

Humanities Seminar: *The Erotic, Laughter, and Spirituality*

Spring 2023

Instructor:

Prof. Albrecht Classen

Dept. of German Studies

University of Arizona

aclassen@arizona.edu

aclassen.faculty.arizona.edu

Tel.: 520 621-1395

You can also reach me on FB, Twitter, LinkedIn, Skype.

Course Objective:

There are very few fundamental issues addressed in literature. Poets have dealt with them throughout time, in endless manifestations. Those are, first of all, God, death, the quest for happiness, the individual and society, the voyage, and love. Medieval literature proves to be a first-rate platform to examine those few issues, perhaps in different terms than we might be used to, but certainly in most significant approaches. In this course, we will examine the topic of the erotic, or love, as a medium for the exploration of the other crucial issues. In fact, the erotic proves to be a powerful catalyst for the exploration of death, spirituality, and the individual. Many of you might have already studied such grand poets as Dante and Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare, who all embraced intimately those fundamental values and worked with them in their narratives and plays.

I myself have previously offered courses within the Humanities Seminars on some Middle High German poets, such as Wolfram von Eschenbach (*Parzival*) and Gottfried von Strassburg (*Tristan*), both of them rather esoteric, monumental figures aiming for the highest ideals in human life. But human existence is not always a deeply serious affair. Instead, there is crying and laughter, the spiritual and the earthly, and the erotic discourse reflects this in a very illuminating fashion.

In the late Middle Ages, across Europe, laughter became an increasingly important issue, and in the contemporary literature, we discover more and more cases of humorous reflections on human foibles and shortcomings, regularly associated with the erotic and the sexual, of course. This course examines a selection of late medieval German verse narratives where the three components come together harmoniously and deftly, the erotic, the spiritual, and laughter.

We will begin with an intriguing Middle High German verse narrative by Hartmann von Aue (ca. 1190) to set the stage, and then turn to a selection of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *mæren* (novellas) where we are constantly invited to listen to love stories, to laugh about funny

situations, and thus gain insights into deeply relevant issues in human life, spirituality. So, this course will combine fun reading material with deep ethical and moral issues addressed in them, often behind humorous settings.

Alert: I have scheduled text selections for each meeting, but much depends on how our discussion will develop. In my experience, each story could probably be examined from many different perspectives, and my students have so far always responded in a very rich fashion, which meant that we might need more time per story than expected. If that happens, I will be happy to slow down and maybe cut out one or two stories, depending on our situation.

Reading Material:

1. Hartmann von Aue, "Poor Henry," excerpt available on the HSP learning portal.
2. Albrecht Classen, *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany*. 2nd ed. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009. ISBN: PAPERBACK 9780866983747. You can order it directly from the publisher at: <https://acmrspress.com/9780866983747/erotic-tales-of-medieval-germany/>; or from the bulk distributor:

Customer Service

Chicago Distribution Center
11030 South Langley Avenue
Chicago IL 60628

Phone Orders:

(800) 621-2736 (USA/Canada)
(773) 702-7000 (International)

Fax Orders:

(800) 621-8476 (USA/Canada)
(773) 702-7212 (International)

Email Orders:

orders@press.uchicago.edu

Or you can order it online at amazon.com:

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Erotic+Tales+from+Medieval+Germany&i=stripbooks-intl-ship&crd=3OV2RD1A40TEC&sprefix=erotic+tales+from+medieval+germany%2Cstripbooks-intl-ship%2C233&ref=nb_sb_noss

Syllabus:

January 30: Introduction, the Middle Ages as our historical, intellectual birthplace, medieval literature, what should we read, what could we read; what does it all mean for us today in 2023? This will not be a historical overview, but an exploration of the question what the European Middle Ages might mean for us today and why it is so much fun and insightful engaging with medieval (German) literature.

February 6: Hartmann von Aue, “Der arme Heinrich” or “Poor Henry.”

February 13: *Of the Wise Aristotle; or: Aristotle and Phyllis* and Dietrich of the Glezze/Gletze: *The Belt*

February 20: Jans of Vienna: *Sir Friedrich von Auchenfurt* and Anonymous: *The Little Bunny Rabbit*

February 27: Ruprecht von Würzburg: *Two Merchants and the Loyal Wife* and Johann of Freiberg: *The Little Wheel*

March 13: Anonymous: *Women’s Constancy; or: Wrongful Suspicion Punished*, and Heinrich Rafold: *The Hazelnut Mountain*

March 20: Anonymous: *The Warm Alm* and Anonymous: *The Monk with the Little Goose*

March 27: Anonymous: *The Priest with the Rope* and “Konrad von Würzburg”: *The False Confession*

April 3: Anonymous: *The Knight with the Hazelnuts*, Anonymous: *The Knight with the Sparrow Hawk*, and Heinrich Kaufinger: *The Search for the Happily Married Couple*

April 10: Last day of class: Anonymous: *The Nightingale*, Hans Rosenplüt (?): *The Painter (Woodcarver) in Würzburg*, and Count Froben Christoph von Zimmern: *The Disappointed Lover*

I very much look forward to working with you all. For me, dealing with medieval literature is a lot of fun and a very fruitful experience. I hope that you will agree with me and join me on a really fascinating literary journey.

Thank you very much!