Rationality in Medieval Literature – The Roots of Modernity in the Middle Ages?

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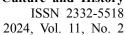United States

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Abstract

This study attempts to push the boundaries of our historical-intellectual concept regarding the origin and development of rationality as a *modus vivendi* not only since the eighteenth century, but already as an intellectual force in the Middle Ages, primarily reflected in literary works. While traditional courtly narratives reveal only tentative elements of rational thought patterns and forms of behavior, as soon as we turn to thirteenth-century romances and short verse *mæren*, do we recognize the emergence of rationality already in the pre-modern world. Rationality is here not identified as a comprehensive philosophical system pursued by the various poets; instead, it is perceived as a pragmatic approach to everyday situations in the lives of the various protagonists who commonly face dilemmatic situations and must apply ratiocination in order to come to terms with specific challenges, considering and balancing out contrastive options to limit harm to themselves and to make the best out of the conditions confronting them.

1. Introduction

No society is simply static; change and transformation are always and constantly at work affecting individuals and communities small and large. This also applies to the Middle Ages, contrary to many common assumptions concerning its alleged backwardness, stalemate, or crystalline feudal structure under the rigid rule of a monarch. The emergence of rationality already then as a major intellectual factor, as this paper will argue, serves exceedingly well to buttress this criticism of such mythical thinking, as countless factors associated with the

so-called "Renaissance of the Twelfth Century" above all indicate. Neither the rise of Gothic cathedrals across the continent nor the emergence of universities would have been possible without fundamental changes in the dominant mentality, thinking processes, and new concepts of human ontology, probably most inspired through the rediscovery of Aristotle's teachings once they were translated from Arabic to Hebrew, and from there to Latin (Toledo and Salerno).[1] At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, for instance, the legal procedure of ordeals was abandoned as an irrational and almost blasphemous reliance on God to decide human affairs. Intellectual transformations of that sort can regularly be identified as the engines of profound paradigm shifts affecting all strata of society.[2]

In several studies, I have already examined this phenomenon of medieval rationality in light of the Middle High German verse narratives by Der Stricker and also in Icelandic Sagas, two very different genres, both far apart from each other in terms of genres, languages, and cultural background.[3] We might debate the starting point of rational thought, whether in the twelfth century (Abelard) or as late as in the fifteenth century (Nicholas of Cusa), but medieval society certainly experienced a profound innovation in the course of time, as manifested in paintings, mechanical products, agriculture, creation of manuscripts, and architecture at least since the twelfth century.[4] William of Occam went so far as to specify

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[1] Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts*, Cambridge History of Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Albertus Magnus und die Anfänge der Aristoteles-Rezeption im lateinischen Mittelalter: von Richardus Rufus bis zu Franciscus de Mayronis = Albertus Magnus and the Beginnings of the Medieval Reception of Aristotle in the Latin West: from Richardus Rufus to Franciscus de Mayronis*, ed. Ludger Honnefelder, Rega Wood, Mechthild Dreyer, and Marrc-Aeilko Aris, Subsidia Albertina, 1 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2005); *The Aristotelian Tradition: Aristotle's Works on Logic and Metaphysics and Their Reception in the Middle Ages*, ed. Börje Bydén and Christina Thomsen Thörnqvist, Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 28 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2017). We could also draw from much older research still valuable today to confirm this observation.

[2] Stephen C. Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For an approach to this phenomenon in terms of mental history, see now Peter Dinzelbacher, *Structures and Origins of the Twelfth-Century "Renaissance*," Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalter, 63 (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 2017); Roger Luckhurst, *Gothic: An Illustrated History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021); Christian Kayser, *Freiburg und die Folgen: Bau- und Konstruktionsgeschichte gotischer Maßwerktürme*. 2 vols. (Regensburg: Schnell + Steiner, 2023); see also *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology*, ed. Clifford J. Rogers. 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[3] Albrecht Classen, "Self-Control, Rationality, Ethics, and Mutual Respect: A Dominican Poet Addresses His Audience and Calls Them to Reason. Ulrich Bonerius's *The Gemstone* (1350)," *Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur / Alman Dili ve Edebiyatı Dergisi*, 47 (2022), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.26650/sdsl2021–1039647; id., "Exploration of Rationality: The Stricker's Contributions to the Intellectual Revolution in the Thirteenth Century, or, the Transformation of the Arthurian World," *Arthuriana*, 32.3 (2022), 21–40; id., "The Emergence of Rationality in the Icelandic Sagas: The Colossal Misunderstanding of the Viking Lore in Contemporary Popular Culture," *Humanities*, 11: 110 (2022), Special issue: *Medieval Scandinavian Studies Today: Whence, Whereto, Why*; online at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/medieval_ScandinavianSpecial Issue for *Humanities*, ed. Alexander van Nahl; http://doi.org/10.3390/h11050110

[4] Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); R. N. Swanson, *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Ryan P. Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens and the Twelfth Century Renaissance*, Church, Faith and Culture in the Medieval

that God cannot be comprehended in human-intellectual terms because theology is not a natural science.[5] It seems curious that scholarship has so far refrained from acknowledging those aspects confirming the existence of rational thought in that cultural-historical context.

In order to challenge ourselves and employ a new lens on high medieval culture, this paper will revisit the issue as exemplified especially by the verse narrative *Pfaffe Amîs* by Der Stricker (ca. 1220), then turn to the fables by the Swiss preacher poet Ulrich Bonerius (ca. 1350), and wrap up the argument by bringing to our attention the workings of rationality, if that is the right term, in the verse narratives by the South German poet Heinrich Kaufringer (ca. 1400). Even though I will engage primarily with literary documents only, and not with philosophical or theological treatises, those promise to evidence the presence of rational ideas determining some of the protagonists who are thus able to distance themselves from their contemporaries and to achieve their goal in a pragmatic, logical, hence rational fashion, whether they are morally and ethical appropriate or not. To facilitate our analysis, I will simply assume that we can define rationality as the intellectual capacity and willingness to allow thought processes precede actions and to make reasonable guesses and decisions.

But to lay the foundation, let us initially reflect on the critical exploration of rationalism in historical terms, then consider some Anglo-Norman *lais* by Marie de France, and incorporate the testimony of the two major contemporaries, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Gottfried von Strassburg who both composed the most influential courtly romances of their time and incorporated, each on his own in unique ways, indications of rational thought determining some of their protagonists who have to operate in an ever more complex social structure that required a fine-tuned intellectual mind capable of making rational decisions in dilemmatic situations.

2. Rationality in the Middle Ages? An Oxymoron or a New Way of Thinking

According to the standard reference works on the Middle Ages, rationality was not a relevant concept, and the term itself seems not to have been coined before the sixteenth century.[6] Various authors such as Peter Lombard and Bonaventure explored the dialectics of rationality

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West (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Warren Treadgold, ed., *Renaissance Before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984); Heinrich Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages 1000–1200*, trans. Denise A. Kaiser (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998; orig. 1992), pp. 267–80; Stephen C. Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); cf. also Nicola Polloni, *The Twelfth-Century Renewal of Latin Metaphysics: Gundissalinus's Ontology of Matter and Form*, Durham Medieval and Renaissance Monographs and Essays, 6 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2020); for the particular roles played by professors and students, see Rainer Christoph Schwinges, *Studenten und Gelehrte: Studien zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte deutscher Universitäten im Mittelalter*, Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, 32 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

[5] William of Ockham, 1. *Sent. prol.* q.7 OT 1, quoted from *Das philosophische Denken im Mittelalter: Von Augustin zu Machiavelli*, ed. Kurt Flasch together with Fiorella Retucci and Olaf Pluta. 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2001; 4th rev. ed. 2020), pp. 183–205.

[6] There are no entries on rationality in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork. 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), or in the *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms – Methods – Trends*, ed. Albrecht Classen. 3 vols. (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

and spirituality, but they limited that to the theological realm and warned against the danger that the human mind in its self-centeredness might undermine faith in God. Bonaventure (1221–1274), for instance, severely criticized philosophers who dared to move intellectually beyond the traditional faith-based concept of the world[7] – see the famous condemnation of the 277 theses in Paris in 1277,[8] and he promoted instead the affective turn toward God counter to previous endeavors to explore intellectualism as a pragmatic approach.[9] Whether medieval people were directed by rationality or not has been discussed occasionally but without any fruitful analysis and conclusions.[10]

After all, for a long time, medievalists have naively assumed that people in the pre-modern age had, for instance, no clear concept of economic principles, and this simply because of a lack of rationality. However, famous Jacque Le Goff, despite some hesitations, noted: "au cœur de cette écomonie du salut et de son fonctionnement social, il y a "la grâce, la caritas et le don . . . le Moyen Age a connu l'idée de risque et que les mendiants eux-mêmes ont inclus dans leur vision de l'activité humaine l'existence, dans certaines conditions, de risqué."[11]

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[7] L. Hödl. "Rationalismus," *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, Vol. VII: *Planudes bis Stadt* (Munich: Lexma Verlag, 1995), pp. 460–61.

[8] See the contributions to *Das Licht der Vernunft: Die Anfänge der Aufklärung im Mittelalter*, ed. Kurt Flasch and Udo Reinhold Jeck (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997); Kurt Flasch, *Aufklärung im Mittelalter? Die Verurteilung von 1277: Das Dokument des Bischofs von Paris*, intro, trans., and explanation, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, excerpta Classica, VI (Mainz: Dieterich, 1989); *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277: Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts: Studien und Texte*, ed. Jan A. Aertsen, Kent Emery, Jr. und Andreas Speer, Miscellanea mediaevalia, 28 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001); Andrew E. Larsen, *The School of Heretics: Academic Condemnation at the University of Oxford, 1277–1409*, Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, 40 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011). The entire book series offers excellent contributions to the wide field of medieval and early modern university studies and the intellectual debates.

[9] See the contributions to *A Companion to Bonaventure*, ed. Jay M. Hammond, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and Jared Goff, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

[10] See, for instance, Dominic Farrell, *The Ends of Moral Virtues and the First Principles of Practical Reason in Thomas Aquinas*. Analecta Gregoriana, 318 (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2012); Zouyi Huang, "Rationality and Belief in Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the 2016 International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (2015). Online at: DOI: 10.2991/iccessh-16.2016.153; Anthony Celano, "Medieval Theories of Practical Reason," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1999; rev. 2022), online at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason-med/; José Filipe Silva, "Introduction: Rationality in Perception in Medieval Philosophy," in *Rationality in Perception in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. id., Investigating Medieval Philosophy, 18 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023), pp. 1–32; Alexander Fidora, "Historische Wechselbeziehungen religiöser Kulturen und Vernunftkritik: Überlegungen zur Transformation philosophischer Rationalitätskonzepte im Religionsdialog des Mittelalters," *Historical Interactions of Religious Cultures*, 1.1 (2024), 30–49.

[11] Jacques Le Goff, *Le Moyen Âge et l'argent: Essai d'anthropologie historique* (Paris: Perrin, 2010), pp. 206–07; cf. also *Écrire, compter, mesurer: Vers une histoire des rationalités pratiques*, ed. Natacha Coquery, François Menant, and Florence Weber (Paris: Éd. Rue d'Ulm; Presses de l'ENS, 2006); Giacomo Todeschini, *Richesse franciscaine: De la pauvreté volontaire à la société de marché* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2008); *Calculs et rationalités dans la seigneurie médiévale: les conversions de redevances entre XIe et XVe siècle; actes de la table ronde organisée par le LAMOP à Auxerre les 26 et 27 octobre 2006*, ed. Laurent Feller, Histoire ancienne et médiévale, 100 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2009). See also the contributions to *La moneta nell'economia Europea secoli XIII–XVIII*, ed. Vera Barbagli Bagnoli, Atti della "Settima settimana di studio" (11–17 aprile 1975), Pubblicazioni, 7 (Florence: Le Monnier, 1981).

Risk-taking, however, requires sharp calculations, planning, balancing one's options, daring, and long-term thinking.[12] Yet, this paper does not aim at a socio-economic analysis, as valuable as that would be in the larger context. Instead, the focus will rest on a selection of literary texts from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries where we can observe significant indication of rational thought processing affecting personal life. After all, knights in pursuit of their goals of chivalry and public esteem, lovers trying to win their lady's attention and response, rulers aiming for a just and fair political system, and others who populate the literary texts have also faced the need to operate rationally to some extent and to make choices, for instance. We constantly observe moments in the various narratives where paths bifurcate, where a difficult decision has to be made, and where a careful consideration of the conditions and challenges are required to avoid catastrophe.

3. Rationality in Modern Thought and Its Medieval Antecedents

Most modern philosophers and sociologists who have engaged with the history of rationality have focused on modern conditions, associating rationality mostly with the rise of the Enlightenment when Spinoza, Wolff, and Leibniz argued strongly against classical empiricism (Bacon, Locke, Hume) in favor of the supreme priority of human reason and the ability to think deductively.[13] However, medieval society was not completely determined by the Christian faith, by the ideology of feudalism, the complete submission under the monarchy, or the rule of patriarchy, as much research has demonstrated in a variety of ways.[14] To cope in their everyday life, certain elements or aspects of rationality had been necessary, and a close examination of specific examples can clearly demonstrate that observation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* only knows of a reference to the word earliest cited in a

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[12] Will Hasty, *The Medieval Risk-Reward Society: Courts, Adventure, and Love in the European Middle Ages* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), argues that medieval society, in its public appearance, was heavily involved in competitions, such as of dynasties. Curiously, he does not take the logical next step and investigate the rational mechanisms relevant for such competitions.

[13] There are countless relevant studies on rationality; see, for instance, the contributions to *Key Concepts in the Social Sciences: Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970); *Rationalität: ihre Entwicklung und ihre Grenzen*, ed. Leo Scheffczyk, Grenzfragen, 16 (Freiburg i. Br.: K. Alber, 1989); Dieter Freundlich and Wayne Hudson, *Reason and Its Other: Rationality in Modern German Philosophy and Culture*, Berg European Studies Series (Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berg, 1993); *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality*, ed. Alfred R. Mele and Piers Rawling, Oxford Handbooks in Philosophy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Donald Davidson, *Probleme der Rationalität* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006); *Rationality: Constraints and Contexts*, ed. T.-W. Hung and T. J. Lane (London, San Diego, et al.: Academic Press, 2017); Mikael Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life: A Critical Evaluation of Four Models of Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018); Antonio Cocozza, *The Unexpected in Action: Ethics, Rationality, and Skills* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023). For a very helpful overview, see Kurt Salamun, "Rationalismus," *Lexikon der Geisteswissenschaften: Sachbegriffe – Disziplinen – Personen*, ed. Helmut Reinalter and Peter J. Brenner (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 2011), pp. 669–75.

[14] See, for instance, Heinz Kischkel, *Tannhäusers heimliche Trauer: über die Bedingungen von Rationalität und Subjektivität im Mittelalter*, Hermaea, Neue Folge, 80 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998); Wolfgang Achtner, *Vom Erkennen zum Handeln: die Dynamisierung von Mensch und Natur im ausgehenden Mittelalter als Voraussetzung für die Entstehung naturwissenschaftlicher Rationalität* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); as to rationality in the history of medieval music, see Rainer Bayreuther, *Untersuchungen zur Rationalität der Musik in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Rombach Wissenschaft. Reihe Voces: Freiburger Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft, 10 (Freiburg i. Br., Berlin, and Vienna: Rombach, 2009).

mathematical context from 1570, but it also mentions a much earlier use: "post-classical Latin *rationalitas* faculty of reasoning (early 3rd cent. in Tertullian), (in mathematics, of a quantity or ratio) property of being rational (1267 in a British source)."[15] An online source offers this definition: "Rationality is the quality of being guided by or based on reason. In this regard, a person acts rationally if they have a good reason for what they do or a belief is rational if it is based on strong evidence. This quality can apply to an ability, as in a rational animal, to a psychological process, like reasoning, to mental states, such as beliefs and intentions, or to persons who possess these other forms of rationality."[16] The author adds: "This usually implies that they [rationally operating individuals] reflected on the possible consequences of their action and the goal it is supposed to realize. In the case of beliefs, it is rational to believe something if the agent has good evidence for it and it is coherent with the agent's other beliefs.[17] In most cases throughout time, rationality is at work when social interaction or engagement with material objects are at play and when the individual does not simply refer to a higher being as the *ultima ratio* for his/her etiology.[18] Undoubtedly, we can identify significant commentary on this phenomenon already among late medieval philosophers.[19]

4. Marie de France

It might seem curious to begin with the *lais* by Marie de France, the famous Anglo-Norman poet active before 1200 when we try to track down traces or indications of rationality already in medieval literature. They are often determined by magic, miraculous events, and fantasy figures (a fairy, a werewolf, a speaking animal, etc.). The poet intended to explore conflicts in matters of love and presented unique cases of lovers who have to overcome major challenges or fail in that regard. When a black ship arrives in "Guigemar," for instance, which is empty of any crew, we notice the intervention of a higher power that wants to take the protagonist out of his traditional sphere into the new world where he can find the lady basically pre-destined for him. Of course, he has first to succumb to a major wound, he needs to depart on that ship, sail magically all by himself to the shore where a lady, imprisoned by her jealous and old husband, espies him and then offers to him her healing skills. Both then fall in love, but they are discovered a long time later and have to separate. But the ship then arrives again and takes the lady to her lover's land where they can, after serious troubles, reunify and live happily thereafter.[20] But the poet also considered difficult cases where only a rational

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[15] https://www.oed.com/dictionary/rationality_n?tab=etymology (last accessed on March 30, 2024).

[16] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationality (last accessed on March 30, 2024).

[17] See also Errol Lord, *The Importance of Being Rational* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[18] For an exclusively but insightful post-medieval approach, see Luca Sciortino, *History of Rationalities: Ways of Thinking from Vico to Hacking and Beyond* (New York: Springer-Palgrave McMillan, 2023). See also Jesús Mosterín, *Lo mejor posible: Racionalidad y acción humana* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2008).

[19] Richard Heinzmann, "Thomas von Aquin und die Autonomie der Vernunft," *Der Streit um den rechten Glauben*, ed. Norbert Kutschki (Zürich: Benziger, 1991), pp. 169–83; Ludger Honnefelder, "Wille oder Vernunft. Ethische Rationalität bei Johannes Duns Scotus," *Abwägende Vernunft: praktische Rationalität in historischer, systematischer und religionsphilosophischer Perspektive*, ed. Franz-Josef Bormann and Christian Schröer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 135–56.

[20] *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. by Claire M. Waters (Peterborough, Ont.:

approach could solve the dilemma. In "Deus Amanz," for instance, the princess resists her lover's suggestion to elope because it would cause great harm to her father, her country, and to herself. Instead, she devises a concrete plan that would have worked well if her lover, the young squire, would have listened to her and taken the magical potion to strengthen him in the crucial moment. As we can notice, here rationality and magic, emotional turmoil, pride, and showcasing of masculinity determine the narrative.

Her father had tried to keep his daughter for himself after the wife's death, maybe as a secret indication of incestuous desire, so he had imposed the requirement that only that wooer who would be able to carry her up a mountain without resting could hope to win princess's hand in marriage. No man is strong enough to accomplish that feat, until she falls in love with a squire and then devises an intelligent plan to ask her medically trained aunt in Salerno to concoct a potion for the young man, a kind of modern steroid. Moreover, she fasts several days before the crucial day, dresses only in her shift, and is thus ready for her lover to accomplish the feat.

However, destiny then strikes them both because he suddenly refuses twice, while carrying her up the mountain, to take the potion when he has become weak, and so he finally overstrains himself and dies, although he miraculously reaches the summit, from a broken heart, only to be followed by the princess out of utmost grief.

Obviously, she had operated very rationally – considering carefully her personal and public situation, reaching out to her learned aunt, instructing her lover how to carry out her plan to overcome her father's obstructions, and urging the squire to take the potion when she notices him getting weak – and tried to the best of her abilities to overcome the hurdles set up by her father. She secretly communicates with her aunt, sends the lover down to Salerno, and then holds the potion in her hand while he is carrying her up the mountain. She observes his palpitation, recognizes the signs of his physical exhaustion, and urges the squire to follow her instructions, but to no good because he wants to prove to her father and society at large that he is indeed strong enough to win his bride through this physical feat. Despite her good advice: "I know well that you are getting tired: / recover your strength" (186–87), he disregards it and stumbles forward, but only to crash at the summit and to collapse right there. The tragedy of this bittersweet love story really consists of him ignoring her urging at the very end to listen to her and to take the potion. Her rational approach in this case fails because he is overwhelmed by his irrational desire to demonstrate a masculinity which he really does not (yet) command.[21]

The other relevant case among Marie's *lais* proves to be the last and most mysterious one, "Eliduc," where we observe two distinct strategies to employ rationality in very different

broadview editions, 2018).

[21] For a variety of approaches to the poet and her works, see *A Companion to Marie de France*, ed. Logan E. Whalen, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 27 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011); see also Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*. Gallica, 24 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2012). The topic of rationality is not dealt with in either study. In fact, I do not think that scholarship on Marie de France has yet considered any of the *lais* in light of possible rationality being at work there.

situations. The protagonist demonstrates extraordinary military skills and knows how to advise his king well until he suffers from slander and is sent into exile. Nevertheless, in Exeter, where he helps another king in need, Eliduc displays his intellect, foresightfulness, and ability to strategize well, at least in war. Instead of confronting the enemy directly, he inquires with the local knights about a convenient location to ambush the opponents and thus to overwhelm them by means of a surprise attack (165–72). They knew the topography better than he does, so he wisely draws from their expertise and thus manages to defeat the hostile troop and thus to liberate the king Exeter.

Then, however, love strikes the princess and him, and ultimately, they do elope although he is still married back home to a loving wife. But he does so only after he has left the king, freed himself from his oath of loyalty, and can thus preserve his honor because his secret return remains unknown to her father. Whereas Eliduc performs well in planning the elopement and carrying it out, which requires a bit of deceptive communication, hiding, and pretense, he does not take into consideration what to do with his wife back home since he cannot be married to two women. The narrator praises him repeatedly: "Eliduc was very clever" (763), or "He had been there all day / and planned their journey well" (699–700). We are also given another example of his resoluteness, decidedness, and leadership when they cross the Channel because they run into a mighty storm that threatens them to end up in a shipwreck. At first, one of the sailors panics and shouts at Eliduc that they might all die as a punishment for their lord's elopement with a princess while he is still married and that they should toss the young woman into the sea to appease God (831–40). She, suddenly realizing the terrible situation she finds her in, faints, whereas Eliduc attacks the sailor, slays him, and pushes the dead body overboard. He himself takes the rudder and mightily steers their ship safely to the harbor. But thereupon he is at his wits' end, not knowing how to handle his situation with two women in a close relationship with him. He has the comatose body of the princess placed before the altar in an abandoned chapel and subsequently begins a ritual of prayers on her behalf for many days, which his wife's servant notices who then reveals the secret to her.

Quite characteristically of medieval narratives, a miracle then happens when two weasels appear, one being killed by the servant and the other one resuscitating its fellow with the flower of a mysterious plant. The lady observes this and gets hold of that flower, placing it in the comatose maid's mouth, which revives her as well. The subsequent development amounts to a wonder, but it also reflects the lady's rational handling of the situation. Having learned that this young woman is her husband new beloved, she accepts this change in their relationship quite calmly, promulgates that she would renounce her marriage to free Eliduc from his marital bond, and asks for the permission to take the veil. All this then happens, her former husband has a monastery erected near the old chapel, endowed with much land, and she is appointed as the abbess.

The outcome of this complex narrative indicates that her rational handling of this difficult dilemma proved to be the best solution for them all. After a long and happy life with the princess, they both join the Church, she entering the first wife's monastery created for her, he establishing a new institution for himself. All three of them pray for each other and send messengers back and forth, so "they made a very beautiful end" (1179). We could certainly

confirm that Eliduc recovered his rational mind after the dissolution of his marriage and the establishment of a new one, which harmonizes the worldly with the spiritual love and creates, at the end, friendship between the two women and Eliduc. Without his first wife's intervention and rational decision making, the love affair would have ended in a fiasco for all three. Only because she was able to withdraw from her emotional bonds with her husband, could she make it possible for him to live out his new-found feelings of love for the princess. Her realistic assessment of the situation and calm response to the new affair smoothed the path toward a peaceful and harmonious solution.[22]

At closer analysis, we discover elements of rational behavior in many of Marie's other *lais*, but then those are also matched with irrational elements, such as in "Equitan," "Le Fresne," "Bisclavret," and "Milun." This poet had apparently grasped that courtly love faced many challenges and needed help from the outside, either in the form of magic or of rational strategies. The narrator does not resort to a specific adjective to circumscribe this phenomenon; instead, she relies on courtly terms such as "proz," "hardi," "fier," "vaillant," and "fort."[23] Of course, we can certainly not claim that Marie de France already infused her narratives with this modern concept of rationality, but our examples demonstrate that rational behavior had become relevant within her world since without appropriate consequences, deadly disaster could loom on the horizon, such as in "Equitan."

5. Wolfram von Eschenbach

As impressive as young Parzival in Wolfram von Eschenbach's eponymous romance appears to be, considering his strength, his noble character, his commitment and loyalty to his wife, and his family pedigree, he does not strike us as a particularly calculating and rationalizing individual. True, ultimately, he achieves his goals to succeed King Anfortas on the Grail throne, but he is really predestined for that role and simply has to go through a long learning process before he has truly qualified himself for that task. However, when we consider his companion and almost *doppelgänger* Gawan, we notice a rather different situation that allows us to describe him as driven crucially by rationality.[24] After all, he has to deal with a most obstreperous mistress, Orgeluse, who resist his wooing for a long time and constantly makes fun of him until he has finally crushed her emotional resistance and demonstrated his knightly qualities and superiority in character, being a most loyal servant for her even in most dangerous situations.

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[22] Albrecht Classen, "Guildeluëc in Marie de France's "Eliduc" as the Avatar of Heloise? The Destiny of Two Twelfth-Century Women," *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae* (Poland) 20 (2015), 395–412; online at https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=901447.

[23] Glyn S. Burgess, *Marie de France: Text and Context* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 88 et passim. See also R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), who widely comments on the *lais* and *fables*, though he does not engage with the question whether rationality is at work in any of those texts.

[24] Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival and Titurel*, trans. with notes by Cyril Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004/2006); as to the character Gawan, see Albrecht Classen, "Crisis and Triumph in the World of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Gawan in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*," *Gawain: Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 217–29.

For instance, when Gawan encounters a badly wounded knight, he rushes to his assistance and treats him expertly, although his lady ridicules him in that matter, saying, for instance: "'If this companion of mine knows how to be both doctor and knight, he may well make an excellent living, provided he learns how to sell ointment-boxes!'" (Book X, ch. 517, p. 218). But Gawan keeps his calm, reacts rationally to this evil treatment by his lady. He is further insulted by the strange creature, Malcreatiure, who has hair as sharp as a hedgehog's needles, which make the knight's hand bloody when he tries to punish the other one for his insulting words. Then, after Gawan has treated the wounded knight and saved his life, the latter steals his horse and is identified as the rapist knight Urjans, whom Gawan had saved from certain death out of pity and a sense of duty since he had promised him security when he had apprehended him to take him back to the court for trial (p. 222).

In the course of time, Gawan overcomes this and all other challenges because he operates skillfully, dutifully, and in a circumspect fashion, all of which results from his ability to resort to his reason and to act rationally. However, he is deeply in love with Orgeluse despite all of her mockery and disparaging words against him (p. 224), so he continues his service for her despite enormous difficulties coping with what is available to him, such as Malcreatiure's feeble horse. After Orgeluse has departed by boat, Gawan has to defend himself against the knight Lischoys Gwelljus, although he is in a great disadvantage. Fully recognizing the difficulties, Gawan adjusts so effectively that he can defeat Lischoys and wrestle him down to the ground. But he does not want to kill him, despite the young man's pleading for a quick finish. A second fight erupts, this one with swords, but again Gawan reflects carefully about how to overcome his opponent through a trick, and when he grasps him by surprise, he can force him down to the ground a second time (228). Again, Lischoys prefers death over grace, feeling deeply ashamed about his defeat at Gawan's hand. The latter, however, thinks by himself: "'Indeed, I must not do so, for I would forfeit fame's favour if I slew without cause this bold, undaunted warrior'" (229). He realizes that his opponent had also been driven by love for Orgeluse, but now Gawan only takes his charger and hands him over to the ferryman as his dutiful toll (229–30).

The romance continues with Gawan's adventures, and we observe him overcoming all challenges, large and small, each time through a combination of knightly skills and intelligent reasoning. We could not identify this hero as a rationalist in the modern sense of the word, and certainly not as a philosopher. Nevertheless, the few examples discussed have already indicated that Gawan operates skillfully and reasonably in many different situations and can thus achieve his ultimate goal, i.e., to win Orgeluse's love and hand in marriage. Of course, Parzival, Wolfram's main character, enjoys a higher respect, but he also has to suffer more painfully until he can finally return to the Grail castle and ask the long-expected question of the ailing King Anfortas, which then liberates the Grail world of its suffering and allows Parzival to assume the throne.

Whereas Parzival is happily married and has two sons from his wife Condwiramurs, Gawan is described as a sorrowful wooer of Orgeluse and has to face numerous deadly threats in her service. But once he has triumphed and gained the final trophy, a garland, he actually chastises her and admonishes her to observe womanly honor better in the future: ". . . 'I am

wise enough to know that that [sic] if the shield is to have its due, you have acted badly by it . . . . Accept this garland. You must never again offer such dishonour to any knight inspired by your radiant complexion. If your scorn were to be my lot, I'd rather do without love'" (257).[25]

6. Gottfried von Strassburg

When we turn to the other major Middle High German romance, we observe even more indications of rationality at play. In his *Tristan* (ca. 1210), Gottfried von Strassburg develops an intriguing portrait of the protagonist who first has to shed the dangerous character trait of his father Rivalin to act impulsively and irrationally. Tristan actually commits murder to avenge his father's death, as we would have to judge the act by itself, but he would have almost been killed in that process because he had not considered carefully enough the grave danger when he is in the middle of Morgan's army. Only the quick intervention by his foster father Rual saves his life. Also, Tristan is also deceived by the Norwegian merchants, their valuable birds of prey, and their precious chess board. Thus, he does not realize at first that they have kidnap him and take him with them against his will, probably to sell him into slavery. Divine power, however, intervenes, since a major storm threatens their lives, until they agree to release the young man, which immediately soothes the waives. They drop him off at an unknown shore, from where Tristan has to figure out his path back to civilization. First, he climbs to the top of a mountain, then he encounters two pilgrims, and finally runs into King Mark's hunters whom he impresses with his skills of carving their prey into an art object.

From there, he then makes his way to the court where he is welcomed as a most superb artist, musician, and linguist, apart from being a master huntsman. Tristan orchestrates each individual step most carefully, always paying greatest attention to the external circumstances and the social expectations. In short, he operates highly successfully in rational terms, at first hiding his true identity until the revelation profits him. But he soon gets caught in various court cabals and must figure out carefully who is true enemies are and whom he can trust as a friend. Since he is an outsider, and as such as a paragon of courtly culture, he faces much criticism and even open hostility, which grows tremendously in the subsequent episodes. He even has to fear for his life and tries everything in his power to defer to King Mark as the ultimate authority figure.[26] The encounter with the pilgrims proves to be telling for Tristan's employment of rational strategies: "Tristan was cautious and clever beyond his years, and so he started to tell them a fabulous story" (40). Since he does not know those two men more personally, he stays aloft and responds to their questions only carefully and protects himself

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[25] See now, for instance, Björn Reich, "Zur Psycho-Logik bei Wolfram: Gawan und Parzival als emotive Modellfiguren," *Emotion und Handlung im Artusroman*, ed. Cora Dietl, Christoph Schanze, Friedrich Wolfzettel, and Lena Zudrell, Schriften der Internationalen Artusgesellschaft, 13 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter; 2017), pp. 63–96.

[26] Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan and Isolde*. With Ulrich von Türheim's *Continuation*, ed. and trans., with an intro., by William T. Whobrey (Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2020). The body of relevant research is enormous, but no one seems to have investigated yet to what extent we might recognize here an expression of rationality already in the high Middle Ages.

to the best of his abilities: "Well-mannered Tristan was careful about what he said, and whatever they asked him he said just enough to answer the question. He was so measured in his speech and demeanor that the wise old men though it a great blessing" (41).

Next, Tristan meets King Mark's hunters, and he intervenes in their primitive way of butchering a stag, which really ought to be excoriated, as he calls it. In fact, the young man demonstrates to them how to transform the animal's corpse into an artwork. Subsequently, he also demonstrates his enormous skills as a musician, and then as a multilingual artist who dazzles everyone. But Tristan never performs anything without specific intentions and so can be identified as a rational individual long before the emergence of the term 'rationality.'

One of the most dramatic strategies that he pursues finds its best expression in the duel with the Irish knight Morold, brother the Queen Isolde who spends time in Cornwall to collect the tribute owed by them to Ireland. In a most dramatic scene, Tristan publicly rejects Morold's demands and announces his readiness to fight against him in a duel that will decide the future of both countries.[27] His subsequent efforts first to regain his health with the help of the Irish queen and later his struggle to win Princess Isolde's hand for his uncle King Mark in marriage are both fundamentally determined by his careful strategizing and manipulation of everyone in his social environment. Tristan is fully aware of the political risks involved and hence operates most carefully both on the Irish and then on the Cornish stage. The narrator does not identify these operations as reflections of rationality, but we can be certain that the protagonist would have failed badly in various situations if he had not proceeded carefully, meticulously, and diplomatically. He is, indeed, a most rational individual, but when love then intervenes, even Tristan fails and loses track of what matters centrally in his life.

At first, just before the ordeal scene involving Isolde, he is no longer the agent of events and simply follows Isolde's instruction, carrying her off the ship and falling to the ground at the beach as she had told him to do because this allows her later to swear the oath that she had never laid in the arms of any man except those of her husband, King Mark, and of the poor pilgrims who had only failed to carry her further (194).

Of course, there is lying involved, but the public does not realize that. We as the audience are fully cognizant that Isolde swears a rather ambivalent oath, but it serves her intentions very well and conforms, indeed, with God's own expectations since she subsequently can carry the red-hot iron without burning her hands (194), both a miracle and a satirical swipe against the Catholic Church and its belief in the power of the ordeal. The narrator adds the curious comment: "It was revealed right then and there and proven to all the world that Christ, flawless as he is, can be supple like a sleeve" (ibid.). We might argue that Isolde commits an egregious sin by invoking God and swearing an oath that is at the least ambivalent. But she takes the risk and succeeds in that respect, and this as a result of her rational calculations.[28]

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[27] Sarah Neumann, *Der gerichtliche Zweikampf: Gottesurteil – Wettstreit – Ehrensache*, Mittelalter-Forschungen, 31 (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2010), pp. 79–81. Cf. also Vickie L. Ziegler, *Trial by Fire and Battle in Medieval German Literature*, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004).

[28] Will Hasty, *The Medieval Risk-Reward Society: Courts, Adventure, and Love in the European Middle Ages*

Subsequently, however, Tristan himself, the great strategist, overplays his hand and tries too hard to soothe Isolde's pain resulting from their separation. He brutally wins the magical dog Petitcreiu from his friend Gilan (ch. 23) by fighting successfully against a giant. First, he realizes that he cannot figure out the color of the dog's fur since it overpowers his sensory abilities. Then, he sends the dog to Isolde, who quickly realizes that listening to the music created by the bell hanging off the dog's neck creates a false sense of happiness in her. Realizing that the music kind of drugs her, making her feel happy in an artificial way, she rips off the bell and thus destroys the music, which returns the sorrow in her heart. Tristan did not understand really what he had done with the dog, and instead of embracing the sorrow associated with love, he had only wanted to introduce fake happiness. Isolde realized the danger and resolutely destroyed the music, while Tristan stays behind not knowing really any longer, so it seems, what the meaning of true love might entail.[29]
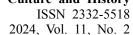
7. Der Stricker

However, we need to move beyond the genre of courtly romances to detect specific and more concrete examples of rational performance, such as in Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs*. German scholarship has long recognized this rather mysterious Austrian or German poet from the first half of the thirteenth century as innovative and creative in his narrative works. He is famous for having composed a new version of the *Rolandslied*, his *Karl der Große* – an adaptation of the Old French *Chanson de Roland* – for his large collection of didactic and entertaining verse narratives of great appeal even until today,[30] his fables in verse, his courtly romance, *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, and also for his remarkable *Pfaffe Amîs*, which consists of a serious of episodes circling around this roguish priest in England who makes every possible effort to keep a free house open to anyone who wants to enjoy a meal and partake in Amîs's Christian hospitality. His pranks, all serving the same goal to deceive others and to take their money, have had a deep influence first on the anonymous *Till Eulenspiegel* (first printed in

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(Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), pp. 53–5, et passim.

[29] There is much research on Gottfried's *Tristan*, but there are hardly any efforts to detect elements of rationality in his work. See, for instance, Tomas Tomasek, *Gottfried von Straßburg* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2007). For an excellent close reading, see Hugo Bekker, *Gottfried von Strassburg"s* Tristan*: Journey Through the Realm of Eros*, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture, 29 (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1987). See also the contributions to *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan"*, ed. Will Hasty, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2003).

[30] Der Stricker, *Erzählungen, Fabeln, Reden: Mittelhochdeutsch / Neuhochdeutsch*, ed., trans., and commentary by Otfrid Ehrismann (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1992); cf. also Der Stricker, *Die Kleindichtung des Strickers*, ed. Wolfgang Wilfried Moelleken (alone for vol. 1), Gayle Agler-Beck, and Robert E. Lewis. 5 vols., Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 107/I–V (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1973–1975). Wolfgang Achnitz, "Ein 'mære' als Bîspel: Strickers Verserzählung 'Der kluge Knecht.'" *Germanistische Mediävistik*, ed. Volker Honemann, Münsteraner Einführungen. Germanistik, 4 (Münster: LIT, 2000), 177–203. See also the contributions to *Die Kleinepik des Strickers: Texte, Gattungstraditionen und* Interpretationsprobleme, ed. Emilio González and Victor Millet. Philologische Studien und Quellen, 199 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006). For a brief and concise introduction, see Albrecht Classen, "错误!仅主文档。The Stricker," *The Literary Encyclopedia*, first published 16 August 2021, online at: https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=14777.

1510; possibly written by the Brunswick tollkeeper Herman Bote), then on a long tradition of closely related entertaining stories from throughout the centuries.[31]

Der Stricker created a new literary figure with his Priest Amîs in the history of medieval German literature, or rather, he drew from a long tradition of the trickster whom we can trace back to antiquity, and then forward throughout the ages.[32] A trickster, however, is not simply a public entertainer but someone who operates on many different levels, both actively and passively, pulling people's legs and teaching them deeper truths at the same time. The trickster makes everyone laugh about his foolish victims, who often prove to be we ourselves.[33] In order to achieve his goals, Amîs, like other figures of this type, has to proceed very rationally, often hiding behind a mask, pretending to be an honorable priest, painter, medical doctor, merchant, and a bishop's secretary.

The most famous episode in Amîs's life, which has appealed to many audiences, appears early on in the collection of narrative accounts when the priest faces his jealous bishop who questions his qualifications and subjects him to a convoluted and ultimately meaningless knowledge test with which he hopes to expose Amîs as a fake, as an ignoramus, and hence as someone not worthy of holding his benefice, the parish, the source of his income. In this case, the protagonist enjoys the great opportunity of deconstructing much of traditional scholastic knowledge and demonstrating his intellectual superiority because he knows how to employ rationality and smartness to the disadvantage of other people, especially of those who hold considerable authority.[34]
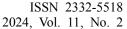
First, the bishop wants to know how much water there is in the ocean (102), which no one would be able to answer. Amîs, however, simply claims a certain amount, which the bishop wants to have verified. If the bishop could stop all rivers from running into the sea, then the priest would be able to confirm the measurement (113–15) – certainly an impossibility. Next,

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[31] Der Stricker, *Der Pfaffe Amîs: Mittelhochdeutsch / Neuhochdeutsch*. Nach der Heidelberger Handschrift cpg 341 herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert von Michael Schilling (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1994), pp. 199–204.

[32] Carl Lindahl and Malcolm Jones, "Trickster," *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow. Vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO, and Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2000), pp. 994–99; William Mahan, "Going Rogue Across the Globe: International Vagrants, Outlaws, Bandits, and Tricksters from Medieval Europe, Asia, and the Middle East," *Globalism in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: Innovative Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. Albrecht Classen, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 27 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2023), pp. 221–46.

[33] Alison Williams, *Tricksters and Pranksters: Roguery in French and German Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 49 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 63–76.

[34] *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms*, ed. William J. Hynes (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993); for an excellent survey article with an extensive bibliography, see Thomas Geider, "Trickster," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, ed. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, Vol. 13.2 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 913–24. He observes, for instance, "In allem, was der T[rickster]. tut, ist er ein Grenzgänger, ein Rebell und Gegner von Anstand, Sitten, Normen, Gesetzen und Tabus, ohne daß seine Taten innerhalb der Erzählungen bewertet werden" (914; In everything what the trickster does, he is a loner, a rebel, and an opponent of decency, customs, norms, laws, and taboos, but his deeds are not evaluated within the narratives).

the bishop questions him about how many days have passed since Adam's time in Paradise (122–23), and Amîs quickly replies that the true number would be seven days per week, and once those have come to an end, another set of seven days had set in, and so *ad infinitum*. Subsequently, the bishop challenges the priest with the question where the center of the universe might be (132–33). The response is that the church the bishop had assigned him is placed right there, and if he might question him in that, he only would have to measure to find out the truth of this claim. The bishop knows only too well that Amîs is lying to him, but he cannot afford to do the measurement – certainly an impossibility. Then, when the bishop asks him about the distance between heaven and earth, he has to accept as a valid answer that it is short enough to hear each other on both sides; if the bishop would like to test that, he should go straight up there and listen to him down there on earth (157). Amîs finally answers the question regarding the expanse of heaven in an equally smart way, providing some random measurement. If the bishop would not believe him, he ought to remove the sun and the moon and all the stars and push the entire space of heaven together to find out that the priest said nothing but the truth. The final test consists of a donkey which Amîs is supposed to teach reading, and again he finds a way of pretending or deceiving his superior who, after having been presented the first alleged proof, dies soon after.

Amîs succeeds both here and throughout the narrative to trick other people, especially because he knows how to utilize their gullibility and ignorance, fooling them very easily by way of playing with common concepts and ideas and transforming those for his own purposes. The bishop had really exposed his own ignorance by asking those questions, which served as a narrative medium to ridicule scholasticism at large. Amîs understands exceedingly well how to cope in that situation and to utilize the foolish context to his own advantage. None of those questions really make sense, so the answers are quite appropriate. The priest realizes easily that the bishop only commands clerical authority over him but does not possess much intellectual capacity, so he easily succeeds in defeating him in this examination with his own means. It is worth noting, for instance, that the priest is fully aware of the shape of the earth as a globe and hence of the geometric condition that any point on earth can be identified as the center, certainly a standard scientific comprehension throughout the Middle Ages, even if the bishop implies the opposite.[35]

In the course of the narrative's development, Amîs's tricks and pranks get worse, and they soon cause more and more harm to his victims, but he is ruthless and even cruel, intent on gaining as much wealth as possible at all costs. This strategy, as disgusting as it might be, always works exceedingly well because the priest quickly analyzes his opponents' character weakness and uses it to his own advantage, probably a negative application of rationality, which is certainly highly effective. Of course, there is always the implication that all the money that he earns through his pranks serves for a good cause, supporting his hospitality back home.

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[35] Frank Schleicher, *Cosmographia Christiana. Kosmologie und Geographie im frühen Christentum* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014), definitively lays to rest any modern myths about the alleged belief in the flat earth.

And, finally, having accomplished all his worldly goals, Amîs then joins a monastery, which he endows with all his money, and serves as their abbot, as if God had approved his many different operations to deceive people. In a certain way, we can thus identify Amîs as a negative example of what rationality can achieve if employed for those evil purposes. Whatever the poet might have intended, however, he identified his character as a highly rational being who has a deep understanding of human shortcomings and frailties and utilizes those for his own purposes without any moral or ethical concerns. This priest proves to be the arch-trickster who callously resorts to an amazing range of rational abilities to deceive all kinds of people around him and to take their money, whether for an allegedly good purpose or not.

8. Ulrich Bonerius and the Fable Tradition

Since antiquity, the fable as a distinct literary genre has enjoyed tremendous and enduring popularity. Here, animals interact with each other and demonstrate virtues and vices, as they are commonly displayed among people. Within this context, the various authors since the time of Aesop have formulated suggestions and advice as to proper behavior, smart and wise attitudes, and forms of behavior, and provided illustrations of foolishness. When we turn to the fables collected by the Bernese Dominican Ulrich Bonerius in his *Der Edelstein* (The Gemstone) from ca. 1350, we face more or less the same examples, but this author, whose work greatly appealed to his audiences far into the late fifteenth and even sixteenth centuries – there is a large number of manuscript copies and then also of incunabula and early modern prints containing his text – also included narratives that reflect on rationality as a necessary strategy for successful interactions with people.[36]

Best known and universal in its applicability, the fable about the city mouse and the field mouse mirrors how the latter responds to her experiences upon a visit to the city. Although food is plenty there, the appearance of the cook in the cellar frightened her to death. Drawing the right conclusion, the field mouse decides to leave as soon as possible and to return home where life might not be so elegant or rich, but it would certainly be much safer: "I would rather chew my beans / than to bear the fear / as a price for your pleasant food, / which is mixed in with the bitterness of gall" (no. 15, 31). Moreover, as the expresses as the critical learning: "The greatest life you can have / is to exist happily in poverty. / Poverty is without worries, / whereas the rich person faces many fears" (ibid.).

Fable no. 16 presents a mother fox who resorts to desperate but effective means to rescue its little ones from a predatory eagle, setting the tree on fire where the nest is perched. As the poet states in the epimythium, "He who exerts violence without justice, / will never reach a good end. / With the help of smartness, power will be overcome, / just as fire melts the ice" (33). Similarly, in "Of a Lion and a Mouse" (no. 21), a lion intends on eating a mouse which

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[36] Ulrich Bonerius, *The Fables of Ulrich Bonerius (ca. 1350): Masterwork of Late Medieval Didactic Literature*, trans. Albrecht Classen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020; paperback 2023). All relevant research literature is listed and engaged with there. In German research, the poet's name is normally 'Boner.' See now *Der Basler Edelstein: Ulrich Boners Fabelsammlung in der Handschrift der Universitätsbibliothek Basel AN III17*, ed. Kristina Domanski, Charlotte Gutscher-Schmid, and Cordula Kropik, Publikationen der Universitätsbibliothek Basel, 48 (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2021).

begs, however, for its life and suggests that it might be of good use for the lion sometime in the future. Indeed, the lion is subsequently caught in a trap with a net, from which the mouse can rescue him. The advice is obvious, to spare the little ones and to garner much gratitude and support in time of need: "Those in power ought to display pity; / power ought to be matched with virtues. / The powerful one ought to live peacefully with the poor one" (46).

The fable of a swallow and hemp (no. 23) is also universally known and carries timeless value, strongly urging people to be foresightful, to plan ahead, to avoid danger when that is still possible, and to collaborate in time before the threat grows beyond all measure. In this case, the swallow observes a peasant planting hemp seed. The swallow appeals to the other birds to assist her in eating up all the seed kernels to prevent the growth of hemp from which people would make ropes and nets with which they could catch birds in the fields (49). However, none of the birds take it seriously and cannot see into the future, when the hemp has grown and then transformed into rope, as anticipated by the swallow. The birds are then caught because they did not want to listen to the warning, which allows the poet to conclude: "He who does not want to followgood advice, / will not get any help when things go badly for him" (49). Those who are too trustful and naively assume that they will always be safe from danger "will eventually hardly survive" (50).

In fable no. 42, the ant works hard all summer and fall to collect food for winter, which the locust neglects to do out of laziness and foolishness. When the cold weather has set in, the latter begs the ant to share its food but is denied that help. The poet concludes: "He who is lazy during his youth / and does not strive for honor or virtues / what wonder then if things turn out badly for him / if he does not prepare for his old age?" (87). Only a rational approach to life, preparing for the time of shortage during the time of harvest would guarantee survival.

In story no. 72, which is not a fable in the narrow sense of the word, two merchants entrust their money to a female innkeeper for the time while they travel for business. She is supposed to return it to them only in the presence of both. One of them is insincere and returns alone claiming that his friend has died. In her naiveté, she believes him and hands over the money. Half a year later, the other one appears, also alone, asking for the money as well, which she no longer has. This leads to a trial in which a wise attorney takes up her case and argues to the merchant that the contract had stipulated that the money should be given back only when both would be present. Hence, the plaintiff has to leave and must search for the other merchant, whom he can never find. For Bonerius, the case is clear. While the woman was ignorant and foolish in handling this matter, she was at least smart enough to look for a wise attorney who easily saw through the fabric of lies and deception. In conclusion, the narrator underscores: "Therefore, it is necessary that the ignorant one / follow the advice of a wise man" (170).

Of course, we could easily argue that Bonerius aimed for teaching wisdom, as the last fable (no. 100) beautifully illustrates, where a high-ranking priest sells words of wisdom at the market at an exorbitantly high price. The king purchases one of those, although his servants rumble about the excessive cost. But because that saying, to keep one's end in mind, is then inscribed above the doorway to the king's private room, it actually saves his life from an

assassination attempt. This then allows the poet to conclude: "He who can consider the outcome / of his actions is a wise person. / He who wants to keep the end in mind, / will not regret earlier deeds. / The end is the crown, not the struggle itself" (244).

Overall, of course, these fables do not necessarily teach rational behavior in the philosophical sense, but they regularly present specific cases in human or animal life that invite the audience to reflect upon and to adapt, if possible at all, the teachings in that story to their own existence. Fables are didactic, of course, and as such they alert their audiences to pursue a more virtuous existence. Bonerius, however, certainly goes one step further and encourages his readers/listeners to start thinking on their own how to avoid traps, how to be proactive, how to listen to good advice, and how to operate successfully in a world filled with vices, dangers, and threats all the time. In a way, we could hence identify the *Edelstein* as a guidebook for rational actions and thinking, and this already in the fourteenth century.

9. Rationality in a Merchant's Life: Heinrich Kaufringer

Finally, the example of one of the stories by the late medieval South German author Heinrich Kaufringer (active around 1400) allows us to identify the operation of rationality also in the space of the protagonist's private life.[37] In "The Mayor and the Prince" (no. 4), which takes place in Erfurt, a string of burglaries deeply concerns the city council, and its members urge the mayor to interview a strange student in their town who seems to command more money than anyone else. No one is aware that the young man is the son of the French king, so when the mayor asks him about the mysterious source of his income, this dauphin pulls his legs by pretending to be a male prostitute (gigolo) who frequents all wives in the town and their maids upon their requests, providing sexual services to them, which makes him exceedingly rich.

When the mayor relates this to the council, they are all horrified, feeling emasculated and dishonored, so they make sure that this story does not become known in public. However, one day, the mayor sees the student walking across the market square and smiles thinking about the young man's occupation. His wife then forces him to reveal the reason for his reaction, and she immediately condemns this grave moral transgression by the student. In secret, however, she wonders why the young man had never knocked at her door offering himself as a lover, and soon she privately communicates with him, which her husband notices, so he sets up a trap for the two, pretending to go on a business trip. During his assumed absence, the student and the wife meet and enjoy, first of all, a bath together in preparation for their lovemaking.

Sitting in the hot water without their clothes on presents the mayor with the ideal opportunity to catch them *in flagrante* without any danger to himself. The narrator comments the husband's next move quite meaningfully: "He did not commit any error, himself, however; he acted as a wise man who knows how to hide his shame from the public" (24). Removing their clothes and locking it away guarantees that he is save from any attacks by either one since

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[37] *Love, Life, and Lust in Heinrich Kaufringer's Verse Narratives*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 467. MRTS Texts for Teaching, 9 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014; rev. and expanded 2nd ed., 2019).

they are naked. Next, he assures both that no harm would come their way, but he transforms the entire situation into a festive dinner with the student now being an honorable guest in his house. He returns their clothing and urges his wife to accept her official role as hostess: "'Take good care of the guest, give him to eat and fill his glass. Make sure that he does not get too little, since he deserves that in your name'" (24).

The mayor even goes one step further and pays out the money allegedly owed to the student for his sexual service, insisting that from then on, he would always pay the toll owed himself so that the student would never enter his house without his approval. This then finally shames the student so much that he reveals his true identity, being the son of the French king who had sent him to Erfurt ". . . to acquire good manners and virtues" (25). He assures the mayor that his honor has not been infringed, and that he would never return without being invited in. Moreover, to reward the mayor for his smart and rational handling of this situation, he promises him that in the future he would never have to pay any toll on the goods that he would purchase in France to sell in Germany and that he would be guaranteed bodily safety wherever he would travel (25).[38]

The outcome of this story proves to be rather impressive; not one of the servants or maids had noticed anything, so the entire affair remains a secret due to the mayor's circumspection and carefulness. As painful and upsetting as the situation was for him, he had acted highly rationally and quietly which secured his honor and spared him from public scorn or ridicule. The prince, having admitted his guilt, departs in friendship, and the husband then stands to profit economically from this outcome. As the narrator concludes: "By his virtues and his wisdom he enjoyed happiness because he had not hurt the prince. All this resulted in great wealth for him" (26).

We could also include the story "The Monk as Love Messenger" (no. 7) as a further example of rationality at work, especially because here a lady resorts to a most devious strategy to communicate secretly with her future lover via an ignorant and naive monk. The latter regularly reprimands the young man for having harassed the lady and thereby reveals to him what she really wants him to know about her situation and how to find a way to reach her in her bedroom. Although Kaufringer does not resort to the term 'rational,' he certainly gives the lady great praise, or women at large who know how to pursue their erotic goals without being exposed to the public: "They know how to arrange it so that they realize their plans by teaching a monk through clever and subtle lessons, thus making him the messenger through whom they accomplish their love affairs" (43).

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[38] Marga Stede, *Schreiben in der Krise: Die Texte des Heinrich Kaufringer*, Literatur, Imagination, Realität, 5 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993); Sylvia Jurchen, "Kaufringer, Heinrich," *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon: Das Mittelalter*, ed. Wolfgang Achnitz. Vol. 5: *Epik (Vers – Strophe – Prosa)* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), pp. 1240–49; Coralie Rippl, *Erzählen als Argumentationsspiel: Heinrich Kaufringers Fallkonstruktionen zwischen Rhetorik, Recht und literarischer Stofftradition*, Bibliotheca Germanica, 61 (Tübingen: A. Francke, 2014). I myself have discussed Kaufringer's verse narrative numerous times; see, most recently, Albrecht Classen, "The Defense of the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Communication in the Literary Laboratory. With a Focus on the Verse Narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer," *New Literaria: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3.2 (2022): 8–16, online at: https://newliteraria.com/articles/v03i2/v03i2-03.pdf.

10. Conclusion

This now allows us to confirm that in all the literary examples discussed above we encounter at least some specific cases of rational thought processes and behavior that ultimately leads to a successful outcome for the protagonist. Only in the case of Der Stricker might we feel repelled by the protagonist's devious and even destructive actions, but Amîs demonstrates, maybe even more than all other figures, extraordinary abilities to operate rationally and to utilize the specific circumstances in their lives to their own advantage.

We clearly notice that all these individuals succeed in defeating their opponents because they are simply more clever or smarter than them. Whether 'smartness' or 'intelligence' – 'list' in Middle High German [39] – can be equated with 'rationality,' might be a matter of terminological debate, but overall, we can certainly conclude paying closest attention to the actual decision-making processes that poets at least since the late twelfth century injected their protagonists with a considerable degree of rational potency that empowered them to cope well in difficult situations. Those who reject smart advice, insist on their traditional value system and ideals, do not listen to wise recommendation, and simply rely on their authority, tend to fail and even collapse.

We could easily expand our discussion of this new phenomenon to the large genre of *fabliaux* and *mæren*, then to the *tales* and *novelle* so popular since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Even at the risk of employing an anachronistic term, it seems rather appropriate to identify rationality at work already in many high and late medieval literary works. For a broader perspective, we could include discussions of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400), for instance, where the protagonists often demonstrate a considerable degree of rational capacity insofar as they manage their ontological challenges, if fortune does not intervene otherwise, in a fairly intelligent, rational manner.

In most situations, the audience is explicitly invited to support and sympathize with the protagonist, whereas in Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs* the situations get worse and worse, leaving us basically speechless at the end. Nevertheless, even there we observe clearly how much Amîs operates rationally and calculates each time what the best options might be to achieve his goal of acquiring a maximum of money from other people. Bonerius offered practical advice to his audience and encouraged them to handle difficult issues in life in a rational, or wise, manner. In the case of Kaufringer, the mayor demonstrated how an individual could cope well in life and protect his/her honor through an intelligent performance in public.

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[39] Hartmut Semmler, *Listmotive in der mhd Epik: zum Wandel ethischer Normen im Spiegel der Literatur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1991). There are, of course, countless examples of deception, cheating, lying, and stealing mentioned in medieval literature, but I would not equate them with those cases where the protagonist simply faces a serious conflict and has to make an intellectual choice. But see the contributions to *Verstellung und Betrug im Mittelalter und in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*, ed. Matthias Meyer and Alexander Sager, Aventiuren, 7 (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2015); Nine Robijntje Miedema, "'redewîsheit'?: Möglichkeiten des Gelingens von Gesprächen: "list" in deutschsprachigen literarischen Dialogen des Mittelalters," *Gelungene Gespräche als Praxis der Gemeinschaftsbildung: literaturwissenschaftliche und linguistische Perspektiven*, ed. Angela Schrott und Christoph Strosetzki, Historische Dialogforschung, 5 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), pp. 237–59.

Significantly, the emergence of rationality is observed both in male and female figures (see Marie de France, or Heinrich Kaufringer). Apart from Der Stricker' *Pfaffe Amîs*, all the cases discussed here seem to underscore the constructive and positive impact of a rational handling of life's challenges. Since scholarship has so far focused mostly on philosophical or theological texts in the search for examples of rationality, it comes as no surprise that its emergence is traditionally associated with the eighteenth century. The analysis of the literary narratives from the late twelfth century onwards signals, however, a considerable transformation in people's interaction with each other, which we could reasonably associate with rationality, and this already in the high and late Middle Ages.

The vast body of *fabliaux* and *mæren*, *tales* and *novelle* composed since the thirteenth century in various European vernaculars confirms that intelligence, wit, cunning, sharp thinking, and planning had gained the upper hand, all predicated on some forms of rationality. Of course, the theoretical discussions of rationality followed only much later (eighteenth century), but late medieval poets clearly revealed already how much they had learned about intellectual strategies and operations as the most effective tools in all interpersonal relationships.