of short verse narratives – both *fabliaux* and *mæren* – representing the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, and to the many Shrovetide plays, sermon

narratives, and jest narratives from the sixteenth century, where the gender discourse found its most vivid and telling expression. Masculinity was as much an issue in the pre-modern world as it continues to be one today, certainly problematic and challenging, as the literary examples have richly documented. Male insecurity and the struggle for a male individuality could lead to manifestations of ‘toxic masculinity,’ but in most cases discussed here, the male protagonist proves to be amazingly weak, immature, and irrational.

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