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The Independent, Respected, and Individualized Peasant Figure in Late Medieval German and European Literature: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Late Twelfth to the Late Sixteenth Century

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Abstract

Even though courtly literature dominates our concepts of the Middle Ages, a more careful examination of the large variety of relevant documents confirms that peasants, above all, figured in many different texts, often ridiculed, but often also identified as honorable and dignified individuals. At times, various poets focused on peasant women and idealized them as pure, virtuous, and beautiful, making them to the ideal marriage partner of a knight or a prince. Major examples can be found in the works by Hartman von Aue, Der Stricker, Boccaccio, and Heinrich Kaufringer. Moreover, late medieval artists often projected idyllic rural settings in the illustrations of Books of Hours. As much as the courtly world seems to have ignored peasants, a closer analysis demonstrates that there were numerous circumstances where individual representatives of the rural class gained high respect. This does not necessarily mean that medieval and early modern peasants enjoyed a much better position than what chroniclers and others authors had projected, but relying on literary evidence, we can identify a considerably more complex situation, at least as perceived by the various poets who might have intended their works as correctives to the actual social conditions. Within the literary discourse, to be sure, which generally appealed to wide social circles, peasant figures fared considerably better than we are commonly informed about.

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Introduction

The facts themselves are easy to understand and have been highlighted and outlined in countless socio-historical studies; most of the narrative and artistic documents from the Middle Ages were produced by and for the members of the aristocracy. Peasants, by contrast, hardly seem to figure in the literary works that have survived from that

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time. However, ca. 95% of the population lived in the countryside, was illiterate, and suffered from disregard and even contempt by the upper classes that tended to exploit them. To some extent, we can widely confirm these global impressions because feudalism ruled supreme, giving the aristocracy absolute preference and privileges. However, at closer inspection, the situation might have been quite different and much more complex beneath the narrative surface. Hartmann von Aue, for instance, idealizes a young girl, daughter of a peasant couple, as a metaphor for the protagonist's anxious struggle to regain his health and hence to preserve his life. Satirical authors such as Der Stricker and Heinrich Kaufringer poignantly introduced smart peasants who at times prove to be superior in intelligence, ethics, morality, and even economics compared to their aristocratic contemporaries. And famous Boccaccio, for instance, concludes his *Decameron* with the story of Griselda, a farmer's daughter. In fact, often, we learn of peasants who manage to defy the clergy and even the aristocracy, as the many authors of *fabliaux* indicate. Late medieval English literature often presents powerful peasant figures who emerged as an actual threat to the aristocratic elite (William Langland, *Piers Plowman*). If we then turned to the world of Old Norse sagas, for instance, we are confronted by a world primarily determined by members of the rural class who often assume mighty position within their society and exerted much authority (Adamska, ed., 2020; Bouchard 2022).

True, peasants hardly ever emerged as positively characterized individuals or protagonists within aristocratic, especially satirical literature, such as in Wernher the Gardener's *Helmbrecht* (ca. 1260/70) and in Heinrich Wittenwiler's *Der Ring* (ca. 1400), but we can be certain that they were not simply repressed, muted, and subjugated, not even within the framework of courtly romances. As soon as we embark on a critical search, we can count on discovering at least fleeting references to the lower social classes, if they did not really assume a much more significant role than we might have expected – much depending on the literary genre or textual document. This new attention to an allegedly mostly 'marginalized' group in medieval society allows us to re-examine the entire notion of marginalization and the conflicts and struggles involving the various social classes during the pre-modern period (Ertl 2021). Of course, it would be entirely wrong to identify the peasants as a minority, as much as they might have been marginalized by chroniclers, poets, theologians, or philosophers. On the contrary, statistically they constituted the vast majority, but due to their lack of resources and literary or artistic skills, they have left much less records than the small (true minority) group of aristocrats (see the contributions to McNabb, ed., 2020; Brown, ed., 2021). When we turn to the large corpus of Old French *fabliaux* (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), we often hear of peasants, though they are mostly described in a derisive fashion (Dubin, trans., 2013, no. 3, no. 15, no. 31), portrayed as crude, primitive, greedy, and stupid.

Materials and Methods

To gain a better understanding, we would need to consider other literary genres and examine various narrative backgrounds to look beyond the common notion of global marginalization of the peasant class. The critical question raised here thus pertains to the role of the peasant in the public discourse, best represented by literary texts. In this regard, the following analysis cannot claim historical or economic accuracy, but it will offer important insights into the broad perceptions of peasants at least by a wide range of poets from the high Middle Ages to the early modern age. In the collection of fables and similar tales by the Dominican Priest Ulrich Bonerius from Bern, Switzerland, *Der Edelstein* (ca. 1350; Classen, trans. 2020), we once hear of a farmhand who steps up to the plate and defends an unjustly accused royal counselors (no. 62), and another time we learn of a peasant who knows how to outsmart two greedy fellows (no. 74). Finally, in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1377), the entire allegorical narrative is predicated on the life of a peasant (Calabrese, trans., 2020). The same pertains to Johannes von Tepl's *Ackermann*, a dialogue poem between the Plowman (= Everyman) and Death regarding the latter's justification to take people away and the role of death at large (ca. 1400; Krogmann, ed., 1964; for an English translation, seehttps://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/39774/9781469657646_WEB.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; last accessed on Feb. 4, 2024). These examples encourage us strikingly to be much more careful in our assessment of what we think we might know about the actual situation of peasants in the pre-modern world.

Results

The Rural Population in History – Truly a Marginalized Majority?

The historical facts concerning the status of the rural population in the Middle Ages are quite obvious. Even though we could not call them slaves, and not even serfs, at least since the ninth and tenth centuries, the entire class of peasants was subordinated under the aristocracy and did not enjoy the similar privileges. The same situation can also be identified in many other cultures across the world, and often until today. Most of the sources that have survived until today reflect the world of the noble class because they had simply the necessary resources available to work toward the goal of memorialization and self-aggrandization, i.e., self-representation. Only recently, archaeologists have made much progress in uncovering a treasure trove of material remnants mirroring the culture, living styles, material means available, foodstuff, clothing, forms of entertainment, tools, and the like from the rural population (for most recent data pertaining to the southwest of Germany, see, for instance, Scholkmann and Brenker 2023). We would have to engage much more in detail with the world of peasants in historical terms to do justice to this vast topic (for concise and brief surveys, see Rösener1980; Freedman 2010), but the purpose of this study is to draw from narrative material and to explore the true notion of marginalization in light of that evidence.

At first sight, medieval literature and the arts appear to be void of peasant figures, unless a knight has to traverse a village or inquire with laborers in the field about directions or previous knights. Moreover, modern imaginations about the peasant class have been deeply shaped, for instance, by medieval art that mostly ignores peasants, courtly romances, and now also cinematographic episodes created by the Monty Python comedy group in their film “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” (1975), where King Arthur, trying to establish his monarchy, encounters a group of anarcho-syndicalist peasants who radically question his claim to a throne and hence his royal authority over them (Harty 1999, 188–89; cf. also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Python_and_the_Holy_Grail). Undoubtedly, reality was very different, but it proves to be a difficult task even today to investigate the history of peasants and other marginalized groups in the pre-modern world because they have not left noteworthy records.

To understand medieval and early modern people and their social and economic conditions, we have to keep in mind that the dominant discourse from that time easily overshadowed many different sectors of society, including women, Jews, the disabled, the vagrants, artists, criminals, but then also children and old people at large (Nyffenegger, Schmid, and Wedell, ed., 2011). The primary focus rested on the young knights and their beloved ladies. Even marriage was not of significant concern, whereas unrequited love was of considerable interest. Another example to illustrate this phenomenon would be the ignored or detested prostitute. But brothels existed throughout the entire Middle Ages; only by the early sixteenth century did prostitutes face more serious resistance and were somewhat repressed or banned because the arrival of syphilis made the visit of a brothel to a risky enterprise by any male customer (Classen 2019/2021). Moreover, just as today, the pre-modern world knew of many criminals and outcasts, but the refined courtly literature only rarely mentions them. Two remarkable exceptions prove to be Wolfram von Eschenbach in his *Parzival* (ca. 1205), and Geoffrey Chaucer in his “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” (in his *Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1400), where we hear each time of a rapist knight and his punishment (for a useful text anthology, see Musson and Powell, trans. and ed., 2009; see also the contributions to Robertson and Rose, ed., 2001).

Other major marginalized groups were the paupers, the beggars, the sick, the disabled, and the insane (Mollat 1978; Eyler 2010; Muratore, ed. 2016; Turner and Vandeventer Pearman, ed. 2010). Indeed, courtly literature does a great disservice to the representation of society at large, at least on the surface, which I will challenge to some extent in this study. We also need to keep in mind that the vast corpus of hagiographical literature, sermons, and other didactic texts mostly addressed the common people and appealed to them to reform their lives (Gurjewitsch 1981/1987, 38–39). To do justice to the huge desideratum regarding marginalized groups in the pre-modern world, we must pay close attention to the source material, the genres used, the audience interests, and, closely related with it, literary patronage. Moreover, we would have to investigate more in detail the actual meaning of marginalization, either in economic and political or in literary-artistic terms. Lack of visual or narrative

representation does not automatically imply social or economic repression.

While much research has already been done on the various marginalized groups – the case of women in historical, religious, economic, artistic, and literary terms demonstrates powerfully how much our modern lenses determine what we perceive and what we ignore (see, e.g., Bennett and Mazo Karras, ed., 2013) – here I want to focus on peasants as they appear at least in the margins of courtly literature and then in late medieval *fabliaux*, *mæren*, fables, and many other texts. As we will observe, peasants themselves constituted a highly structured social group among themselves and operated quite independently from their lords, depending on the geo-political conditions. But we mostly hear of them only when an individual tries to break through the proverbial glass ceiling and assume a higher social rank, whereas courtly poets mostly disregarded them. This entails that we must keep closely in mind what genre we consider since courtly romances were primarily aimed at a courtly audience and its specific interests, whereas entertaining literature appealed, so it seems, to much broader groups of listeners and readers. However, as we will see, even this differentiation is not always valid and requires further discrimination.

Discussion

Peasants in the Middle Ages: How Marginalized Were They?

Research has already produced much insightful work on the peasant population in the pre-modern period, viewing their lives through the lens of theology (sermons to and about peasants), economy, politics, but also the arts, and literature (Classen, ed. 2012). Studies have focused, for instance, on women in medieval villages (Olson), peasants in *fabliaux* (Gordon), rural life in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (Pigg), estate management (Dowling), the rural space in late medieval Books of Hours (Classen), satire about peasants (Applauso), Jews in the rural countryside (Wiedl), the peasant on the late medieval stage (King), and so forth.

Daniel Pigg has recently identified three models of how peasants might appear in medieval literature, either in a primitive, almost barbaric space where simple folks barely carve out their existence from harsh conditions, or as background figures for the courtly protagonist who passes through the rural space, or, third, as an allegory of human life at large, as a spiritual figure in metaphorical terms (Pigg 2015, 1539). As Pigg concludes, "peasants were far from passive people engaged in labor within a system that seemed to provide few rewards . . . . [A]nyone who writes off the rural world and the medieval peasant is missing some of the most vital imaginative and energetic social spaces in the period following the fall of Rome and the rise of European states" (1541; for further references, see Le Goff 1977/1980; Rösener 1985/1992; Hanawalt 1986).

The peasant figure serves us particularly well to examine the phenomenon of seemingly marginalized groups in the pre-modern world. Marginalization seems to have happened throughout time, and modern society continues to ignore specific groups, or to cast them as outsiders, threats, or foreign, doing this either deliberately or unconsciously. To address this topic in a most specific way, I will turn here to several literary examples from the late Middle Ages and buttress those with some reflections on major artworks from the same period. This will allow us to comprehend more broadly what perspectives regarding peasants were pursued.

Critical Views of the Peasantry in the Case of Wernher the Gardener: the Good and the Bad

In Wernher the Gardener's didactic and deeply conservative poem *Helmbrecht* (ca. 1260/1270), for example, the young man tries to gain respect as a robber knight, and this against his father's best advice. At first, he seems to be quite successful, but soon enough, judges and their servants arrive and capture the entire company of criminals. All of them are executed; only young *Helmbrecht* is somewhat spared. They cut off his right arm, his left leg, and they gouge out his eyes so that he can never ride on a horse again, wield a sword, or see anything. He has become an outcast, and not even his parents are allowed to help him. A year later, peasants whom the robber knight had badly mistreated before, catch and lynch him, which is the end of the young man's attempt to climb on the social ladder (Werner der Gartenære 1993; for recent critical studies, see Nolte and Schneider, ed., 2001; Murray 2015).

The literary evidence reveals the extent to which medieval society was only seemingly frozen in time and allegedly did not allow any social mobility.

However, the very opposite could also be the case because the poet endeavored very hard to put a strong lid on any attempts to break out of the feudal bonds. The very harsh treatment of the literary protagonist after his series of robberies and violent actions served as a general warning, but it also reveals the extent to which the nobility might have been afraid of possible uprisings, as they occurred in England in 1381 (*The Peasants' Revolt*) and in Germany (*Bauernkrieg*) in 1525 (Franz 1933/1984; Scribner and Benecke, ed., 1979; Cohn 1984; Wolf, Brockhoff, et al., eds., 2017; Firnhaber-Baker 2021). To be sure, marginalization has regularly been the dominant social strategy by the upper classes so that they could hold on to their own status as the only relevant group, shining forth through their education, artistic self-glorification, and religious charisma (see the contributions to Zimo, Vann Sprecher, Reyerson, and Blumenthal, ed., 2020). However, focusing on the marginalized or subdued appearance of peasants within courtly and related literature makes possible to study more critically our traditional viewpoints regarding the idealization of courtliness (Jaeger 1985; Schultz 2006) as if it was the exclusive literary contribution to the public discourse. Even if we might come up with only a short selection of counter-impressions, through a careful interpretation we will be in a much better position to assess the social-historical discourse and possibly also the material conditions of the peasant class.

Mixed Perspectives in the Works of Der Stricker

Already in the early thirteenth century, do we encounter remarkable examples of the rural world that quickly proves to be much more diversified and economically capable than we might have assumed, at least based on the evidence of the dominant courtly romance. In The Stricker's *Amîs* (ca. 1225), the protagonist engages with people from many different social classes and exposes them all equally in their foolishness (Schilling, ed. and trans., 1994). The king does not prove to be in any way more dignified than the various peasants and their wives when he is exposed to the priest's challenge. The bishop who threatens the priest *Amîs* of depriving him of his parish because he is jealous of *Amîs*'s great hospitality that he extends to all people, soon demonstrates that he is a truly ignorant person who only commands bookish learning and really lacks in rationality and intelligence. In short, what matters most for us, the peasants whom the priest deceives and robs of their money are not one iota more or less intelligent and simply fall for the rogue's pranks and tricks because they are naïve and gullible. Neither the men nor the women stand out in any way, and through their actions and words they reveal their profound foolishness. However, we never notice any particular expression of contempt of the peasant class; *Amîs*'s victims in the villages are very similar to those at court, in the cities, in churches, and in hospitals (cf. González and Millet 2006). The priest employs the same strategies to extract money from them, pretending to have created miracles and hence to be God's messenger. In a way, here we observe a remarkable leveling of the social classes insofar as no one is safe from the religious maneuvers carried out by this scoundrel of a priest. At the same time, we also need to note that there are numerous individuals within the rural community who are rather wealthy, which attracts *Amîs* to them as potential victims of his trickery.

The Idealized Peasant Woman in Hartmann von Aue's "Der arme Heinrich"

Shortly before Der Stricker composed his collection of curious episodes, the courtly poet Hartmann von Aue had created his famous verse novella, "Der arme Heinrich" (ca. 1200). This narrative sheds important light on courtly perspectives toward the rural world and forces us to discriminate our understanding about this social relationship. Whereas *Amîs* travels around wherever he can detect sources of income (theft), in Hartmann's narrative, we hear of a young prince who suddenly contracts leprosy and is about to die unless, as the medical doctor in Salerno tells him, he can find a young nubile woman willing to give her blood, i.e., her life, for his healing, an impossible proposition, and clearly the death judgement for Heinrich. Neither the worldly laws nor the Church would have ever allowed such a form of self-sacrifice, which the protagonist realizes also only too well. As much as the doctor had dangled a miracle cure before his eyes, this does not prove to be any realistic solution. Hence, the protagonist abandons all his worldly possessions and retires to a farm of a wealthy peasant whom he had always treated generously to await his death there (Gärtner, ed., 1996; for a good English translation, see Tobin, Vivian, and Lawson, trans. and commentary, 2001).

The literary narrative thus moves abruptly from the court to the countryside, or from the castle to the

farmhouse, where Heinrich basically vegetates and awaits his death, although he appears to enjoy good treatment there and does not have to suffer from any shortages in terms of food or housing. Let us focus on what we can learn about the peasant, "who never suffered any of the misfortunes that indeed happened to other peasants who had worse lords, ones who did not spare them from taxes and other demands" (220). Particularly because of Heinrich's kindness and generosity, this man enjoyed a privileged position within his village: "Heinrich protected him from having to toil for other powerful men. As a result, no one in the country was as well off as he" (220). If this passage has any historical value, then we can deduce from it that the economic and financial situation in a village depended very much on the authority of the respective lord who had all the freedom to demand much or little from the subservient peasants.

Significantly, this peasant, who remains unnamed, takes good care of Heinrich who stays there for three years before a major turn of events happens, voluntarily providing good care for the sick man: "How well was he now looked after and how richly did he now reap the benefits of having spared the peasant in the past" (220). Of course, this personal relationship does not represent any guarantee for the future, as the young daughter finally points out when she has conceived of the idea of sacrificing herself. It would take us too far afield to explore the budding love relationship between her and the leper, if that is the right term; suffice it here to recognize that she argues convincingly, as unbelievable as it might appear to her parents, Lord Heinrich, and later also the medical doctor in Salerno, that her voluntary death would be of great advantage to the entire family protecting them from economic harm in the future once their lord would have died (225). The narrator himself early on points out the precarious situation for the family since Heinrich's death would certainly change their economic condition: "They feared that his death would bring them great harm . . . and that some other lord would be more hard-hearted" (221).

Previous scholarship has tended to analyze this short verse narrative mostly from a religious point of view, which certainly carries considerable weight. But Hartmann brings to our attention the world of the peasants within the courtly context of his story. There is even some criticism implied as to cruel and aggressive lords who tend to abuse their peasants and cause them much harm (Cormeau and Störmer 1985, 153–59; Clark 1989; Kartschoke 2004). The poet thus indicates a certain degree of pity with the rural population, and he even has the girl voice personal concerns about married life. Driven by her deep desire to be joined with God as her true husband – almost in the way of a mystical vision female poets such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, Bridget of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena subsequently expressed (see, for instance, Hollywood 1995; for English mystics, see Fanous and Gillespie, ed. 2011) – the young woman rejects any option to marry a peasant and to lead an ordinary life within her rural community. She does not want to copy her parents' life: "A free Yeoman desires me, and I give myself to Him eagerly. Truly you should give me to Him. Then my life is well taken care of. His plow glides along smoothly; His household is filled with supplies. There neither horse nor cattle die. There crying children are not a bother. There it is never too hot or too cold. There one never grows old in years. The old become young. Neither frost not [sic] hunger exist there, nor any kind of suffering" (225–26). Moreover, she reminisces all the dangers and threats to a farm: "It is there I want to go, fleeing the farm that rain and hail beat down on and floods wash away, though one struggle against them time and again. One can work a whole year long to achieve something and lose it completely in half a day" (226).

Her pleading to be spared the misery of a peasant's existence has, of course, to be read within the context of topical images about the misery of human life at large from a Christian perspective – see Pope Innocent III's famous treatise *De miseria condicionis humane* (*On the wretchedness of the human condition*) from ca. 1194 or 1195, so absolutely contemporary to Hartmann's verse narrative and extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages (Lewis, ed., 1978). However, she specifically identifies many concrete and pragmatic problems that could affect a farm, so she desires to be spared the destiny of a peasant's wife. Her arguments are powerful, and the parents do not find any words to oppose her, which subsequently allows her to travel with Heinrich back to Salerno and to submit herself to the deadly surgery. Hartmann as a poet thereby drives home to his courtly audience

what life on a farm might really look like, and thus evokes their pity, at least momentarily. The screen of the aristocratic world is lifting in this situation, even though this peasant family appears to be much better off than most others in their village, due to Heinrich's generosity.

When the parents finally approach the prince and grant their daughter her wish to sacrifice herself for the leper, they admit explicitly: ". . . 'you have made things very pleasant for us and have shown us honor. That would not be well returned if we did not pay you back in kind" (228). Even though both Heinrich and later the doctor in Salerno express their great surprise about this development, they are both willing to accept the girl's sacrifice. However, the narrative does not end that way; the miracle does not happen, at least not in the way as the narrative seems to indicate up to that point. After all, Heinrich desires, in the last minute before the doctor is about to start cutting out the girl's heart while she is still alive, to gain a final view of her, so he gazes through a hole in the wall into the surgery room. In a kind of epiphany, he suddenly realizes how beautiful she, almost a divine figure, is in contrast to his own ugliness. The interior is not in sync with the exterior, we might say, and in metaphorical terms, the narrative seems to reflect the falling apart of body and soul leading to Heinrich's leprosy. Only when he then decides to reject her sacrifice and to embrace his sickness and hence his mortality, does he suddenly recover completely because God, the "cordis speculator," has seen into his heart and recognized his deep inner change, which then leads to his spiritual healing (Classen 2003).

Of course, all this amounts to an almost sentimental religious experience, but the narrator adds one more aspect shedding valuable light on the world of the peasants. Once he has returned to court, Heinrich is supposed to marry, but he refuses to accept any noble lady. Instead, especially to express his deep gratitude, but also out of love, he announces that he can only marry the peasant girl, which is possible because she "is just as freeborn as I am." (234). And he exerts the utmost pressure on his courtly counselors: "But if that cannot be, then truly, I shall die without a wife. For I have my honor and my life because of her" (234). It seems highly unlikely that in the Middle Ages such a marriage would have been possible, although we know of one such case in the history of Bohemia because the duke there wanted to ensure that his future children would be of Czech origin and would be raised speaking Czech, and not German (Classen 2012, "Introduction," 95). We face here a literary utopia which was probably far removed from social and political reality (for the history of the utopian discourse in the Middle Ages, see Hartmann and Röcke, ed., 2013; the contributions address hardly any literary cases and certainly ignore Hartmann's text). However, because the poet endeavored to engage with a religious topic, he took the freedom to project the possibility at least that a prince might marry a peasant woman.

We face a very similar situation in two early fourteenth-century Old French *fabliaux* ("La Grue," "Le Héron") and in more or less contemporary Middle High German verse narratives, such as in "Dulceflore," "Der Sperber," and "Dis ist von dem haselin" (*Erotic Tales*, 2009, 35–41; see also Coxon, trans., 2020, 195–99; there are no attempts to situate this tale within its social-historical context). These examples strongly reflect a humorous aspect and might have served primarily for entertainment. However, Hartmann's narrative is predicated on a serious, life-and-death motif which finds its happy solution because the protagonist finally succeeds in looking inside – both practically and metaphorically – and learn a profound lesson, for which God rewards him with renewed health. The marriage with the peasant girl might not be a realistic feature, but it indicated for the courtly audience that social class distinctions were not the absolute criteria in every respect. After all, as the narrator emphasizes repeatedly, she was virtuous, beautiful, strong-willed, resolute, highly intelligent, and only lacked the status of an aristocratic woman. Since Heinrich, however, identifies her as 'free-born,' he removes any possible arguments against his marriage plan. Of course, we would look in vain for a similar case in courtly romances, but the genre of verse novella allowed the poet to project what normally would be unheard of as an actual reality. Love and gratitude overcome in this story the class barriers, although we are also informed that from the start, Heinrich had entertained a special relationship with that peasant and his family for a long time.

The Suffering Peasant Woman as the Ideal Character in Boccaccio's *Decameron*

To widen our perspective, we can also look at the last story contained in Boccaccio's famous *Decameron* from ca. 1350 where we are confronted with the very disturbing, if not upsetting account of the patient Griselda, a peasant woman who is terribly abused by her husband, the Marquis of Saluzzo, called Gualtieri (McWilliam, trans., 1972/1995). Scholars have debated the terribly victimized Griselda already for a long time, a discussion that had set in already in the fourteenth century and continues until today (Morabito 1993; Aurnhammer and Schiewer, ed., 2010; Rüegg 2019). After all, this prince treats his young wife with the greatest cruelty because he wants to test her loyalty as wife – not even her loyalty as a woman. After she has delivered her first child, he takes it away from her, does so with the second child as well, and finally, years later, pretends that he wants to dismiss Griselda and to marry another young woman. She never protests and submits completely. Only when she learns that he wants to take another wife, does she speak up, but not for herself, but for the 'competitor,' the new wife: "But with all my heart I beg you not to inflict those same wounds upon her that you imposed upon her predecessor, for I doubt whether she could withstand them, not only because she is younger, but also because she has had a refined upbringing, whereas the other had to face continual hardship from her infancy" (793).

The entire situation proves to be puzzling and confusing from the start. Gualtieri had not wanted to marry at all and only agreed to that idea upon his counselors' moral and ethical admonishments and political pressure (784). However, he claims his freedom to pick any woman of his choice, so he chooses the daughter of a poor shepherd, Griselda. Gualtieri had noticed her for a while and appreciated her in her beauty. The narrator adds additional complimentary comments describing her in her new role as wife: "she now acquired so confident, graceful and decorous a manner that she could have been taken for the daughter, not of the shepherd Giannùcole, but of some great nobleman, and consequently everyone who had known her before her marriage was filled with astonishment" (787). She quickly earns the public respect, if not love of all people, who praise the Marquis for his amazing insightfulness in picking this woman who stands out for her "noble qualities that lay concealed beneath her ragged and rustic attire" (787).

Boccaccio thus advocates a new perspective regarding the common evaluation of people, not according to their social status, but according to their inner nobility, a notion which Gottfried von Strassburg had already described in the prologue to his *Tristan and Isolde* (ca. 1210), but not yet with an eye toward the social class distinctions (Whobrey, ed. and trans., 2010). Boccaccio takes great pain to praise this peasant woman as the most excellent character, maybe in the entire collection of tales (*Decameron*), although Gualtieri soon mistreats her so profoundly that everyone, until today, can only feel pity for her. There have been many attempts to come to terms with this extraordinary situation, either criticizing the Marquis by voicing outrage over his patriarchal abuse of his power or praising Griselda for her unprecedented patience and submissiveness, which really amounts to the same perspective (Bronham 2004). For our purposes, however, what matters is the fact that this incredible female figure is constantly mindful of her very low origin and always refers to it as an explanation which she accepts all and every wish or demand by her husband: "'My lord, I have always known that my lowly condition was totally at odds with your nobility, and that it is to God and to yourself that I owe whatever standing I possess" (790). When she is about to be sent away, she only begs him for a shift to cover her naked body in return for her virginity that she had brought into their marriage (790–91)

In fact, her own father had never believed that that marriage would last because of the huge social class difference, so he had kept her old clothes for the day of her return. But a last test is waiting for Griselda because she is required to prepare for the arrival of the new bride, who is really her own daughter. Since she endures all that patiently, her husband finally reveals the truth, which then quickly leads to the happy end. Of course, the entire account has left most readers/listeners with a bad taste in their mouths, and this for good reasons since Gualtieri emerges as a wrathful, almost hateful, obsessively fearful husband who does not trust anyone, not even his own wife. But since she passes all tests willingly and readily without even knowing of those tests, the Marquis finally reveals the truth and accepts her again as his beloved wife.

We could argue, as Kurt Flasch has done, that the only philosophical explanation of Griselda might be that she truly represents an idea as espoused by Boethius, the freedom of all contingencies as the guaranteed pathway toward happiness (Flasch 2002, 266: "Griselda hat alles gewonnen, weil sie sich von allem trennen konnte" [Griselda wins all because she could let go of all]). But in concrete terms, Boccaccio truly concluded his *Decameron* in a most unsettling fashion, as if all attempts by the various female narrators and female protagonists in the many stories would have to be dismissed as irrelevant. In a way, even here, we might recognize another literary utopia where social class differences no longer matter because a poor shepherd's daughter can rise to the position of a Marquise.

While her husband is both praised for his intelligent choice of wife and criticized for the harsh tests, Griselda receives complete praise for her wisdom (794). No one has even a thought of her low origin, and Gualtieri makes that past being forgotten quickly because he elevates the poor shepherd Giannùcole to a pleasant economic position "so that he lived in great comfort and honour for the rest of his days" (794). As problematic as the entire narrative motif proves to be, it certainly underscores the permutability of the social class limits when an individual demonstrates sufficient wisdom, gracefulness, and patience. For Gualtieri, his wife's low social rank does not matter at all; and in the future he never voices any concerns regarding a lack of subservience to him due to her former position as a peasant woman. However, when he started testing her, he had drawn from this very argument, placing it into the mouths of his subjects, whereas he himself never harbors any concerns in that regard: "claiming that his subjects were thoroughly disgruntled with her on account of her lowly condition" (788).

He himself had been fully aware of the problematic nature of his decision to marry Griselda because his friends and counselors could have easily objected to her. Hence, Gualtieri set up conditions that made it impossible for them to protest against his choice (784–85), which cleared the path for his secret plan. As brutal and mean he might appear to his people, the fourteenth-century audiences, and also to us, he certainly broke through the noble class ideology and chose the simple shepherd's daughter as his wife because he recognized her as most attractive and virtuous, i.e., as his worthy bride irrespective of the social class distinction. And the narrator deserves our acknowledgement for having projected such a possibility in the final story of the *Decameron*.

Otherwise, Boccaccio hardly ever pays closer attention to members of the peasant class. In the tenth story told on the sixth day, Fra Cipolla preaches to a crowd of simple folks from the little town of Certaldo and from neighboring hamlets, trying to impress them with fake relics, but there are no particular references to social class issues. Instead, the focus rests on his ability to overcome a prank played by his friends and to convince the faithful that the coals in his bag are those that had roasted St. Lawrence (476). The audience, which is not discriminated at all, simply believes his words and donates much money to this highly eloquent preacher. In the sixth story told on the eighth day, the narrator relates a funny story about a foolish farmer, Calandrino who is deceived and robbed by two rogues who pretend to be his friends. However, this account falls into a new narrative register where we commonly hear about peasants and their wives (*fabliaux*, *mæren*, or novelle). We hear of the same characters also in the third story told on the ninth day. And the sixth story told on the ninth day relates an erotic adventure that a nobleman, Puniccio, pursues with the daughter of a poor innkeeper in the dark bedroom where they are all sleeping. Chaucer later picked up that motif of the confused beds in the dark of the night in his "The Miller's Tale" (*Canterbury Tales*; cf. Boenig and Taylor, ed., 2012, 98–108). In light of this observation, the appearance of the most beautiful, humble, and virtuous Griselda, daughter of a simple herdsman, as the best choice for the Marquis, signals that the poet intended to round off his collection with an account in which the traditional feudal structure is undermined and exposed in its constructiveness, giving more free rein to the free choice of a marriage partner in complete disregard of her social background.

Good Peasants as Crucial Helpers in Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Königin Sibille*

When we turn to one of the earliest prose novels published in the fifteenth century, the German translation of *Königin Sibille* (Queen Sibille) by the Countess Elisabeth von Saarbrücken-Nassau (ca. 1437), we encounter another major peasant figure who assumes a central support role for the

protagonist, wife of King Charlemagne (Bastert and von Bloh, ed., 2018; for critical studies, see the contributions to Haubrichs and Herrmann, ed. 2002, though the issue addressed here is not covered in that volume). A political faction at the royal court attempts to undermine the king's power and in that process target his wife, the daughter of the Emperor of Byzantium. They convince a black dwarf to sneak into her bed one early morning while her husband is attending Mass. However, the dwarf is too afraid to touch her and falls asleep. Thus, Charlemagne discovers him upon his return. Driven by an explosive jealousy, he wants his wife to be burnt at the stake although she is heavy with his child. After much pleading and many negotiations, he sends her into exile and has the dwarf burnt. However, Sibille is then pursued by a knight who wants to rape and then kill her, but she manages to escape, whereas her companion, a younger person, dies while defending her.

Subsequently, the queen encounters the peasant, named Warakir, who is described in almost monstrous terms and who at first thinks that he could rape her. But once he has realized who she is and what she has suffered so innocently, he decides to become her guide and protector, taking her all the way to Constantinople to her father to whom they would lodge a severe complaint against her husband. The peasant sends his donkey back home where his wife and children have to assume that he has been killed or taken prisoner. Their sorrow is mentioned only in passing (15), whereas the narrative emphasis rests on the queen who soon delivers her son, and then travels on to her father.

Warakir remains a very loyal helper throughout the rest of the novel and is also accompanied by a thief, Grymmener (31) who knows how to practice magic, which helps him to discover all treasures wherever they might be hidden. Both men, apart from Sibille's by then ten-year-old son Ludwig (Louis), then assume the central role in the queen's endeavor to regain her previous position and to be declared free of any guilt. Although people tend to ridicule the peasant and the thief, their dedication, loyalty, and skills contribute essentially to the queen's final success of being accepted by her husband again who finally acknowledges her complete innocence. Warakir, above all, is forgiven by the king all of his actions that he had carried out against Charlemagne in his service for the queen, and he is greatly praised by Ludwig: "Er hat miner mutter alczü wol gewartet bis vff diesen hürtigen dag" (53; He has served my mother very well until today).

Of course, neither the peasant nor the thief operates like traditional knights, but many of those men who serve at the royal court reveal a criminal mind and are not to be trusted because they operate as traitors, a major negative judgment often voiced by medieval poets, and so here as well (Tracy, ed., 2019). For the first time in pre-modern literature do we thus encounter truly positive portraits of members of the royal class who contribute critically to the queen's survival and ultimate victory. Ironically, whereas two of Elisabeth's other novels enjoyed considerable success during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (in manuscripts, incunabula, and imprints), *Königin Sibille*, just as her *Huge Scheppel*, has survived only in one manuscript (Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. 12 in scrinio; cf. Bastert and von Bloh, ed., 2020, XXIV–XXVII). This one, however, is beautifully illustrated and obviously served as a representative literary document of great value. And yet, particularly here, two individuals from the lower social class receive great respect as major helpers for the innocently persecuted queen. In fact, they emerged as more noble in their character than the high-ranking members of Charlemagne's court, many of whom display lack of empathy, hostile and vicious behavior, recklessness toward the innocent victim, and a deep level of meanness.

Elisabeth's novel proves to be particularly important for our investigation because despite its format of a prose novel, it still comes close to the traditional courtly romance. However, the author voices severe criticism both of King Charlemagne and of the evil knights at his court who ruthlessly try to destroy her and thus the king's happiness and public status. Although both this German translation and the French source (Reine Sebile), which was written in verse and designed similar to traditional chansons de geste and chansons d'aventures, highlight the world of the aristocracy and the king's court, here we are finally exposed to the lives of the ordinary people, those who are normally marginalized, ignored, and forgotten. We must not forget that the original text was first composed in Old French between 1150 and 1170 and copied down in the middle of the thirteenth century, when the appearance of the non-

aristocratic characters must have been even more striking (Lange 2002, 420). Or, as we might already conclude, Warakir and his predecessors confirmed already at that time that the courtly world was not as exclusive and opposed to members of the lower classes as we might have assumed.

The Smart and Courages Peasant in Heinrich Kaufringer's *mæren*

We find proof for that claim also in some of the verse narratives by Elisabeth's contemporary, Heinrich Kaufringer (fl. ca. 1400; Classen, trans. 2014/2019). Granted, here the world of the early modern city life begins to assume central importance, but still a good number of these narratives involve the court, knights, and ladies, such as "The Innocent Murderess" (no. 14). At the same time, some of the stories deal with urban authority figures, burghers, craftsmen, and students. In "The Peasant Who Was [Falsely] Accused" (no. 3), a priest harbors great jealousy of a wealthy peasant and tries to slander him to his bishop as a bad Christian who would deserve to be punished. But the peasant can convince the bishop that all of his words and actions are those of a good faithful, whereas the priest, who has also colluded with a corrupt judge, deserves to be punished. The most important example proves to the charge against the peasant that he has publicly declared to have both heaven and hell at home, which the priest considers to be extremely blasphemous. He takes the bishop and his servants to a backroom where his old and badly suffering mother lies in bed and then explains:

Here is hell and heaven. You know this for certain because if I treat my mother well I will have guaranteed access to heaven. If I were not doing that, I would become part of the hellish throng. (17)

Although the room is smelly, since the mother has occupied it already for thirty-two years – maybe without ever leaving it – the man has treated his mother well, which one of the bishop's administrators immediately explains in light of the Fourth Commandment as a most noble deed. By contrast, the priest is then exposed as having had an affair with the judge's wife already three times with the result that he was badly punished for it. And yet, he did not abandon his scandalous behavior and is thus identified as a "fool and an idiot because he does not realize why he had to suffer so much pain before" (18).

Certainly, Kaufringer intended his tale as a lesson for all people, he still profiled the peasant as a most noble, worthy character who knows how to defend himself against the priest's evil strategy to malign him to the bishop. The outcome proves to be the very opposite: "The bishop understood that the priest harbored great hatred against the innocent peasant that he had inconsiderately chastised him from the pulpit . . . the priest had to put down immediately a pawn of hundred pounds, while the judge had to pay for the food and the wine served by the peasant" (19).

Similarly, in "The Tithe on Love" (no. 12), a priest wants to commit adultery with a peasant's wife and is badly punished by the husband who knows well how to defend his honor and that of his family. By trickery, he makes the priest drink the wife's urine, which almost kills him, and the peasant then comments about his wife's body: "The vineyard is also perfect; I have worked in it well, and as a reward I have received love and happiness. It belongs to me and cannot be loaned out. No one has a right to work in it, neither lay people nor clerics, only me, let me tell you that" (65). And in "The Pious Miller's Wife" (no. 17), two priests come to see her and discover that she is truly a very pious person and has raised her children to be devout Christians. Although she has a hard life, has to work much with her husband, and so does not have much time to attend church services, she demonstrates in their conversation that she is truly a pious woman. Although the story is situated in the countryside – mill – the general message confirms that it addresses all people. For Kaufringer, it had become easily possible to utilize a rural setting for his urban and aristocratic audiences. The barrier between the social classes had become, we might suspect, permeable, at least within the framework of the literary discourse.

The World of Peasants in Visual Terms: Books of Hours –Art-Historical Evidence from the Late Middle Ages

Finally, let's take a look at some art-historical evidence. In the late Middle Ages, the genre of the Book of Hours, above all, gained enormously in importance, being particularly appreciated by female members of the royal courts (Smeyers 1999;

Freedman 1999; Classen 2007). These quarto folios appealed to noble ladies because they allowed them to carry out private devotion with the guidance of these wonderfully illustrated manuscripts containing prayers, liturgical texts, calendars, and psalms. While monks or nuns resorted to their breviary, these aristocratic lay readers relied on their books of hours that represented an abbreviation of the breviary in which the monastics could recite the Divine Office. Art historians have globally agreed that the illuminations in those manuscripts can be identified as some of the most beautiful paintings from the Middle Ages (Calkins 1983; Wieck 2004; there are by now numerous facsimiles of medieval books of hours with good commentaries).

Of course, the religious purpose dominates in all examples of Books of Hours (Snyder 1989, 441–43), but since the late Middle Ages, the artists increasingly included natural scenes and thus also rural settings. The spectator's gaze is directed toward idyllic and idealized landscapes, which change according to the seasons. This allows the viewer to gain a good understanding of the many different types of agricultural activities and subtly brings the world of the peasant class very close to the aristocratic owners of those precious manuscripts. There are just too many manuscripts still available containing these calendars, prayers, psalms, and accompanying illustrations to go into detail here. Let's focus, hence, on one of the most attractive ones created by the Flemish artist Simon Bening (Bening 1988). The focus is directed toward the rural settings, and we observe clearly the types of farmhouses, farm animals, tools, sheds, and the peasants' activities either on the farm or in the fields depending on the season of the year. Men plow the fields, sow, harvest, slaughter animals, women take care of the smaller animals, we see groups of people involved in hay making, women working in the gardens, men shearing sheep, and, for the winter months, scenes with children playing in the snow. The picture for the month of September is filled with many different elements showing a month plowing his field with two horses under the yoke, while someone in the background is already sowing the seeds for the next harvest. Undoubtedly, the artist intended to project idyllic sceneries, but it is now located in the village, in the fields, in the forest. The aristocratic viewer was thus invited to consider the lives of the peasant class as a positive experience since all those people operate according to the demands of nature in response to the seasons. Both men and women appear as well dressed and well nourished; there is nothing of the squalor Monty Python imagined, and the peasants do their jobs as expected. In other words, these scenes represent peaceful settings and project a world where agriculture was regarded just as important as the commercial activities in cities – we see, at times, merchants, cranes, merchandise, etc. – and the life of the noble class. Women and men cooperate during the harvest, which is still the case today, while other images show the two genders involved in respectively different work assignments (see also Classen 2024).

In a way, these images convey a sense of calmness, tranquility, contentment, and individual happiness, almost as if the rural world was supposed to represent a kind of utopia, which the aristocratic viewer was invited to appreciate. However, irrespective of the certain degree of fantasy, we can certainly trust the artist having presented to us very realistic sceneries as he had observed them himself or copied from previous Books of Hours (Winkler 1925/1978). Whether the artist relied on models or not, the overall impression confirms both here and in many other examples that, similarly as in medieval and late medieval literature, the world of the peasants attracted a growing interest, both for aesthetic and social reasons. The notion of marginalization in the pre-modern world would have to be viewed rather carefully, just as we have learned in the last decades to recognize the huge role that various women could play in medieval society. Granted, as we have observed in the case of Hartmann von Aue's "Der arme Heinrich," which could be well complemented by the anonymous "The Little Bunny Rabbit," much depended on the individual decision by the aristocrat as to his treatment of his subjects. But the poet strongly indicated how much the peasant's daughter was critically important for the survival of her lord.

Conclusion

Even though we tend to ignore the appearance of peasant figures in courtly and urban literature, and so also in late medieval manuscript illuminations, the analysis has demonstrated that our concept of a complete marginalization of the lower social class by poets and artis was not the case. To do justice

to the issue at hand, both the fictional account and the painting served specific functions for courtly entertainment and religious instruction. Behind those images, however, rested, after all, a certain degree of material realism. The courtly audiences enjoying the romances and verse narratives, and later also those marvelous manuscript illustrations, were exposed already in the twelfth century, but then increasingly in the later Middle Ages, to characters from the peasant class and were often told that those deserved considerable respect, both because they were wealthy and influential, and because they demonstrated considerable intelligence, rhetorical skills, and political insights. The negative words by Wernher the Gardener in his *Helmbrecht* about the danger for a peasant who might try to rise above the traditional class level mirrored, of course, a deep fear by the aristocrats that their own status might not be as stable and uncontested as they assumed. But we could identify numerous other examples of worthy representatives rising up from the peasant class (Boccaccio, Kaufringer), proving their independence, wit, and wisdom. Hence, the transition from this positive discourse to the artistic depictions of peasants in the Books of Hours since the fifteenth century was not a major innovation. Instead, we have to acknowledge that our notion of a strongly marginalized world of peasants might reflect social-economic conditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but not necessarily those in the Middle Ages

Of course, peasant life was certainly not rosy, and we should not allow the beautiful images in the Books of Hours seduce us to assume that. However, we have uncovered much evidence – both literary and artistic, both didactic and religious – to confirm that the rural class was not simply marginalized and was actually quite present in the minds of courtly poets and artists. The various peasant uprisings in the later Middle Ages mirrored strong discontent and unrest and were attempts to improve the ordinary people's lot, but this does not mean at all that we would have to view the entire world of peasants as completely repressed, muted, excluded, or marginalized. Of course, many times they could not compete with the aristocracy, but both courtly poets and artists provided much material to signal to their audiences the value and independent status of the rural population after all. The evidence assembled here does not suddenly confirm the very opposite to what previous research has unearthed and confirmed. Feudalism was a very hierarchical system, with strict barriers between the social classes. But, the literary material also indicates that the village and the castle were not completely separate from each other; most aristocrats were not much more than elevated estate managers; society at large depended completely on the peasants' food production, and so it does not come as a surprise that numerous poets of *fabliaux*, didactic texts, *mæren*, and at times even courtly romances granted considerable space also to peasants. The rich illustration programs in many Books of Hours demonstrated that both the patrons and the artists were fully aware of the lower social classes and often paid more respect to the peasantry than we might have assumed. Altogether, medieval and early modern poets and artists were in the vanguard of attributing a considerable amount of credit to the peasant class with many worthy figures operating on the narrative stage or in pictorial frameworks.

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