Women Knew How to Defend Themselves! Late Medieval Literary Evidence of the Gender Discourse in Middle High German Verse Narratives (*mæren*)

We easily fall into the interpretive trap or become the victim of a fallacy assuming that medieval literature was deeply and pervasively misogynistic and that medieval society was thoroughly patriarchal, not granting any respect, freedom, and independence to women. On top of that, we regularly encounter the trope of the evil woman who endangers, threatens, and subjugates her husband. Many times, male poets voiced this severe criticism of women as hateful, seductive, irrational, gullible, disloyal, and simply evil character, all following the model of the ur mother, Eve who betrayed Adam in the garden of Eden. Satirical literature emphasized and reconfirmed these stereotypes, and when we turn to clerical authors, their condemnation of women was loud and clear. However, the reality on the ground, so to speak, was rather different, but we would have to read our literary sources more carefully and with more attention to the details than most scholars have been willing to do. This paper begins with several very contradictory cases where women are idealized and condemned almost at the same time. Then, the focus will turn to the large corpus of late medieval German verse narratives where we encounter many examples of strong, virtuous, intelligent, and agentic women whom we are invited to admire, even though the poets were, as far as we can tell, all male. This analysis will thus allow us to gain a deeper insight into the global gender discourse during the pre-modern period, at least in the West, realizing the playful, contradictory, and probably intentionally ambiguous approach to this question.

Keywords: *gender discourse, late medieval Middle High German verse narratives (mæren), smart women characters; misogyny; Andreas Capellanus; Marie de France; Dietrich von der Gletze; Heinrich Kaufringer; Graf Froben Christoph von Zimmern*

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Introduction

There are countless examples of medieval literary documents that want to confirm women's seductiveness, lack of morality, revengefulness, or hunger for power over their husbands. Misogyny was simply rampant, and this since the time of the Church Fathers, such as Tertullian, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Ambrose, Saint Jerome, and Saint Augustine, who were, however, primarily concerned with the temptation exerted by the human body at large and believed that sexuality constituted the greatest danger to a good Christian, pitting the soul against the body (Blamires, ed., 1992). The fear of becoming the victim of sin, closely associated with lack of chastity, hence with sexuality, dominated the entire Church, and has done so, to some extent, even until today. But there were also many poets who projected highly positive images of women as mothers,

wives, and daughters, all depending on the context (Blamires 1997). We face, hence, a rather problematic situation because medieval society was certainly patriarchal and tended to force women to stay at home, or to be quiet in church following Saint Paul's dictum (1 Corinthians 14:34–35): "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (https://www.bible.com/bible/1/1CO.14.34–35.KJV). But, at a closer analysis, we also find the opposite case, so we need to learn to differentiate more than in the past to do justice to this gender discourse.

Research, however, has begun to recognize that this public stance by male society was pursued only partially, and often did not even matter because countless women were graced by divine visions and experienced revelations that made them speak up and write about those, whether we think of Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schönau, Catherine of Siena, Birgitta of Sweden, Julian of Norwich, or Teresa of Avila, all enjoying enormous authority as God's mouthpieces. Those were the 'big' names, but we have recently also realized that there were many women's convents all over Europe where the members produced major artworks, composed hymns, copied texts, or wrote about their mystical experiences (Dinzelbacher 2005). Indeed, many of those monastic centers were centrally important for women who wanted to gain an education, be involved in the production of art works, compose and perform music, and be active in many administrative duties and crafts (Schlotheuber, Hamburger, and Jackel, eds. 2024; for secular French poets, see Le Vot, ed., 2026).

Moreover, many noble ladies were energetic book collectors, patrons of scribes and artists who produced books of hours for them, or they turned to writing themselves (Kaplan 2024; Lähnemann and Schlotheuber 2024). There is no longer any shortage of relevant studies confirming the extensive involvement of medieval women in the intellectual and practical life of their time (Postan 1975/1996; Classen 2016), not to speak of women as rulers all by themselves or in close cooperation with their husbands (see, for instance, the contributions to Levin and Bucholz, eds., 2009; Benz St. John 2012; Westwell 2024).

What still remains a very open and critical question pertains to the gender discourse itself which raged throughout the ages, as a vast body of literary texts extensively records. On the one hand, we have realized the true extent to which women contributed their own texts, and this from Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Frau Ava, and Herrad of Landsberg for the early Middle Ages to Marie de France and the *trobairitz* for the High Middle Ages, to Christine de Pizan, Helene Kottannerin, and Argula von Grumbach for the late Middle Ages (Brinker-Gabler, ed., 1988; Wilson and Margolis, eds., 2004). Some women were energetically committed to defend their own gender, such as (again) famous Christine de Pizan, but men such as Jehan Le Fèvre also rushed to this task on the side of women, when the latter composed his *Livre de Leesce* 1380–1387) (Burke, trans., 2013).

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Structure of this Paper

Based on these general comments, I will first highlight the considerable complexity of the gender discourse throughout the Middle Ages focusing on Marie de France and Andreas Capellanus. The question regarding misogyny in medieval literature can be fruitfully discussed through a close reading of the enormously successful episodic account of *Dolopathos* (Latin, anonymous, ca. 1200) where we encounter an extremely hateful female character and yet also a number of very positive female figures. Subsequently, I will turn my attention to the central evidence for this study, a selection of late medieval Middle High German verse narratives identified as *mæren*. Those were quite similar to the Old French *fabliaux* and at times were actually influenced by them, if they were not even translations. Research has made some efforts to engage with this genre, but the issue of gender has not yet attracted sufficient interest. These entertaining, often highly erotic tales aimed at a mixed audience, inviting both members of the urban and the aristocratic classes to laugh about the events related in these narrative accounts. A large selection of these tales have only recently been made available in a scholarly edition by Klaus Ridder and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler (2020), so the time has come to accept these popular narratives as critically important within late medieval German literature. In light of some of the comments and motifs presented in these *mæren*, we will be able to conclude with significant insights into the presence and impact of the gender discourse in the late Middle Ages.

High Medieval Comments About Women

Although Marie de France and Andreas Capellanus were contemporaries, she living in England, he working in Paris (both late twelfth century), their works have not yet been compared with each other, probably because of vast differences in genres (in Andreas's case, a hodgepodge of genres combined in the framework of a guidebook on love versus Marie's case with verse narratives talking about conflicts in love and marriage) and the use of languages (Latin versus Anglo-Norman). Nevertheless, if we want to understand the complex issue a little better, putting both their texts next to each other will shed important light on the questions regarding the gender dispute as it raged in the Middle Ages (for a fleeting and not productive comment, see Burgess 1987, p. 15; for the notion of a crisis in that regard, see Classen 2023, for a failed attempt to bring these two authors together, see Schuhardt 2019).

In Marie's *lais*, we come across a variety of different love relationships, some ending in a fiasco, others developing gloriously with both partners feeling a deep sense of happiness. In "Guigemar" and "Yonec," the young woman is married to an old and hateful husband and gains her freedom only through some magic or rather has to die before the truth comes out. In "Equitan," the king convinces the seneschal's wife to have an affair with him, but when she later schemes to get her husband killed, both she and the king die in turn. In

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"Bisclavret," the protagonist regularly turns into a werewolf, and when the wife finally learns the truth, she betrays him and thus forces him to stay in that monstrous shape. However, one day when Bisclavret encounters her again, he bites off her nose, which makes a wise counselor figure out that there must have been a previous relationship. She is forced to reveal where his clothings have been hidden, and thus Bisclavret can recover his human form whereas she is sent into exile. In "Lanval," we learn of a fairy who imposes a taboo on her lover, Lanval, who subsequently breaks it when he is severely challenged by the queen who wants him as her sexual partner. Lanval would have almost faced the death penalty for his alleged crime of rape, but the fairy appears in the last moment, convinces the king of his innocence, and disappears into Avalon, and this together with Lanval who no longer wants to live in this world of legal injustice and tyranny.

In "Deus Amanz," the conflict involves a king's daughter and her lover, a squire, who can win her hand in marriage only if he achieves an impossible task. She therefore arranges that her aunt in Salerno concocts a magical potion for him which would him strong enough to carry her up a steep mountain, but in the last minute, he refuses to take it, reaches the top, but collapses with his heart having given up. She dies out of grief. In "Milun" and in "Eliduc," marriage is at stake, though there are no insurmountable challenges. There are more *lais* to be mentioned, but it suffices already to observe how much Marie explored gender problems, especially mismatched marriages, toxic masculinity, women's envy of a female neighbor ("Le Fresne"), fear of the Other, adultery, murder, and communication ("Milun"). The ideal she pursued aimed for individual happiness, especially in marriage, but this could also entail, as in "Eliduc," that a loyal and acquiescent wife voluntarily removes herself from the marriage and joins a monastery to make it possible for her husband to be with his true love. But at the end of their lives, all three embrace each other as friends, so even this account concludes harmoniously. However, when violence, betrayal, and hatred enter the picture, catastrophes loom large because they undermine the gender relationships and create huge conflicts (Waters, ed., 2018; for a comprehensive discussion of Marie, see Kinoshita and McCracken 2012).

Clerical Views of Love, Marriage, and Gender

When we turn to the evidence by the Parisian cleric Andreas Capellanus, famous for his 'manual' on courtly love, *De Amore* (ca. 1180/1190), the first impression suggests that he provides detailed definitions and explanations of how to love, whom to love, what to do to achieve love, and so forth. But even though the introductory section seems to lay the groundwork and provides very clear instructions, the subsequent debates between a man and a woman, mostly one of them of a different social class, do not lead to any satisfactory outcome, at least for him. However, they demonstrate how one should implement rhetoric to address a person from the other sex and to express one's desires, even if the result is altogether only negative for the male wooer (Parry, trans., 1941/1969;

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see now Knapp, Fritz Peter, trans., 2006, with a German translation). Although the narrator insists that members of the clergy should abstain from any lovemaking, he cannot fully advise that they embrace complete chastity and actually urges them to participate in this erotic game (ch. 7, pp. 141–42). Nuns, by contrast, ought to be avoided at all costs because gaining sexual pleasures with them would kill both body and soul.

Nevertheless, Andreas is very specific and detailed when he states in unmistaken terms that love cannot be found within marriage. In a letter allegedly written by the Countess of Champagne, we learn: "love cannot exert its powers between two people who are married to each other. For lovers give each other everything freely, under no compulsion of necessity, but married people are in duty bound to give in to each other's desires and deny themselves to each other in nothing" (pp. 106–07). The narrator underscores this observation repeatedly, often resorting to different literary genres, including even a short Arthurian tale at the end of Book II. There, a lover accomplishes all tasks requested by his lady and brings back from his adventures the rules of love which confirm the previous statements and expand on them, as if all gender relationships can be subsumed under such a rigid system of regulations and stipulations concerning life outside of the bonds of marriage.

However, despite the appearance of a legal codification of love, fully affirming its relevance and value to everyone, then follows book three which puts everything on its head because the narrator turns against himself and condemns both women at large and love outside of marriage; God would condemn this without any doubt (p. 187). The narrator, speaking as his student's tutor, finally concludes that the only proper approach to this matter would be to "pass by all the vanities of the world, so that when the Bridegroom cometh to celebrate the greater nuptials" (p. 211), the soul would be prepared for the arrival of God. He does not mince his words: "Avoid then, Walter, practicing the mandates of love, and labor in constant watchfulness to that when the Bridegroom cometh, He may find you wakeful" (p. 212).

Basically, until today, modern research has been thoroughly puzzled about this astounding contradictory and ambivalent discourse in a treatise that was supposed to be the ultimate guideline for its recipient, young Walter. Andreas formulates some hesitation as to the value of pursuing love in his preface, but he admits having gone through the same experience as his student: "I know, having learned from experience, that it does not do the man who owes obedience to Venus's service any good to give careful thought to anything except how he may always be doing something that will entangle him more firmly in the chains" (p. 27). Does Andreas promote courtly love or does he oppose it? He is convinced that his teachings will make Walter to a better lover: "after you have learned the art of love your progress in it will be more cautious" (p. 27).

In essence, as we may argue, *De amore* closely follows the model by Ovid with his *Ars amatoria* and then his *Remedia amoris* (between 1 B.C.E. and 4 C.E.), relying hence on dialectics in the discussion of all aspects relevant for love. It remains unclear whether Andreas also wanted to address a female audience or whether he had only male readers in mind. But he certainly

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highlighted the problematics and difficulties in all gender relationships, especially when class differences and religious concerns intervened and problematized the communication between men and women. There is a certain playfulness in this treatise from the beginning to the end, and despite the final book with its harsh condemnation of love, we know already too much about the narrator's 'serious' intents in the first two books to go either completely with the pro or the con of the debate. However we might evaluate *De amore*, it underscores very explicitly the tensions between the genders and forces the reader to recognize the dialectic nature of all human communication (see, for instance, Allen 1992; Baldwin 1994; Monson 2004). The narrator is not fully reliable, so it seems, and deliberately so, because he obviously aimed for the full display of possible arguments and attitudes in the matter of love, glorifying and condemning it, and presenting women as admirable and despicable, all simply depending on the register pulled by Andreas in the various chapters.

The Evil Queen: Traditional Misogyny

To pursue our objective further and widen the background for the actual focus on late medieval *mæren*, let us consider the powerful and highly popular *Dolopathos* by Johannes de Alta Silva from ca. 1200, which represents the Latin version of an ancient source from Persia probably conveyed to the West via a Hebrew translation. We can no longer identify the exact transmission of the various manuscripts and are hence in no position to determine specifically whether Johannes relied on an older but now lost Old French version of the *Seven Wise Men* or on oral sources. The value of Johannes's work for our study consists of its stereotypical characterization of the evil queen (Müller, trans., 2025; for the English translation, see Gilleland, trans., 1981).

The young prince Lucinius receives a solid education from his teacher Virgil in Rome, when he learns of his mother's death. His father remarries, and his wife then demands Lucinius's return home, but the latter understands from the study of the constellations that his mother has dies and that he will soon be separated from his tutor. Virgil then imposes a ban on his speech once he has left Rome until his own appearance in Palermo, where his father resides. The king is very distraught about his son's muteness, so when his second wife requests that she be in charge of releasing his tongue, he happily accepts this, not knowing what she really intends. First, she assembles a group of sophisticated prostitutes who try with every means available to seduce Lucinius sexually, but all to no avail. Subsequently, the queen takes over, but she also fails. This then creates such anger in her that she suddenly pretends that Lucinius tried to rape her and the maids at her court. Her husband believes this claim and wants his son to be burnt alive. Then, however, a sage appears and tells a story that grants a one-day delay of the execution. This is repeated six more times, and then finally Virgil himself appears, which allows the prince to reveal the truth. This then leads to the burning of the queen and her maids, while Lucinius takes over his father's rein.

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The evil queen is the model case of a contemptible woman, closely following the original story of 'Potiphar's Wife' (Genesis 39:5–20). Scholars have often argued that this would allow us to characterize the poet as a misogynist. Müller, however, pointed out that there are several women who appear in the stories told by the wise men who represent the very opposite character (Müller, trans., 2025, pp. LX–LXV). In other words, when we probe how various medieval authors viewed and evaluated women, we have to be much more careful to avoid the danger of stereotyping and generalizing. Both in the intradiegetic stories "Canis" and "Creditor," the husband appears as easily subject to irrationality, violence, and ignorance. Only the wife's intelligence and rationality saves him or sets things in good order again. In fact, both here and in many other medieval narratives, such as *Apollonius of Tyre* and *Floris and Blanchefleur*, we encounter quite a number of outstanding female individuals who deserve our respect and are openly admired by the male poets.

Gender Discourse in Late Medieval *mæren*

In light of all this evidence confirming that the gender discourse was widespread, intensive, complex, and rather popular, we can take the next step and examine a range of late medieval *mæren*, i.e., short verse narratives very similar to Old French *fabliaux*, Italian *novelle*, and Middle English *tales*, where the gender relationship proves to be challenging. For convenience's sake, here I rely on the collection of twenty stories contained in the anthology *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany* (Classen, trans., 2007/2009; for the critical edition of a large corpus, see Ridder and Ziegeler, eds., 2020). Just as in the case of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400), these more or less contemporary stories were commonly predicated on erotic motifs involving men wooing women and the subsequent problems, more or less in the same vein as Marie de France's *lais* and the debates contained in Andreas Capellanus's *De amore*. These *mæren* often drew from French, Latin, or Italian sources and explored in their own ways the gender tensions so common in the late Middle Ages, at least as outlined in this unique genre (for the larger context, see Grubmüller 2006).

"Aristotle and Phyllis"

In "Of the Wise Aristotle, or Aristotle and Phyllis" (ca. 1300, here no. 2), the philosopher Aristotle has been appointed as the personal tutor for Alexander the Great, as he was later called. When the latter falls in love with the chambermaid Phyllis, he becomes entirely distracted and loses interest in all learning. His teacher manages to get them both separated, but he has not counted with the young woman's intelligence, resourcefulness, resolve, and strategic thinking. She knows that she cannot get her lover back, but she wants to expose the philosopher in his own sensuality and sexual desires. The narrator wavers and both praises her and criticizes her for her sexual teasing, but our sympathies

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are directed toward her because the old man had hurt her badly, so she is only getting even with him. On the one hand, we hear that she "acted in this way in order to tease the old man, who had robbed her heart of her love, and in order to deceive him" (p. 14). On the other, we are told: "No one can tell all the tricks that women command. A woman can go hunting everywhere, and no one can be safe from her cunning" (p. 14), Comparing men with birds who are caught by hunters using glue on sticks, the narrator laments, though certainly only with tongue-in-cheek: "It does not matter how wise he is or how indolent; no one can free his mind of women's cunning" (p. 14). Even Aristotle then becomes her victim, but not because he would have actively sought her out. Instead, she preys on him out of revenge for the hurt he had caused her, and thus she can easily demonstrate even this old man's sexual desires, which quickly make him look utterly foolish.

In a hilarious reversal of traditional gender roles commonly expressed through the reference to the horse standing in for the woman and the rider for the man, Phyllis demands that Aristotle allow her to place a saddle on his back for her to sit on and to use her silken belt as a bridle, and this way the old man then crawls on his knees and hands with her on top of him, a scene which the queen and her maids secretly observe. They all burst out in laughter, and the news quickly spread throughout the court, which makes dignified Aristotle to all their butt of the joke. He is ridiculed, embarrassed, and humiliated and thus has to pack up his stuff and leave. In exile, he writes a misogynist treatise and warns the world about women's seductive power: "Whoever turns to women will be caught by them like the fish by the hook, like the bird by the rope" (p. 16).

But there are two valuable comments by the poet who, referring to Saint Gall, also emphasizes that "women are not like that. Women give joy to sad hearts that are weighed down by worries. . . women are well guarded and free of all blemishes. There are thousands of women who excel in virtues" (pp. 15–16). This puts the actual blame for sexual transgressions on men who want to "have a dishonorable and unchaste relationship with a woman" (p. 16). The other point by the narrator might be even more relevant because the entire court laugh about Aristotle and express respect and even admiration for this smart maid: "The sweet and noble Phyllis has avenged her sorrow" (p. 16). Even though we learn nothing about young Alexander's reaction, both the king and his courtiers indicate their satisfaction with the maid's success in humiliating this old and highly respected teacher who had expressed such a disagreement of love that fills the hearts of two young people. Instead of expressing their pity and empathy with Aristotle, they mock and ridicule him, imposing an "unbearable disgrace" (p. 16) on him (for the significant epistemological function of laughter in medieval and pre-modern literature, see the contributions to Classen, ed., 2010). We might even go so far as to identify the court's laughing as a significant twist in the gender discourse insofar as the experience of love is generally evaluated as positive, at least within secular society, and this irrespective of the bond of marriage. They actually blame Aristotle for not having any understanding of or sympathy for the young people who just love each other, whereas the

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philosopher revealed his own hypocrisy in punishing them for their relationship and yet clamoring for just the same, or rather exclusively, sexual pleasures.

Gender Role Playing and Masks

In Dietrich von der Gletze's *Der Borte* (The Belt; here no. 3), also from the late thirteenth century, the conflict discussed is localized within marriage insofar as the young man feels deeply insecure about himself and fails to gain social recognition as a knight. He does not enjoy any successes at a tournament or at the court of Brabant; he is regularly defeated by other men and suffers from a crushed masculinity. His wife, who appears to be completely self-assured, strong, and resolute, supports his visit to the tournament, but then she faces her own challenge back home, which takes us into the world of fantasy but clearly underscores the tensions between public and private affairs, between social success and personal attitudes.

While spending some time in her protective garden, a stranger knight appears and immediately wants to make love with her, for which he is willing to offer first his goshawk, then his two greyhounds, and finally even his horse as a payment for her sexual favor. She adamantly refuses and is not at all interested in him or his gifts, all of which would be miracle animals guaranteeing the owner victories in each one's respect. This knight is tempting her, and finally he goes one step further and offers her his valuable belt: "whoever wears it will notice that he enjoys honor among knights" (p. 23). The lady feels terrible about this enormous temptation, she turns pale and red again, but then she thinks of her husband for whom she would acquire those animals and the belt and so agrees with him, accepting the offer in return for one sexual union. Even though nature seems to express its approval of this affair (p. 23), she subsequently mocks him for having wasted away all those valuables, but for him, everything was worth the cost: "I have never experienced so much happiness, lady, as I have here with you" (p. 23).

Unfortunately, a servant has observed the scene and reports about it to his lord. The young knight is so distraught that he simply leaves the tournament and departs for Brabant where he stays without returning or communicating with his wife. She stays behind, waits for him, and runs their estate. Eventually, after two years, she decides to make a move, just like Phyllis, but she uses the very opposite mask. Whereas Phyllis had made herself look extremely attractive and erotic, the lady in "The Belt" changes her appearance into that of a man. As a knight, she arrives in Brabant where she immediately enjoys many triumphs with her magical animals and is highly admired by everyone; everyone believes her to be a man.

At some occasion, she/he and her husband, Conrad, are assigned to a guard post during a city siege organized by the Duke of Brabant. Here, the entirely humiliated and weakened Conrad begs his new 'friend,' Heinrich, for a gift, that is, any one of the animals, because he believes that those would grant him finally also some victory. To his surprise, the stranger then sets a condition; if he were to turn over one of the animals, he would demand a price from Conrad, a sexual

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union: “I love men. I have never loved women. If you do whatever I wish, I’ll gladly give you the greyhounds and the bird of prey” (p. 27). Conrad realizes that the other man is a homosexual, which he laments somewhat, but he is so anxious to gain one of the animals that he is willing to submit under the other ‘man’s desires.

Just when they are about to have sex with each other, the wife reveals her true identity and lambasts her husband for his lack of morality and principles. Fully enraged, she bitterly complains: “I kissed another knight and let him sleep with me, so that you would gain more honor in knighthood with the help of the weapons and the strength of the belt” (pp. 27–28). She admits her own wrongdoing, but insists that she had committed adultery for an ulterior reason, to help him gain respect and honor. Her affair was nothing but the result of “human frailty” (p. 28). His willingness to sleep with another man “was a crime against Christianity. . . . You are a corruptible man considering that you would have abandoned, just for two minuscule gifts, your honor” (p. 28). Of course, this then does not lead to their separation or divorce. After all, the wife had orchestrated her strategy in order to recover her marriage and to teach her husband a lesson. This appears to be working, he begs for her forgiveness, which she grants, and she then hands over all the animals and the belt to him, so both can finally return home, but not without her stating one more time: “My lord, you know well that you bore the greatest guilt” (p. 28). The wife does not try any longer to assume a new gender role; instead, she has achieved all her goals; her husband greatly respects her, and she has helped him to establish his honor and hence his identity.

The poet concludes his verse narrative with general comments about the ethical and moral decline of his society since people pay respect only to money and disregard the service for pure women and hence love. In short, as he says: “I would prefer women’s favor over silver and gold. No one can describe in words the great joy which those receive from pure ladies who are in their service” (p. 28). As much as the outcome of this story fully reconfirms the traditional gender roles, Dietrich deftly played with the possibilities of role reversals under certain circumstances. But to be clear, there is no homosexuality involved because she only pretends to be a man under the mask of a knight and happily takes it off again when it is no longer needed for her purposes. By the same token, Conrad has no hidden interests in homosexuality and submits under Heinrich’s wishes only so that he can acquire one of those magical animals. That means, he simply lacks in morals and easily prostitutes his body to gain some respect as a knight, even if only by the help of the mysterious dogs or the horse, so magic. Of course, the wife is not scot-free of all blame, but she fell for the mysterious knight’s offers not for her own sake but for her husband’s. In short, she sacrificed herself for him, whereas Heinrich thinks only of himself and is absolutely reckless in purchasing public esteem through a sexual act. Undoubtedly, Dietrich provides us, through this story, with much to think about, mirroring in many ways the same reflections determining the *Romance de Silence* by Heldris de Cornuälle (first half of the thirteenth century, see Roche-Mahdi, ed., 2007). However, in this Anglo-Norman text, cross-dressing serves primarily for legal and economic

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reasons (see the contributions to Bozkaya, Bußmann, and Philipowski, eds., 2020), whereas in the case of Dietrich's verse narrative, the wife puts on a male mask to defend the reasons for her own sexual transgression. To be sure, gender, honor, and individuality are all closely intertwined with each other.

Wooing, Identity, and Honor: "Friedrich von Auchenfurt

The Viennese Jans Enikel is famous for his chronicles, ie., his *Fürstenbuch* and the *Weltchronik*. The latter was composed after 1272 and enjoyed enormous success, still extant in thirty-nine manuscripts. One of the reasons for this popularity might have been the inclusion of various fictional accounts, also verse narratives. One of them, "Friedrich von Auchenfurt" (no. 4) illustrates most poignantly how intensively aristocratic society debated gender roles, honor, and individual responsibilities. Although numerous scholars have already turned their attention to this chronicle at large, this particular account has so far been hardly the subject of detailed analysis (but see Dobozy 2008; for an exception, see Classen 2019).

Very similar to "Der Borte," a married lady is strongly wooed by a knight, here named, Friedrich, who does not want to take a 'no' for an answer. She bitterly laments about it but seems to be helpless, especially because she does not seem to be supported by her husband. However, she clearly formulates her love for him (p. 30), but this does not have any relevance for the knight. We are not informed about the lack of communication between the couple at this stage and only face the situation that she is helplessly exposed to Friedrich's constant wooing, and this over years. Finally, she comes up with a plan with which she would finally deter him. She sets up a condition, and if he were to meet it, she would grant him her love. Of course, she strategizes rhetorically and demands that he goes into a tournament and do jousts without any armor; certainly a suicidal situation if he accepted it. But he does, and he gets so badly wounded that he would have almost died. We would think that this would finally bring to an end his stubborn wooing, but this is not the case. To the credit of the lady, when she sits at his sickbed, she laments his foolishness and his ill-conceived desires with her although she only and truly loves her husband who will be as loyal to her as she will be to him (p. 32).

This wife is desperate when he returns and wants to collect his reward. She pleads with him to let her preserve her honor, and then the miracle happens, he relents, but only on the condition that she humbles herself in front of the entire church community during the feast of Pentecost, wearing the blood-soaked shirt he had been wounded in: "Wearing only this clothing, go and receive the Eucharist. If you do that, my lady, as I have told you, then you will be truly free from your oath, never mind what will happen to me" (p. 33). In other words, gender now intertwines with honor, which is quite parallel to the story by Dietrich.

The lady does exactly what Friedrich demanded, which exposes her to public humiliation and shame. Her husband is enormously furious when he witnesses the horrible scene, with his wife standing in front of the community

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wearing this blood-covered shirt. When they later meet in private and he demands an explanation, she finally reveals all the details and hence her suffering and ultimate sacrifice due to the knight's wooing. This shocking revelation has a deep impact on him. He realizes the high price she had to pay to preserve her honor. He might even feel shame not to have protected his wife better, though the narrator does not say anything about this aspect. In fact, he reconfirms his strong love for her and announces, once he has understood it all: "from now on I will be your servant more than ever before" (p. 33).

Once Friedrich has realized the lady's commitment to her own honor, to her husband, and hence to her marriage, he quickly flees the country being afraid of being killed by his opponent. There are no further comments by the poet, but the message conveyed is loud and clear. This lady fought for her marriage with all the means available to her, although she was also somewhat foolish to believe that her wooer would not go so far as to accept her condition. Nevertheless, just as in "Der Borte," the marriage is saved, she is freed from Friedrich's constant badgering, and standing up in public with this deeply embarrassing outfit demonstrates drastically how much she was willing to accept suffering, at least in emotional and psychological terms in order to preserve her honor and her marriage.

Committing Crimes to Preserve One's Integrity and Honor: Murder, Marriage, and Misery in Heinrich Kaufringer's "The Innocent Murderess"

What are the limits an individual might have to transgress in order to preserve her marriage, her happiness, and her innocence? Can we even imagine the paradox of 'innocent murder'? This is the very premise in one of Heinrich Kaufringer's *mæren* (ca. 1400; here no. 17), where the female protagonist has to fight under greatest duress to protect herself agains series of evil people who all try to abuse her at a time when she is about to get married. Scholars have already realized the extent to which legal issues assume considerable relevance in this genre, shedding additional light on the conflicts between genders (see the contributions to Doering und Emmelius, eds., 2017).

In this case, a young countess is about to marry the king, but she is badly abused by a knight whose servant had slandered her claiming that she would sleep with any man if the opportunity arose. So, in the evening before the wedding, she would be alone, and the knight should pretend to be the king. Indeed, this plan works, although she is rather hesitant to let him in. So, they both sleep with each other, but afterwords, in his drowsiness, he betrays himself, which makes her suspicious. Finally shining light into his face, she realizes the horrible truth. Like a new Judith from the Old Testament, she gets a knife and decapitates him. But this is not the end of her problems. The body is too heavy for her to take it away, so must ask her guardsman to help her. The latter, in his vicious mind, only agrees to do so if she allows him to sleep with her. Afterwards, when both take the body to the well, she uses that opportunity to lift him up and throw him into the water, thus killing the second person.

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Then the marriage takes place, but she is no longer a virgin. Trusting a female confidant, she makes her spend the first night with the king and to grant him her virginity. But the maid then betrays the lady, insisting on staying in bed with the king because she wants to be the new queen. In her desperation, the countess sets fire to the bedroom, rescues her husband, locks the door from the outside, and so has the maid burn to death. The fourth killing had already taken place the day before when the countess's brother had returned from the king's castle and had come across the knight's servant holding his horse. They suspect him of theft, beat him up, and hang him.

Altogether, four killings, and certainly three murders. At first, nothing happens, the marriage works well, the couple lives a happy life, but thirty-two years later, all her feelings of guilt rise up in her and force her to reveal everything to her husband. The king is deeply shocked, just as the husband in "Friedrich von Auchenfurt," but he also realizes the enormous sacrifice done by his wife to preserve her honor and her marriage because she was, basically, innocent and had turned to violence only in desperate self-defense. As the king then states unequivocally, "'I want to live with you forever as your loyal servant because you have suffered much on my behalf, there is no doubt about it'" (p. 116).

As problematic as this legal case certainly is – there cannot be an innocent murder – the personal relationship between the king and the countess does not suffer from her confession; on the contrary, he realizes the depth of her commitment to him, to honor, and even to justice. Those whom she killed were evil people and had done evil things to her. Whether she would have been entitled in any way to exact justice on her own remains debatable, but the narrative framework and even the narrator's comment underscore the great sympathy we are supposed to feel for this worthy and honorable woman. By the same token, her husband proves to be equally honorable, respectful, and empathetic. He understands her suffering, he comprehends why she had to commit these crimes, and he does not blame her for the actions she did to save their marriage. We might have to investigate further the ethical, moral, religious, and even philosophical implications because there cannot be a justified murder. But the countess always acted out of self-defense, not out of hatred or greed. It would have been impossible for her to find any support in all those three cases, so was facing life or death and opted for the former.

Confusion, Disruption, and Deception: The Calculating and Role-Playing Wife in an Early Sixteenth-Century Chronicle: Froben Christoph von Zimmern

Similarly as Jans Enikel, the Swabian chronicler, Froben Christoph von Zimmern (1485–1575), enriches his family chronicle by way of sudden and unexpected inclusions of verse narratives. One of those proves to be a highly complex account with a story included within the frame story. The "Disappointed Lover" presents to us a young man who falls in love with a woman who is married and yet has, so it seems, a monk as a lover (here no. 20). The male protagonist has no real success in his wooing but observes through a

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hole in the wall of his bedroom a scene with this woman and her old husband. At first, the latter severely criticizes and blames her for her adultery, but she defends herself in an amazingly effective way, first pretending to be so hurt by his 'false' accusations that she is about to die. This makes the old man so worried that he cowers before her and submits himself entirely. Then she tells him a story which is directly borrowed from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350, Day six, tale seven) and serves her to explain her utter innocence, which is completely contrary to the facts. But the situation is much more complicated than that because in the Italian source, the lady had defended her love affair at a legal court as fully legitimate. Since her husband had always been satisfied by her and since she nevertheless had more love to share, she had granted it to a young man, so there should not be any blame on her for the affair she entertained. This account baffles and stunts the old man, who becomes completely her servant, and the protagonist, who had listened to it as well from his side of the wall, is deceived by her once again. She subsequently pretends to love him after all, but then he spies on her and discovers that she is still together with the monk.

His friends finally manage to pry him free of this obsession and force him to leave town with them, although he feels much pain due to his love for this highly dangerous woman who can handle three men at the same time, leading each one on and playing different roles all the time. As the friends affirm: "You are not clear in your mind; you are deceived by that woman. Please realize that, undoubtedly, love has caught you with a fishing rod which the young woman holds. You do not understand with whom you are dealing, and you have also forgotten that yesterday you were sitting behind the fireplace in the middle of the smoke, and how she treated you like a fool" (p. 141).

Whereas the 'innocent murderess' appears as a most honorable yet also criminal person we are asked to respect for her heroic deeds, here the woman is described as a most devious, strategizing, deceiving, and lying individual no man can handle properly. However, she herself operates with a story about a worthy female who can convince the entire court and the city that she should be entitled to have a love affair outside of marriage and not to be punished for that. The traditional gender debate is almost reaching its breaking point because Froben relates an account that ultimately no longer makes good sense. Extreme misogyny is paired with the praise of good women, marriage is identified as an unstable form of partnership, and love emerges to be a highly seductive and irrational force that no longer allows the individual to pursue a happy life (Hurwich 2006). The contrast between this story and all our previous cases consists of the highly negative evaluation of the female protagonist who operates like a puppet master and plays with the men in her life at her pleasure.

Conclusion

To proceed further, we would have to consider the wider range of contributions to this genre. Moreover, it would be necessary to enter into discussions regarding the marriage discourse in the late Middle Ages and the

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early modern age, but this would lead us too far afield for the purpose of this paper. The very sense of confusion we might be left with resulting from the discussion of so diverse narratives highlights the actual results we have achieved. These *mæren* lend themselves exceedingly well to the exploration of the gender discourse as it gained increasing attention since the thirteenth century. Gender has always been a problematic category, but this very tension that we observe reflected in these Middle High German verse narratives documents the existence of constant exchanges, struggles, conflicts, but then also of love, honor, dignity, support, ethics, and morality. Of course, considering the profound changes of the late Middle Ages, with city life emerging as the dominant form of social cohabitation and a growing population irrespective of the Black Death in 1347–1351 and many times thereafter, it does not come as a real surprise that married life and hence the many tensions between the genders gained tremendously in attention by poets and artists, by preachers and chroniclers alike.

Undoubtedly, we observe the continuation of misogyny and patriarchy in various circles, but we can no longer simply rely on such blunt binary categories when we want to understand the gender relationships in late medieval Europe. But already the twelfth-century examples (Marie de France, Andreas Capellanus) and the intriguing cases of *Dolopathos* and *Apollonius of Tyre* and *Floris and Blanchefleur*, to mention just some of the most popular texts, underscored the enormous potential of the term 'gender discourse' which was of great relevance for society at large, causing both happiness and conflict, leading to strife or agreement. The rich corpus of *mæren* lends itself exceedingly well to the further exploration of this topic although we do not know of any female author, as far as we can tell so far. It would be difficult to determine exactly when that discourse set in since we find significant comments on gender issues in twelfth century literature (Lundt, 2002). Considering the evidence of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as complementary to the Middle High German *mæren*, we can certainly conclude that literary entertainment has regularly drawn from those fundamental issues in human life, love, sexuality, and marriage (McCarthy, ed., 2022). Actually, thinking critically about it, we find ourselves until today within the same narrative framework, though certainly under different cultural and historical circumstances (Singh and Agha 2025).

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