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Research Article

Global Perspectives on Society: Kaleidoscopic Reflections on People of All Social Classes, Including Both Genders in Late Medieval Literature

Dr. Albrecht Classen

University Distinguished Professor of German Studies, Department of German Studies, The University of Arizona, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Albrecht Classen, University Distinguished Professor of German Studies, Department of German Studies, The University of Arizona, USA.

Abstract

While traditional literary scholarship has mostly focused on formal or thematic aspects in the evaluation of late medieval literature (genres, motifs, content matter, etc.), this paper identifies a major paradigm shift regarding the social perspective. Until the high Middle Ages, the dominant discourse engaged with the members of the aristocracy above all (heroic epics, courtly romances) and reflected on their concerns almost exclusively. Since the late Middle Ages (thirteenth century onwards), however, poets increasingly turned their attention also toward the peasant class, and then opened a virtual floodgate toward protagonists of all social levels, including merchants, lansquenets, students, city councilmen, farmhands, maidservants, and others. This does not mean that those people were suddenly idealized and glorified in contrast to the nobles. Instead, the poets simply turned to them as convenient figures through whom universal human concerns, shortcomings, foolishness, smartness, cunning, or intelligence could be reflected. Granted, courtly novels continued to be of major importance and they continued to be published over the next centuries, but an ever-growing body of entertaining, moralizing, and didacticizing short verse and prose narratives gained in popularity and soon began to dominate the early modern bookmarket. This reflects, of course, also a major shift in economic power and cultural concepts characteristic of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Keywords: late medieval culture; literary topics; merchants; peasants; students; professors; artists; medical doctors; Der Stricker; Boccaccio; Geoffrey Chaucer; Heinrich Kaufringer; Johannes Pauli; Marguerite de Navarre; Georg Wickram.

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Introduction

Late medieval literature witnessed a dramatic, if not paradigmatic shift away from traditional narrative parameters, reflecting a profound transformation of fifteenth-century European society. Already the fourteenth century has been commonly identified as a time of deep crises (Bauch and Schenk, ed., 2020), but despite some consolidations in economic and political terms in the time after the Black Death (which actually reoccured numerous times), the fifteenth century witnessed a progressive turn away from traditional norms and principles, whether we might view that process through the lens of a worsening crisis or as the result of a significant transition toward an early-modern world and society. Previous scholarship has particularly highlighted five major events as the hallmarks of this paradigm shift (Classen, ed., 2019): 1. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in ca. 1450; 2. the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453; 3. the expulsion of all Jews from Spain and the fall of Granada to the Spanish king in 1492; 4. Christopher Columbus discovering of the New World for the Europeans, also in 1492; and 5. Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation in

1517. To this, we could add, in general terms, the rise of Humanism, the Italian Renaissance and its spread across the continent, the end of the Hundred Years' War between England and France in 1453, the further development of urban centers and universities, the steady decline of the Hanseatic League, particularly in wake of the opening up of the Atlantic route since the early sixteenth century, and technological and medical advances (see, for instance, Schubert 1992; Meuthen 2006; Uña Juárez 2007; Rösener 2012; Lazzarini, ed. 2021). But there were also new epidemics, problems with famine, and religious and economic unrest.

Naturally, we can observe also many changes in the world of literature, such as the global transition from verse to prose, the rise of new genres, such as Shrovetide plays, prose novels, and jest narratives (*Schwänke*), and ultimately, as a consequence of the printing press, new technological modalities of the dissemination of literary texts in an ever-expanding book market, and also the increasing role of female writers and female audiences. Various major handbooks and lexica have already taken note of the characteristic features, themes, motifs, materials, audiences, styles and other elements of late medieval literature, though many desiderata remain to be addressed (Rupprich 1970; Erzgräber, ed., 1978; Bennewitz and Müller, eds., 1991; Reinhart, ed., 2007). All these efforts, certainly highly valuable by themselves, have mostly focused on the cultural context, the literary format (genre), the intellectual and spiritual background, the technical system (the movable type), and the market conditions. What has mattered most so far coul be called the literary-historical dimension involving the poets, their works, their genres, and their readers/listeners. An interesting and new model was presented by David E. Wellbery and Judith Ryan (eds., 2004), who have their contributors address only works that can be closely correlated with historical events. These connections prove to be illuminating, but the method itself leaves too many gaps and blinds us to the intensive web of literary exchanges, developments, and innovations. Finally, the efforts by the contributors to *Early Modern German Literature 1350–1700* (Reinhart, ed., 2007), as welcome as they certainly prove to be, only outline the major developments, the social-historical context, and major themes and topics of the literary works from that period.

Concept of this Study

Without using a strictly sociological approach, the purpose of this paper is to view how late medieval poets increasingly changed their perspective and turned their attention increasingly to individuals on the lower social ranks. What motivated these poets to allow, for instance, peasants to populate the theater stage? What had happened that we suddenly hear of prostitutes, lansquenets, merchants, wetnurses, rogues, or craftsmen, and less and less of the traditional courtly knights. Of course, the traditional courtly romance where all actions and events are situated within the aristocratic context, continued to experience considerable popularity, and some even survived the revolution of the so-called 'Gutenberg Galaxy,' i.e., they were printed in prose versions and thus turned into much-sought-after items on the early modern book market (Gotzkowsky 1991, esp. 309–84).

However, which will be the focus of the present study, already since the first half of the thirteenth century, various poets across Europe developed the new genre of the verse narrative (*mære*), *fabliau*, or *novelle*, in which we encounter a much wider spectrum of protagonists from a variety of social classes. Undoubtedly, here we observe a strong interest in didacticizing the literary discourse, and this predicated on humorous narratives. Inviting their audiences to laugh about foolish, incompetent, ignorant, violent, or brutish individuals, these poets began to integrate human society much more widely and deeply than ever before. It would go too far to take into consideration possible pre-modern elements leading up to the 'democratization' of the late medieval world. Nevertheless, as the evidence will allow us to conclude, this much more didactic and comic literature, at least compared to the heroic genre and the Arthurian and Grail romance, was simply predicated on a much more flexible and open-minded perspective toward human society (for an early effort, though limited to the late medieval German tradition, see Coxon 2008, 155–76, who highlights the role of the foolish adulterous priest, the ignorant peasant, marginal figures, and domestic servants).

Before we proceed, however, we need to be very clear and mindful about the genre specifics because a heroic epic or a courtly romance is concretely concerned with the lives of heroic or courtly protagonists and hence their social and cultural background and framework. We could and should not expect to hear much at all about members of other social classes in those works. In fact, even in the sixteenth century, when authors such as Georg Wickram continued writing novels situated within the aristocratic realm, the focus rests primarily on the nobility per se and their lives, though there are also important connections to the rural world (see, e.g., his *Goldfaden* from 1557). Those, however, only serve to illustrate the meteoritic rise of the protagonist to the rank of king (Kaufke, trans., 1991; for an earlier, very parallel case, see Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Huge Scheppel* from ca. 1437; cf. Bastert and von Bloh, eds., 2018). This was to change only

by the early twentieth century when, for instance, D. H. Lawrence published his famous though scandalous novel *Lady Chatterly's Lover* in 1928.

Nevertheless, as this paper wants to demonstrate, from a sociological perspective, a major paradigm shift occurred already in the first half of the thirteenth century, which was then picked up and vastly expanded by contemporary and later poets of the Old French *fabliaux* and Middle High German *mæren*, then vastly intensified by the famous Italian Giovanni Boccaccio in his *Decameron* in ca. 1350 and the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400). From then on, the public increasingly expected and then consumed ever more verse and then prose tales which pursued entertaining and didactic purposes and for that reason opened their perspective toward the lower social classes. Once we reach the sixteenth century, the paradigm shift had fully been accomplished, if we consider the vast corpus of *Schwankliteratur* (jest narratives). Without going too much into details as to individual story collections, the intention is to illustrate the true extent to which the late Middle Ages and the early modern age witnessed a profound 'democratization process' at least within the framework of literary history.

An Early Forerunner: Der Stricker

Although Der Stricker (fl. ca. 1220–1240) was deeply invested in creating courtly literature, as documented by his Arthurian romance *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, and heroic poetry, as illustrated by his *Karl der Große*, he achieved his greatest accomplishments when he composed a large number of fables and verse narratives (*mæren*) (Ehrismann, ed. and trans., 1992). However, until today, he is most famous for his *Pfaffe Amîs*, a series of episodes tracing the life and roguery of this uncanny figure, the Priest Amîs from England who roams across Europe and even the Eastern Mediterranean being always on the lookout for foolish victims whom he can deceive and deprive of their money (Classen, trans., 2024). Depending on one's perspective, one could call this protagonist a genius, a deeply pious person, a smart and cunning individual, or, much worse, a brutal, reckless agent who causes massive harm to rich individuals in physical and psychological terms (Böhm 1995; González and Millet, eds., 2006).

Probably true to form, in his didactic narratives, such as "Der kluge Knecht" (The Smart Farmhand) and "Die drei Wünsche" (The Three Free Wishes), the poet takes his audience to a rural setting and introduces a variety of characters whom we are invited to laugh about or to admire, all depending on the circumstances. In "Der Riese" (The Giant), we hear about a group of twelve men who are lost in the forest and find refuge in the house of a giant, but they quickly realize that the owner is a cannibal and demands from them to release one of them whom he devours. Then, however, he demands yet another one and so forth until only one man is left over. The latter wants to defend himself, but the giant bluntly tells him that they all lost their chance to fight together against him. As a group of twelve, they might have had a realistic chance, but not as individuals. The narrator correlates this story to the situation on the ground in any territory where the superior lord would try to decimate a hostile family below him by way of taking first only one person, and then another, and thus to destroy them all at the end. The general message refers to all those who do not command enough strength to oppose a vicious ruler but should band together to set up efficient resistance.

In his fable "Der Jäger" (The Huntsman), a proud deer is hunted by a nobleman, but his dogs are not fast enough. When the deer then passes by a village, a whole throng of bastard dogs come rushing out of the farms and eventually succeed in stopping and killing the animal. However, the narrator subsequently turns away from the event itself and offers a metaphorical reading according to which the noble dogs that had originally tracked down the deer would have to be praised higher than the peasants' dogs because they would represent noble characters with honor, whereas the peasants would foolishly praise their wild and uncontrolled dogs despite their lower value. The poet's contempt of peasants is obvious, but they really stand in for all those who do not know how to pursue true honor. What matters for us is that Der Stricker opened a vista toward the rural population within his aristocratic context, which alerts us even here that both the poet and his audience were aware of and acknowledged the existence of people on the lower social class. In this case, the topic concerns a deer hunt, which always required the assistance of a larger number of people (peasants) to encircle and scare the animal until it could be captured and killed (Rösener, ed., 1997; Steinsiek 2025).

And in "Der Gevatterin Rat" (Fischer, ed., 1967, no. VII; The Advice by the Godmother), which highlights the stupidity of a married peasant who cannot recognize the true value and beauty of his wife and must first be deceived and then be fooled by means of masquerading, we gain valuable insight into the social fabric within the peasant world, where women enjoy support by other women and collaborate to defend themselves against male violence. Once the truth has come out, everyone laughs so much about this ignorant and dumb man that he never dares again to say anything in praise of or as criticism of his wife (643). The poet, however, does not single him out as a peasant; instead, the focus rests on his idiotic treatment of his wife, which amounts to a general satire of spouses (male

or female) who operate selfishly, aggressively, naively, or in a mean fashion, whether among the aristocratic class or the peasants.

Boccaccio's Decameron: The Stepping Stool Toward the Renaissance

The Literary Perspective is Widening

Instead of returning to the basis of all Boccaccio research, here I will examine only a few examples from his masterpiece, the *Decameron* from ca. 1350 to demonstrate the widening of the social lens toward the kaleidoscope of human society since the late Middle Ages (McWilliam, trans., 1972/1995; for recent critical approaches, see the contributions to Armstrong, ed., 2015). Although the ten storytellers (seven women, three men) originate from the elite social class in Florence and own fabulous country estates, they are fully aware of the many different people living and operating both in the urban centers and in the countryside. There are many stories about merchants, friars, monks, abbots, abbesses, nuns, counts, and other aristocrats. In fact, the reader can easily recognize that virtually all social classes are represented from the king down to the robber and pirate. There are old and young people, rich and poor, such as in II.3 where three young men squander all their fortune and suffer bitter poverty. In II.5 we hear of a horse trader, and in II.5 a count of Antwerp loses everything in his life and must work as a groom to survive, though he subsequently regains his previous social status and wealth.

In III.1, a man pretends to be mute and can thus gain employment as a gardener in a nunnery, which leads to much sexual licentiousness with the entire community enjoying his body for their own pleasures. In IV.10, we hear of a physician and his curious destiny which would have almost led to his untimely death if not a maidservant rescues him in the last minute. In VI.4, we learn the story of a quick-witted cook, while in VI.5, two painters, one of them the famus Giotto, operate as the protagonists. And in VI.10, a clever friar quickly changes the tune of his sermon he is delivering to his rural parish to avoid a big scandal. Erotic scandals dominate, of course, the entire collection, but we hear of adultery and sexual transgressions among people of the lower class, such as in VII,2, where the wife of a poor mason (bricklayer) proves to be smart enough not only to hide her lover in a barrel when her husband comes home unexpectedly. She can even convince him to scrub the barrel better because the customer, i.e., her lover, wants to buy it only if it is really clean.

Boccaccio as a storyteller looked for many different opportunities to relate funny and witty accounts, and he did not shy away from having his audience laugh about members of all social classes, including friars, monks, and nuns. Significantly, the female protagonist in the very last story, Griselda in X.10, originates from a poor peasant but proves to be a stellar character shining forth through her submissiveness, humbleness, and loyalty. Of course, the extremes of her husband's testing have regularly provoked much criticism, very valid by itself, but it is significant for us that the poet here turned to a peasant widower and his pure and innocent daughter. After all, this story concludes the *Decameron*, which sheds significant light on Boccaccio's frustration with the upper echelon of his society and his interest in characters on the lower social scale who actually command a higher level of morality, virtues, and chastity than the traditional nobles (Morabito, ed., 1990; Aurnhammer, ed., 2010; Rüegg 2019; Alfano 2025). The debate about the cruel Marquis of Saluzzo, Gualtieri and his testing of his wife's loyalty and trustworthiness has raged since the fourteenth century, but for our purposes, what matters here is that Griselda is the daughter of a very poor man and yet is chosen as the Marquis's wife. The social class difference could not be bigger, but Griselda, through her infinite patience and submissiveness, demonstrates to be her future husband's moral superior, although he had 'only' tested her whether she was virtuous and loyal enough to be his wife.

The large number of stories included in the *Decameron* obviously motivated Boccaccio to look far and wide for narrative motifs, so when he refers to a young student who is first badly mistreated by his haughty mistress who really loves another man and who later can take terrible revenge punishing her thoroughly in VIII.7. Similarly, we are also entertained with facetious accounts about pompous and hypocritical individuals such as those with a medical degree from the university of Bologna (VIII.9). There, the foolish medical doctor Master Simone becomes the target of two painters, Bruno and Buffalmacco, who play tricks on him and thus expose his lack of intelligence, as they have done in two previous tales, VIII.3 and VIII.6. As the narrator in the former comments: "These latter were a very jovial pair, but they were also shrewd and perceptive, and they went about with Calandrino [another painter with little intellect] because his simple-mindedness and the quaintness of his ways were an endless source of amusement to them" (561) (see also IX.3).

In essence, Boccaccio utilized the narrative framework to open many new perspectives toward his contemporary society, integrating individual figures from different social classes, either ridiculing them or paying great respect for their intelligence and virtuosity. Although the majority of tales in the *Decameron* are still situated within an

aristocratic context, we can certainly acknowledge this major anthology as a significant landmark in the long-term paradigm shift as mirrored by the history of literature.

Pilgrims Come from Everywhere: Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

It would not be necessary to introduce this 'father of the English language,' Geoffrey Chaucer because he has already been discussed, analyzed, and probed by scores of scholars over the last two hundred years. His *Canterbury Tales* from ca. 1400 belongs to the canon of English medieval literature, so here I can limit myself to just a few remarks (Boenig and Taylor, eds., 2012; cf. now the compendium by Brown, ed., 2019). In contrast to his forerunners, Chaucer utilized the concept of a pilgrimage from London to Canterbury, which was later never copied again, although numerous other authors since then developed similar narrative frameworks (Kleinschmidt and Japp, eds., 2018).

Although the Knight is the first one invited to present a story for the general entertainment of the travelers, and although his account is very much grounded in traditional courtly literature, the subsequent storyteller quickly prove to mirror the wide range of social classes represented here. There is, above all, the host, the innkeeper Harry Bailey, followed by the miller, the reeve, and the cook. Then, there are the man of law (attorney), the (in)famous wife of Bath, a friar, a summoner, a clerk, a squire, a franklin, a physician, a pardoner, a shipman, a prioress, a monk, a nun, a manciple, and, finally, a parson, who calls for people to repent, to confess, and to do penance so that their souls might be granted access to heaven in the afterlife: "Theras ne is neither hunger, thurst, ne coold, but every soule replenyssed with the sighte of the perfity knowyinge of God. This blisful regne may men purchace by poverte espirituel and the glorie by loweness, the plentee of joye by hunger and thurst, and the reste by travaille and the lyf by mortificacions of synne" (459).

Significantly, both the pilgrimage as such, or the shared travel, and the spiritual quest brings everyone together because they all are driven by the same desire, to reach the holy site of Canterbury and there to receive divine blessing. In fact, as the parson correctly emphasizes, in face of death, of God, and the choice between heaven and hell, social differences here on earth do not matter. Moreover, which is, of course, Chaucer's own contribution, the storytelling process also brings a broad audience together. It does not matter in this context what social rank anyone might have; instead, what counts is whether anyone among the pilgrims know how to tell a good story and thus to uplift the listeners among their company.

Hence, we can recognize in the *Canterbury Tales* a literary media to level the differences among the protagonists and to give each person an equal chance (Mann 1973; Turner 2007; Rigby 2020). For the Host, to be sure, it is a "myrie [ ] compaignye" (v. 764, p. 60). He acknowledges everyone in the entire group as an equal participant in the process of shortening their travel to Canterbury by telling a story which would entertain and uplift them at the same time, just as Boccaccio had set up his narrative frame. The Host states unequivocally: "This is the poynt, to speken short and pleyn, / That ech of yow to shorte with oure weye / In this viage shal telle tales tweye / To Caunterbury ward, I mene it so" (790–93, p. 60). We do not know for sure, of course, the actual composition of Chaucer's audience, but we find, as stated above, storytellers from many different statuses in late medieval England/London (see, for instance, Buckler 1986). After all, as all pilgrimage studies have confirmed, and what is still the case today, on the way to a holy site, people join from all age groups, genders, ethnic background, and social classes. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* can thus be identified as a literary forum of this 'democratic' cooperation to spend the long time of traveling to Canterbury by way of storytelling.

Chaucer's Continental Contemporary: Heinrich Kaufringer

In recent years, we have become much more aware of Heinrich Kaufringer, active in the area of Augsburg in southern Germany around 1400. We do not know much about him at all, but we have available a large number of his short verse narratives which follow to some extent the tradition of Der Stricker's *mæren* and yet prove to be quite unique in many different ways (Classen, trans., 2014/2019; for recent reflections, see Stede, 1993; Rippl, 2014; Manuwald, 2017; Classen 2025a). The poet engages with many different characters who represent both the world of the courts and the urban world; and we also hear quite a bit about the situation in village, so it might not be so anachronistic to recognize here, similarly as in Chaucer's famous story collection, an effort to pursue a more 'democratic' perspective (Classen forthcoming). I would not want to claim that Kaufringer intended to promote any kinds of 'democratic principles in his storytelling, but we are on solid ground arguing that his narrative strategy involved giving much room to protagonists both at court and in the city, both in the countryside and in a religious context. Since Kaufringer's verse narratives still rest in a considerable obscurity, I will offer brief synopses of some of the major representatives and then summarize the overall observation relevant for our main argument.

In no. 3, "the Peasant Who Was [Falsely] Accused," for instance, we encounter a wealthy, strong-minded, resolute,

and intelligent peasant who knows well how to oppose the intentions by the local priest who colludes with a judge to malign the peasant to the bishop in the hope to get him imprisoned and heavily fined for his blasphemous statements. They utterly fail, however, because the peasant is supremely qualified to defend himself, first pointing out that a bad weather could not be called 'evil' because he had been a manifestation of God's power. Then he refers to his sick mother who had been bed-ridden for many years, which had made the sickroom to a horrible place, but since she is his mother, he has always taken care of her and thus had secured his own salvation in the afterlife. Finally, he insists that he was right in claiming that the priest is dumber than his horse because the latter had learned from a bad fall into a ravine and then had refused to attempt crossing it on the way back. The priest, however, has had an affair with the judge already three times and has been beaten up for this each time without him learning from his lesson. The bishop is completely satisfied with those answers and imposes fines on the priest and the judge, whereas the peasant remains scot-free and is held in high esteem for his piety, intelligence, virtues, and eloquence.

In no. 23, "Merchants in Disagreement," we learn of a large group of merchants who have banded together to protect themselves from robbers and thieves. However, when two robbers appear and pretend to represent a count still hidden in the forest, demanding that some of the merchants pay up their debt to the count, disagreement erupts, and the majority does not want to stand up for each other. This then allows the robbers to take the wealthiest among them as captives, and soon they return and insist that others among them are also in default of paying their debt. Ultimately, just six robbers manage to defeat the entire group of thirty merchants because the latter had failed to hold out together against the evil men simply out of a sense of greed and cowardice.

In no. 4, "The Mayor and the Prince," we find ourselves in a socially mixed situation with the French dauphin being a student at the university of Erfurt in eastern Germany. At that time, a string of robberies take place, but no one can identify the perpetrator/s. Hence, the suspicion falls on this wealthy student from abroad of whom no one knows anything concrete. The mayor is then charged with investigating this case to determine whether this young man might be the responsible thief. The student is rather irritated about this irrational suspicion, so he resorts to a rhetorical strategy to make fools of both the mayor and the other members of the city council. He pretends to be a gigolo who gets a certain amount of money from every wife and every housemaid in return for his sexual service. Certainly, a most unpleasant news for all the husbands in the city.

One day, the mayor, sitting in his living room, observes the student walking across the market square and smiles thinking about what female customers he might be seeking out. His wife notices this and forces him to reveal the reason for his smiling. She pretends to be morally upset about this sordid business, but in secret she is disappointed that the student has not yet frequented her house. So, she tries to launch an affair with him, but her husband, who had noticed her secret plans, traps the two lovers, but turns the situation into one where the students appears as an official visitor, which saves his honor and protects the mayor's marriage. Only then does the young man reveal his true identity, and he greatly rewards the opponent with a considerable financial privilege while doing mercantile business in France.

But in no. 14, "The Innocent Murderess," which is a highly dialectic, legally profoundly challenging story, we are once again confronted with a major problem affecting a countess who is supposed to marry the king but is badly abused (raped) by a hostile knight and then by her own guardsman, and subsequently terribly betrayed by her most trusted maid. The female protagonist, however, knows how to fight back and kills all three, which she admits to her husband only many years later, who forgives her and identifies her as an innocent victim who had to struggle hard to protect both their honor.

In no. 17, "The Pious Miller's Wife," two friars visit this low-ranking woman and learn that she is a deeply devout Christian and has raised her two children accordingly. In no. 18, "The Devil and the Wandering Scholar," the poet engages with a student, whereas no. 20, "The Paid Lawyer," we are confronted with legal experts and hear of the severe problem if they are corrupt, as in the conflict between a shoemaker and a furrier. The narrator deeply laments this problem of corruption which destroys the foundation of all laws and justice, so he urges the public to consider how a true lawyer ought to behave and perform: "When he defends someone at court, a virtuous lawyer always remembers to listen only to him and pursue a just case, without allowing anyone to weaken his stance. . . . That lawyer is virtuous and good who does his job in the name of God and not by way of a deceptive strategy" (112). Kaufringer, as a member of an urban community, was also deeply concerned with the ethics of the city councilmen and warned them not to become a victim of corruption.

Finally, mirroring the strong tendency in late medieval society to harbor strong antisemitic feelings, in no. 28 "Disputation with a Jew about the Eucharist," the poet presents a case of himself having debated with a Jew about the true meaning of the Eucharist, which the Jew then loses. But, instead of converting, the Jew stays true to his

own faith, which the poet condemns harshly in very similar terms as those used by countless Christian contemporaries: "Instead, he wanted only to remain a heretic, for which he will have to suffer eternal pain" (136; cf. also no. 2, where the Jews actually converts to Christianity because he is terrified of the devils. More broadly on this topic, see, for instance, Cohen 1999; McMichael and Myers, eds., 2004; Chazan 2006; Mayerhofer, Porat, and Schiffman, eds. 2021). And finally, we are also placed in the world of craftsmen, such as in no. 9 "The Canon and the Cobbler," which pits a smart cleric against a foolish husband who does not understand how his wife and the canon play tricks with him. For Kaufringer, this is an opportunity to lambast disloyal wives and blaming women at large who often deceive their husbands (53), which simply picks up the contemporary misogyny which was widespread in the late Middle Ages (for a good anthology of texts viewing women from both extreme perspectives, see Blamires, ed., 1992). But the poet also included a story in which a virtuous wife is raped by a knight because her husband is too afraid of the rapist whom he had tried to trap and then to punish (no. 6).

Altogether, Kaufringer's *mæren* thus prove to be an excellent metaphorical window onto the social conditions of his time. Even though he still included some accounts about situations relevant for members of the nobility, the majority of his tales open new perspectives toward peasants, craftsmen, various types of wives, a mayor, councilmen, lawyers, Jews, students, merchants, clever peasant women (no. 11), naive female victims of an evil priest's sexual manipulations (no. 12), and a hermit. What we noticed in its incipient stage in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, we find much more developed in Kaufringer's corpus of verse narratives, which fully turn to late medieval society in its vast breadth and address a wide range of topics relevant in human life, irrespective of the individual's social class. For the poet, hence, it no longer mattered whether some issue in marriage was studied through the lens focused on craftsmen or a king.

Some rural women are highly praised for their wisdom and piety, others are sarcastically ridiculed and condemned for their brutality against their ignorant husbands, though the narrative (no. 11) also evokes considerable fear of those extraordinarily cunning women who know exceedingly well how to manipulate and fool the men.

Sixteenth-Century Perspectives: The Case of Georg Wickram

To do more justice to this topic we could engage with many other fifteenth- and sixteenth-century narratives that illustrate and mirror material, emotional, political, spiritual, and economic conditions within human society. Without going much into details here, it would be a worthwhile enterprise to examine the anonymous French *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (ca. 1460) in the same light, or to turn to the highly scandalous *Facetiae* by the Italian Vatican secretary, Poggio Bracciolini (ca. 1458–1465). To strengthen our understanding of how women viewed the same issues, especially love, sex, marriage, sexual violence, ethics, honor, and virtue, we could study at length the famous *Heptaméron* by the French Queen Marguerite de Navarre (1558/1559). The satirical novel *La Celestina* by the Spaniard Fernando de Rojas (1499, also known as *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*). Late medieval and early modern satirical literature by Sebastian Brant (*Das Narrenschiff*, 1494) and the equally famous and highly popular collection of Hermann Bote's (?) collection of *Till Eulenspiegel* (in part based on Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs*, see above) would easily contribute to our approach and add valuable insights regarding the emergence of figures from the lower social classes as valuable representatives in the narrative discourse (Clements and Gibaldi 1977; Könneker 1991; cf. also the contributions to Bennewitz and Müller, eds., 1991). The phenomenon could be described as the poets' realization that they could address countless fundamental human concerns and problems, experiences and values by examining all kinds of people's actions, words, forms of behavior, conflicts, misunderstandings, foolishness, or wisdom.

To wrap up our reflections, let us turn to one of the most influential authors of jest narratives (*Schwänke*), Georg Wickram, whose *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555) reveals many similarities with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and enjoyed an enormous popularity (Gotzwkowski 1991, 574–83; for the English translation, see now Classen, trans., 2025b). Future research can endeavor to confirm our findings by looking at other collections of this *Schwankliteratur*, such as by Hans Wilhelm Kirchhof, Martin Montanus, or Jakob Frey.

The collection begins with a story of a Alsatian peasant who needs to hire a proxy to do a pilgrimage on his behalf because he himself is too busy with his field work. Then, there is the account of a city councilman who believes to have become pregnant (no. 4), of two bickering peasants and their interaction with the mayor's wife (no. 6). The figure of the lansquenet, a mercenary soldier in the early modern armies, gained a strong profile in these jest narratives, such as in nos. 7, 14, 15. and 40. And we also encounter, more than ever before the innkeeper, such as in nos. 11, 54, and 55, which reminds us of the predecessor, the Host, in Chaucer's work. Marital conflicts in the house

of a tailor, who badly mistreats his wife by being extremely miserly, is the topic of story no. 16. Curiously, Wickram also reports of an impoverished nobleman who has to borrow money from a rural community and then tries to get away from them because he cannot pay back his debt (no. 18). A haberdasher makes good money in no. 19, while the focus of the stories no. 25 and 41are waggoners or cart drivers.

Then there are horse traders (no. 31), merchants (no. 33), a lawyer (no. 36), a court singer (no. 53), and even a dentist (no. 65). In no. 69, we hear of a little boy who is very good at bowling but does not even know how to pray. In some stories we hear about children and their games (no. 74), and one about threshers at a farm, one of whom has a bad accident (no. 98). Finally, there is drummer (no. 104), a clever student (no. 107), and finally also a medical doctor (no. 111). The courtly jester or fool in no. 110 is secretly taken in by a widow who apparently uses him for sexual favors, but the narrative is not fully clear about it.

Wickram did not compose an epilogue, but the specter of character populating his collection of *Schwänke* is amazingly wide. He mentions many women and discusses their marital conflicts, sometime expressing his empathy with their suffering, sometimes laughing about their foolishness. We also hear of Jews who are viewed negatively, as was common at that time. Noblemen and peasants appear to operate in very close proximity, with the peasants at times being even better off than the former. Craftsmen, tradesmen, children, haberdashers, and lansquenets fill the literary scenes presented in this highly attractive volume.

If we turned to other collections published around the same time, many of them closely following Wickram's model, we clearly gain the impression that the literary paradigm had actually shifted. Even though in some contemporary novels the traditional courtly context continues to dominate, as Wickram himself illustrated in his contributions to this genre, in reality, the literary discourse had opened up to all social ranks, and we hear of men and women, old and young people.

Conclusion

Although the early features of the sociological paradigm shift outlined in this paper emerged already in the thirteenth century on a pan-European level, the full changes affecting many aspects of the literary discourse became noticeable only by the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Even though many poets continued with their efforts to entertain their audiences with hilarious or comical accounts of foolish people, they increasingly turned away from knighthood, the royal court, battle themes, crusading topics, or religious issues. From that time on, especially since around 1400, new perspectives turned toward the broad range of diverse people in many different social classes. Of course, this does not mean that we would suddenly encounter peasants, prostitutes, craftsmen, their wives, female artists, and others would gain admiration and central respect. But once the sociological floodgates had broken, late medieval and early modern literature was filled with many characters from all walks of life, and no one was spared from being laughed about.

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