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Teaching Medieval Literature and Culture in Contemporary Universities Challenges and Opportunities from Past to Present. Exemplary Case Studies of the *Roman de Silence* and *Mauritius von Craûn*

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Abstract

In face of an ever-changing academic framework, all scholars working with pre-modern literature, art history, philosophy, are currently deeply challenged to explain and justify their fields of investigation. More and more foreign and language departments in the United States decide to cut out the Middle Ages and the early modern period as irrelevant to their teaching and research portfolio. Nevertheless, medieval research continues strongly, as the wealth of relevant publications indicates, coupled with energetic conferences, symposia, and other activities. But there are hardly any academic job opportunities, which make it harder and harder to convince graduate students to pursue a degree in medieval literature, for instance. The present study does not promise to offer a panacea against this general malaise, but will indicate, through the close reading of two literary examples, the enormous potentialities of this primary material to attract students and to provide meaningful, relevant, and perhaps even transformative seminars on the undergraduate and graduate level.

Keywords: Pre-modern literature; Pedagogical strategies; Relevance of the Middle Ages; Heldris de Cornuälle; *Mauritius von Craûn*; Medieval French literature; Medieval German literature; Teaching the Middle Ages.

1. Introduction

The current debate about the relevance of the Middle Ages as a subject matter to be covered at the university or not is not really a new one, but the situation seems to gain in urgency especially because increasingly teaching positions are not maintained, retiring professors are not replaced and university libraries feel less inclined to acquire the relevant research material pertinent to the pre-modern era. For our students, and this applies to virtually all countries in this world, reading and comprehending older texts, even if dating only from the nineteenth century, becomes increasingly a difficult if not an impossible task. We tend therefore to resort to modern English or German translations, but since there is the parallel pressure to make our teaching material freely accessible to our students, there is a very understandable tendency to resort to very old versions that are digitized and openly available without any charge, yet represent poor renderings of older texts which sound almost more archaic as their medieval sources.

Numerous publishers have made valiant efforts to assist in this situation, producing an actually growing number of modern translations, whether we think of Philipp Reclam jun., Broadview Press, Routledge (formerly Garland), Penguin, Hackett, Champion Classiques, etc., and this at surprisingly affordable prices. Sometimes, those editions combine the original with the translation on opposing pages, but many times, the reader finds only the translation and is thus supposed or expected to be content with the end result.

All this can have the unwelcome consequences that the new student generations no longer are even exposed to the original and lose all their abilities to read those, if they are presented with them in the first place. Subsequently, we face new teachers and/or scholars who are familiar only with those texts from the past that have been translated into a modern language. That means future research is becoming increasingly limited to those documents that publishers have made accessible, whereas the real task would be to explore what the archives hold and to discover relevant evidence for whatever hypothesis is explored and tested.

A good counter-example for a combination of both aspects, having available a medieval narrative in modern English and introducing thereby a heretofore mostly ignored late medieval texts would be the translation of Ulrich Fuetrer's recreation of the *Iwein* romance under the title of *Iban* (1480s; Sullivan). I myself have recently published the fables by the Swiss-German Dominican priest Ulrich Bonerius (ca. 1350; Bonerius, 2020). And just a few years ago, Horst Brunner compiled highly unusual German nonsense poetry from the late Middle Ages and early modern age along with their modern German translation (Brunner, 2014). Fortunately, we can discover similar efforts by

philologists and scholars in Spain, Italy, or Poland, as documented by the work of Eva Parra Membrives and Miguel Ayerbe Linares (Parra and Miguel, 2009) or by William W. Kibler and François Suard (Kibler and François, 2003).

However, even under the best possible circumstances, the Middle Ages as a research topic remain a tough sell, especially to university administrators who tend to allow classes to go forward only if there is a minimum enrollment. If a course topic then sounds too esoteric, too challenging, too alien, or too irrelevant, students do not choose it, then the minimum is not met, and the instructor is thus not allowed to teach it. The less classes on the Middle Ages there are, the less students turn to that period, the less learning there is, the greater the ignorance about medieval languages, and thus, altogether, the higher the dangerous chance that anything that smacks like 'medieval' is no longer included into a department's teaching schedule.

Of course, the same destiny can affect any university seminar dealing with any literary text, artwork, historical document, or archaeological object from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Nothing would prevent an English department to cut out Shakespeare, a German Studies department to ignore Goethe and Schiller altogether, a Russian department to leave out Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky etc. But where would we then end up with? Who would subscribe to an exclusively chronologically determined 'canon' of relevant text? What kind of university education would this be if students would not know any text from, say, prior to 1980, or 1945?

Looking backward, the question then immediately arises as to what would justify the teaching of classical antiquity, when already the Middle Ages or the age of the Protestant Reformation might suddenly appear as irrelevant for the current student generation. But the present article is not supposed to be a global jeremiad about the decline of the field of Medieval Studies at the university level, although the Middle Ages enjoy tremendous support and interest in the public, as documented by medieval and Renaissance fests, movies, games, images, video and card games, etc. (see, e.g., Young, 2015).

Even at the risk of preaching to the choir, it is certainly worth reminding ourselves of the great importance of the European Middle Ages as the cradle of modernity in many different respects, whether we think of medicine, architecture, philosophy, music, literature, astronomy, geography, pharmacy, etc. Jones *et al*. (2020). The traditional label of the 'Dark Ages' has been debunked so often that we do not need to revisit the false ideological strategies behind it once again because this notion, like so many other myths about the past, is predicated on more fantasy than fact, and proves to be an empty concept of little value in examining that pre-modern age in the first place (e.g., (Harris and Bryon, 2008).

The purpose of the subsequent reflections is, however, not to uncover the true importance of the Middle Ages for us today in philosophical, historical, or medical terms. Instead, we face an intriguing opportunity to draw from the very danger that this field faces within the academy and to turn that danger around by reinvesting in the fundamental principles of teaching medieval literature. Here I suggest it as an ingenious platform for our students to rediscover themselves and yet to observe the objective distance to that past which can only serve as a convenient but very powerful platform for universal issues at stake (Classen, 2020). It is important to analyze the reasons for the decline in interest in and respect for medieval literature, for instance, but it is not good enough to limit oneself to such lamentations (as in the case of Demade (2020).

My task here is to present some sample cases of medieval narratives that might serve particularly well to reinvigorate the teaching of that period in whatever language department those texts might fall. The efforts focus on two case studies illustrating how we can, even at the risk of anachronism, bring a medieval work of fiction back to life and to make it meaningful. If an instructor all by him/herself succeeds in convincing a group of students that the study of the Middle Ages appears to be a worthwhile effort, then the rest of all our endeavor consists only of continuing with this approach and elicit the expected responses from our students. One success leads to another, as long as the basic teaching strategy works and makes good sense to the 'audience.' In short, much depends on the instructor's pedagogical skills, on the smart selection of text/s, and on the right strategies to get students engaged in the discussion about a certain romance, poem, or epic as a relevant document for their own learning experience.

2. Methods

Here I will present two literary cases and illustrate how their close reading and discussion will enable teachers and students to engage with the material together in group works, in a lecture style, and in critical writing by the students. By bringing out the relevance of these texts for modern students through theoretical reflections and practical analysis, we experience the extent to which also pre-modern texts can appeal to contemporary audiences. The analysis presented here will highlight the way instructors can offer meaningful classes on pre-modern literature and identify them as relevant narrative mirrors for universal issues in human life.

3.1. First Case Study

3.1.1. Heldris de Cornuälle, *Le Roman de Silence*

Medieval European literature consists of a vast corpus of texts, many of which linger in the archives until today, unedited, untranslated, disregarded, or simply ignored (Busch and Björn, 2014). In fact, only a small percentage of medieval texts (factual or fictional) has survived until today, so we are really dealing with a very limited amount of literature that had been produced in the pre-modern world (Haye, 2016), here not even talking about the role of oral poetry that was never recorded in writing. Nevertheless, the actual number of works more or less available and accessible, whether in French, Spanish, English, or German literature, is enormous, though many of which are deeply determined by religious (sermons, liturgical texts, etc.) or philosophical themes (treatises, reflections, etc.). When we consider vernacular literature, we notice a strong emphasis on the erotic, such as in courtly narratives, and

then also on the sexual, such as in *fabliaux*, *novella*, *tales*, and *mæren* (Grubmüller, 2006). The late Middle Ages witnessed even an intensification of both themes, but it became increasingly couched in the discourse on marriage (Cartlidge, 1997; Classen, 2005; d'Avray, 2005).

For our current student generation, there are hardly any more important topics to explore for themselves than sexuality, gender identity, partnership and friendship, marriage, and personal happiness. We could also add such ponderous topics as death, God, the relationship between human society and the natural environment, health, and spirituality. Those were commonly addressed in quite different terms than today, and yet there are striking parallels between the texts from the Middle Ages and our world today. This archetypal experience represents the crucial bridge between the past and the present, as long as we remain careful in alerting our students to the different frameworks in mentality, spirituality, and social structures.

If we want to guarantee that the courses in pre-modern literature make it with healthy enrollment, we must specifically keep the general interest of the current generation in mind. Students tend to have choices, and they are normally no longer required to take some basic language courses in Old and Middle English, Old and Middle High German, Old Spanish, Old French, etc., not to speak of medieval (or classical) Latin as the standard language of all learned intellectuals far into the eighteenth century. This constitutes an existential dilemma for philologists today because the original texts thus remain incomprehensible for our modern students. If the topics discussed in a seminar then do not appeal to the students, they will simply not enroll, which thus makes it impossible to offer such a seminar, which all turns into a vicious cycle. In my own situation, for instance, I have increasingly failed to teach a graduate course on the History of the German Language from the Age of Migration to the Twenty-First Century due to an utter lack of enrollment. Such a course would represent considerable challenges even for graduate students in a non-German context because they tend to lack anyway the background in history, religious history, and particularly in the respective languages and would have to work hard to compensate for those shortcomings. There is, of course, no doubt in my mind that the study of the historical development of a language would be a core requirement in any language and literature department but that is, obviously, no longer the case.

By contrast, my undergraduate courses with titles such as "Eroticism and Love in the Middle Ages," "Medieval Answers to Modern Problems," "War, Death, and the Hero in Medieval Epics," or "Toleration and Tolerance from the Middle Ages to Today" constantly attract larger and even extremely large groups of students. Of course, in all those cases the primary reading material consists of English translations, but at least students are exposed to medieval topics and learn to appreciate the literary discussion of such fundamental issues. Based on a smart selection of texts, we thus would not face real problems attracting enough students, which guarantee the survival of Medieval Studies at large.

Let us examine this in light of one particularly fascinating medieval text which was not discovered until 1911 and was fully edited not until 1972 (Thorpe, 1972). Research on Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* (middle of the thirteenth century) has picked up considerably (for the latest investigations, see Bozkaya *et al.* (2020)), but it remains to be seen how this romance could be a successful addition to our reading lists in a variety of different courses at the undergraduate and the graduate level. Let us hence explore to what extent *Le Roman de Silence* might be an intriguing catalyst to overcome the disinterest in anything medieval and to establish a new fascination with pre-modern literature as a medium for global investigations of human topics of relevance both then and today.

Heldris created, indeed, a most unusual romance, which has survived in only one manuscript, maybe because his audience did not like it or did not understand the topics addressed here (Psaki, 1991; Roche-Mahdi, 2007). However, the *Roman de Silence* is predicated on a central issue that certainly speaks directly to critical topics heavily discussed today, that is, gender identity, gender crossing, and the tension between nature and nurture, i.e., between the material conditions of our existence and the role of education or the social environment. Moreover, Heldris addressed a variety of other topics, such as issues of communication, male and female musicians (minstrels), jealousy and envy, the functioning of human language (silence versus speaking), sexual harassment, a king's good rulership, the threat of tyranny, the role of secrets and prophecy, and the danger of corruption, treason, and failing loyalty (for an actually very solid summary and discussion of the text, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Roman_de_Silence; for French literature, see https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Roman_de_Silence; both last accessed on April 19, 2022).

To understand the content of this fairly long romance, let us briefly highlight some of the central features. King Ebain of England has issued a law forbidding all females from inheriting their fathers' lands because two of his knights who had married twin sisters and had then fought against each other over the right to take over the women's inheritance had died in this battle. Then, Count Cador marries the young princess Euphemie~~,~~ and she gives birth to a baby girl from him. The parents, however, try to hide her identity and raise her as a boy and young man~~,~~ -Silence~~,~~ to protect the inheritance for her. This works surprisingly well, with Silence emerging as a highly impressive knight who serves 'his' king must successfully, even against his worst enemies. But Ebain's wife, Queen Eupheme, falls in love with the boy-maiden and tries to seduce him, which closely follows the narrative trope of the biblical Joseph pursued by Potiphar's wife (*Genesis* 39; see also Marie de France, "Lanval," ca. 1190) (e.g., Yohannan, 1968). Eupheme then desperately tries to get Silence executed, which her husband refuses to do. Instead, he is sending him to the King of France to get him out of the way and to protect him as well. But the queen secretly replaces the letter which now says that the messenger is to be killed immediately. Again, Silence is saved because the king's counselors realize that further investigations would be necessary before any action should be taken. The entire court is also deeply troubled by the inexplicable threat against the beautiful youth. The king himself had welcomed him most warmly, granting him a royal kiss that would guarantee his life for at least forty days (Classen 2022). Eventually, the truth about the falsified letter is revealed at the English court, but Ebain does not do anything about it; instead, he soon faces a deadly enemy among one of his barons, and needs Silence's help, who then returns and

actually wins the battle for the king. Nevertheless, the queen continues with her pursuits of the youth, and since she is rejected again, she charges him for having tried to rape and kill her. Now, the king finally listens to her and orders Silence, as Eupheme had demanded, to go search for Merlin, without whom he could not return.

Merlin would let no one else catch him but a woman. But Silence is a woman, so she can trap this prophet/magician and take him back to the court, where Merlin bursts out laughing very hard, and eventually reveals the truth about Silence, the queen who had lied so badly and has committed adultery with a man who is disguised there as an abbess. Once the truth has come out, the king has the queen and her lover executed, and then he marries Silence, after he has lifted the ban on female inheritance.

As the rich body of recent scholarship has demonstrated, this romance invites numerous and intensive debates about a wide variety of important issues pertaining to gender identity, royal rulership, women's role within male society, sexual harassment, falsification of documents, and the mysterious function of the prophet/magician Merlin. As Heldris indicates throughout the entire romance, Silence can perform all those functions that a male aristocrat would normally be expected to do. And s/he actually demonstrates superior capabilities and impresses all her companions and also the rest of the opponents deeply. At the same time, Silence exerts much attraction wherever s/he appears, obviously because of the female features in a male disguise, which no one understands. Queen Eupheme's passion is the strongest indication of how the appearance of Silence defies all traditional gender norms and society's concepts about women.

In class, there are countless opportunities to explore any of the many different themes addressed in this text. While scholars have primarily focused on the gender issue, which is, of course, the most dramatic topic of them all, there are numerous others, as outlined above. In other words, here we face really a literary masterpiece that stands out for its complexity, richness of issues, complex characters, but also for some internal contradictions. For instance, scattered throughout the text, we hear of typical comments about women and the great need for them to be quiet and to observe silence. Various characters reiterate and reproduce traditional stereotypes about women, whereas Silence herself demonstrates that the very opposite could be the case. However, the most fascinating issue proves to be the debate between nature and nurture in allegorical terms, hence the conflict between the biological sex and social gender identity.

Many modern questions concerning those issues can be brought in, and instructors are invited to utilize this Old French text fully to their advantage in exploring not only a medieval narrative and its approach to the gender question, but also by analogy concerning the same debate in the modern world. Equally important would be the role of the king concerning his leadership qualities, his ability to refrain from rash decision-making processes, his willingness (or lack thereof) to consult with his councilors, and ultimately his readiness to revoke his own legal positions in light of changed circumstances. The text contains, surprisingly, at times rather contradictory positions, sometimes portraying King Ebain as a wise, delicately operating ruler who does not simply submit to the demands of his highly volatile wife, and sometimes showing him to do the very opposite. A jealous husband is hence projected as a highly irrational person who might not be trusted because he might tend to embrace irrational policies, as Silence has to experience at the end.

The entire romance could also be studied in light of epistemology because there are constantly episodes in which the truth does not come out for a long time, in which dissimulation dominates to hide feelings, or in which external dangers make the protagonist to cover up his/her true identity. By the same token, the episode with the falsified letter lends itself intriguingly well to the exploration of truth-telling, the danger of written lies, and the problem of miscommunication in a world where the process of confirming a truth was certainly a considerable challenge (Black, 2003, 10-11). As the narrative indicates, the falsified letter could have easily led to Silence's death, if the royal councilors would not have examined the situation carefully and discriminately. In class, this case could be utilized to study the trope of the falsified letter and the danger of fake messages in a wider European context, thus when we think of the Middle High German sentimental romance *Mai und Beaflor* from ca. 1280 (Mai und Beaflor, 2006; cf., e.g., Meyer 2009). The strategies by Queen Eupheme illustrate a universal problem pertaining to the large field of evidence, fact-finding, the establishment of proofs, legality, the reliance on the written document, and the meaning of signals and signs (Thum, 1990). Of course, human language and hence communication have always been problematic and difficult to deal with, but only a trustworthy and reliable medium for social exchange can establish a well-constructed and harmonious society, an insight which applies both to the Middle Ages and our world today (Classen, 2002). As numerous scholars have already observed, the relationship between the speaker, his/her body, physical gestures and signs, mimicry, and oral and written performance matter centrally here (Müller, 1996).

In Heldris's *Roman de Silence*, the major discourse focuses on the interrelationship of the spoken language and silence, of pretense and secrets on the one hand and truth and transparency on the other. As successful as Silence proves to be in her long-term dissimulation, as necessary it ultimately turns out to be for her to reunify her sexual and her social identity, although her performance as a knight during tournaments and the war demonstrates her outstanding abilities superseding most of the men in her environment. At the same time s/he also acquires the highest skills as a musician (harp and vielle) and singer, to a point at which her/his teachers, the two minstrels, get so jealous that they are prepared to murder the young 'man.' Silence, however, is intelligent enough to learn about their secret plans and to defy them.

Finally, the appearance of the mysterious Merlin also deserves close analysis because he functions as the ultimate truth-teller who provides ample evidence of how much deception and illusion dominate the court. He himself admits having been tricked by Silence in her disguise as a man, but the romance concludes with Merlin's irrepressible laughter since he has recognized the truth behind all the various screens set up by the major figures,

apart from the king and his councilors who are just as much duped as Merlin admits having been duped by Silence's fake appearance.

As has become evident, Heldris's romance lends itself intriguingly well for extensive discussions of many different topics of great relevance both then and today. While the *Roman de Silence* reflects the world of late medieval aristocracy in England and France, it contains numerous themes of universal relevance, and this also today, whether we think of the quest for individuality, the construction of gender, human communication, wise rulership, and others. Heldris's narrative could thus be easily utilized in a course on gender issues, on cross-dressing, or on women's sexual and social identity, or in a course on human communication, on critical perspectives toward royal rulership, or on the language of love – as in the case of Silence's parents, Cador and Euphemie.

3.2. Second Case Study: Mauritius von Craûn

In essence, then, as 'alien' as this medieval romance might appear at first sight for a contemporary reader, as timeless its messages, comments, ideas, and observations prove to be. In essence, the *Roman de Silence* can serve exceedingly well as a foundational reading material for a critical assessment of all those issues also in the modern context. Even if we could clearly argue that a literature seminar is primarily intended to familiarize our students with some of the major texts from a certain time period somewhere in this world, we can also recognize here the extraordinarily valuable opportunity to initiate a critical debate about social, linguistic, gender, political, and other issues as they concern us today, here simply viewed through a historical-medieval lens.

Let us finally examine another, more or less contemporary literary example, the Middle High German short verse narrative *Mauritius von Craûn* (ca. 1220/1240; Reinitzer, 2000), which has also survived in only one, actually extremely late medieval manuscript, the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* (1504-1516) (Klarer, 2019). Even though the central issue in this text is differently positioned, with gender questions being not of any concern, the audience, both medieval and modern, is called upon to engage with some of the problematic topics raised by the poet (Fischer, 2006). The focus here rests on the protagonist's efforts to win the love of the married Countess of Beaumunt. She refuses to listen to his wooing for a long time, even mocks his laments about his love pangs, but finally agrees on the condition that he organizes a tournament on her behalf. Then she would invite him in and share a night of love-making with him.

Mauritius is more than ready to comply with this request, but he goes far beyond the expectations. Not only does he arrive at the tournament site with a huge, enormously decked-out fake ship, like a float in a parade, which then serves him to appear in public like an opera star, but he also organizes the tournament in such a manner that he emerges as the total winner, defeating all the other knights quite effortlessly. Although the narrator does not reveal the secret facts, it is more than obvious that Mauritius had staged the tournament in such a way that he would gain all the triumphs.

However, there are several major problems that mar the idyllic impression. First, Count Beaumunt is also present, is allowed to do the first joust, but accidentally kills his opponent. He immediately takes off all of his weapons, retires, and laments all day this tragedy. Second, after the tournament, when Mauritius allows the minstrels to dismantle his ship and take whatever they like, one of them is killed. Third, when the protagonist is finally invited in to his lady, he is extremely exhausted and falls asleep while waiting for her. Fourth, when she then arrives and observes him knocked out, she rejects not only him, but all courtly, hence adulterous love, and all men as potential wooers for her.

But Mauritius is not the man to accept a 'no' for an answer. As soon as he has woken up and realized the negative outcome, that is, the loss of his beloved, he tries with all of his might to reap his reward, forces his way into the marital bedroom, scares the husband out of his wits through his horrible appearance, looking like the ghost of the slain knight, and then lies down in the bed next to the countess. She is deeply amazed and shocked, but eventually, she turns to him, in a way encourages him to have sex with her, which he accepts. However, subsequently, he returns her ring which she had given him as a symbol of her love for him, announces the end of their relationship, and leaves her for good. The countess stays behind, lonely and frustrated, bitterly disappointed about her own failure, but she can no longer redeem her situation (Classen, "Contracting Love"; recent scholarship has been greatly attracted to this problematic verse novella; (see, e.g., Dimpel 2014).

Even though the narrative framework is squarely located in the late Middle Ages, focusing on knighthood – which is highly problematized both in the prologue and in the depiction of Mauritius's performance throughout the text – the tournament, and the protagonist's wooing of the countess, the conflicts that emerge allow us to address timeless issues, that is, also issues that concern us deeply. Undoubtedly, as we would say today in any literature class, students would need a 'trigger warning' before the reading of this text. The final scene with the knight and his lady creates many problems of interpretation. He uses force, but is he violent against her? Is this date rape or not? What role does the lady play? Has she not invited the knight in, after having promised her love in return for the tournament? How much is she committed to holding her part of the contract? Yet, if their relationship is determined by a contractual relationship, can we then even talk about love? Why can't Mauritius accept her 'no' as the final answer in the evening after the tournament?

But we could also consider other criteria that problematize the entire situation even further. Why did Mauritius not wash himself, relax, and prepare himself properly for the affair with his lady? He is obviously completely exhausted, arrives at the castle directly from the tournament, and clearly makes a horrifying impression, as the count's reaction indicates, who then lies on the ground, unconscious after having hit his shin so painfully in his attempt to escape from the 'ghost'. Why did Mauritius even conceive of the plan to build that ominous ship (Fischer, 2006, 106-116), which is nothing but a prop, a fake construction embellished most preciously? Could we read this

deceptive ship as a symbol of Mauritius's own inner character flaws? Does he perhaps unwillingly reveal to be nothing but a showman without real qualities? Granted, after he has left his lady, the narrator emphasizes that he enjoyed "lop und êre" (1643; praise and esteem), but this time through his wooing of other ladies in far-away countries. The countess, by contrast, is extremely downcast, disappointed about herself, and described as a victim of her own failures. Nevertheless, it has not been possible by scholarship to reach any kind of consensus regarding the proper interpretation of this curious case of courtly love having gone so awry and sour (Classen, 2011).

The critical approach to *Mauritius von Craûn* would first require, the study of this text in its medieval context, but the poet's negative comments both in the prologue concerning the decline of knighthood globally and in the text regarding Mauritius's behavior and actions next lend themselves exceedingly well to explore many different modern-day concerns regarding sexual relationships, moderation in wooing another person, dangers of pompous performance, appropriateness of gift-giving (the ship as an opera-like gift), adequateness of communication between lovers and friends, male toxicity, bragging in public, and the conflicts resulting from arrogance and pompousness.

In short, this medieval verse novella allows us without major difficulties to enter into a host of fundamental discussions regarding critical issues in human life. Sexual violence and rape are here closely associated with courtly love and chivalry, implying a serious challenge to the standard norms of a male-dominated society, both then and today. However, this verse narrative does not only criticize the male protagonist. Instead, the countess emerges as an uncultured, ignorant, sarcastic, and certainly unreliable person who tends to manipulate her lover to her own advantages and then suddenly faces a situation in which she has to succumb to his sexual desires. She is both victim and perpetrator and receives no help from her husband who proves to be simply incompetent in every possible respect as a count, as a tournament knight, and as a husband.

Undoubtedly, certainly the many tasteless episodes in this curious narrative invite the audience to debate universal issues, conflicts, tensions, and fights. There is no good outcome, as neither the countess nor Mauritius experience any happiness and subsequently split for good. In my experience, students cannot identify with either character and reject, for good reasons, both individuals as utter failures. Of course, as is also very clear, the lady suffers from sexual violence, for which she is partly to be blamed as well. Mauritius does not come off as the ideal knight, as we are wont to encounter in traditional courtly romances, such as Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec* or *Yvain*. Granted, those figures are commonly in considerable need of a thorough education and maturation process – hence, they belong to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, already in the Middle Ages – but most of those romances illustrate how this process is then realized, achieving a kind of happy end. In *Mauritius von Craûn*, the conclusion consists of utter frustration and disappointment, that is, we face an extremely negative example, irrespective of putative successes by Mauritius somewhere far away.

This curious situation, as unpalatable as it might be for enthusiasts of medieval literature, allows for truly significant debates and discussions in the modern classroom. The text serves as an excellent medium for our modern-day students to reflect on many of the critical issues as they concern them in their own world, whether we think of sexual violence or of the quest for the formation of the individual self. One major difference between medieval courtly culture and twenty-first-century society proves to be that wooing a married lady was regarded as a standard form of the erotic quest. The institution of marriage did not matter critically apart from legal and political perspectives (progeny) since that was at any rate mostly a matter of parental arrangement and had little to do with emotions (love).

The instructor's task hence consists of working toward the goal first to sensitize students to the cultural-historical differences, and only then, second, to 'translate' the issues addressed in this text into more global terms. Some of the critical questions which thus could be raised in the seminar would be whether love can be enforced, whether gift-giving would be sufficient to acquire love, whether an extremely pompous appearance would be enough to sway a beloved person to grant the other possession of her/his body, and so forth.

The narrator himself raised fundamental concerns in his prologue regarding social honor, the ideals of knighthood, and the value of courtly love itself. The historical examples of the Trojan war and the performance of the Roman Emperor Nero underscore the conflicts and dilemma addressed in this tale, now situated somewhere in the late-twelfth-century French kingdom. The poet's Old French source, the *fablel* "Du chevalier qui recovra l'amour de sa dame" (Reinitzer, 2000, 97-112; Classen, 2017), had still indicated avenues out of the terrible dilemma, with the knight commanding a high level of communicative skills, which saved the day, or the night respectively, and allowed him an honorable retreat from the marital bedroom. The lady observes his diplomatic performance with great respect and later rewards him with her love. In the Middle High German version, this is no longer the case, as virtually all the traditional ideals are undermined and have become lost, which forces the modern reader to question many of the traditional assumptions and concepts about medieval society at large.

It is little wonder that the contemporary audiences obviously cared very little for this text, preserved only once in this early sixteenth-century manuscript. But both modern scholarship and practical experiences in the college classroom have confirmed that here we face a fantastic opportunity to utilize this medieval composition for the discussion and exploration of painful modern issues. As negative as the outcome of *Mauritius von Craûn* proves to be, the painful conflicts discussed in this text illustrate the high productivity of the literary analysis for contemporary social, psychological, emotional, religious, ethical, moral, and cultural issues.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

There would be many other literary examples from the Middle Ages to illustrate strategies, methodologies, and interpretive approaches in intra-human relations. Insofar as we are dealing here with medieval narratives, which seem to be far removed from our current day-day situations and experiences, both *Roman de Silence* and *Mauritius*

von Craûn offer fantastic opportunities to help our students to come to terms with many issues relevant in their own lives. We could talk here about literary laboratories where human conditions and problems are isolated, projected in extreme terms, and hence illuminated most clearly, inviting the readers to study both the historical framework and, most importantly, the universal concerns here addressed. Both texts offer, so to speak, safe spaces to reflect on gender, gender roles, individuality, masculinity, femininity, communication, the tension between the public and the private, personal performance, and social exchanges.

My personal experiences confirm that modern students indeed accept the invitation to discuss medieval narratives like these two. The vast corpus of late medieval verse narratives – *fabliaux*, *tales*, *mæren*, *novella*, etc. – contains countless other examples for this approach (*Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany, 2007/2009*), inviting us to laugh, to criticize, the discuss, to puzzle, and to question the events and figures in those texts. In other words, here we face infinite possibilities to reinvigorate the interest in and study of medieval literature, and this even for a twenty-first-century student audience. The current generation needs may be a more convenient packaging of pre-modern literature, that is, better epistemological bridges between the past and the present, perhaps in a more playful manner (Houghton, 2022; *Pleasure and Leisure in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Toys, 2019)*. It is natural that young people at first tend to resist the invitation to study the Middle Ages, seemingly an exclusively stern world determined only by the Christian religion and the crusades, for instance, in an academic setting – in popular culture, that period has already long been accepted as a fun and exciting cultural period for gaming (Driver and Sid, 2004; Pugh and Susan, 2021); see also the video game *Assassin's Creed*; cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassin%27s_Creed). However, as our investigation of how to approach these two texts pedagogically has clearly indicated, formal differences in language, cultural and political conditions, and even in the traditional gender relationships represent only short-term barriers that any skillful and experienced instructor can easily overcome and actually use as effective teaching tools. Once there is at least a minimum of willingness to engage with any of these medieval narratives – another great example would be the fourteenth-century Middle English alliterative romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – then we can easily proceed and engender more broadly conceived enthusiasm and interest in pre-modern literature at large.

For medievalists, this claim constitutes, of course, nothing but owls carried to Athens, to express this proverbially, but we can now expand on this and propose also to university teachers in the modern literary field that older texts certainly carry much meaning, contain considerable appeal, and continue to be of great relevance also for our new generation of students (N. Miedema and A Sieber ed, 2013). *Mutatis mutandis* this actually sets the platform for further pedagogical investigations addressing the teaching of early modern literature, or literature from across the globe. Learning does not mean, as we are all too familiar, simply to reiterate what we know already, but to expand our horizon and to reach new plateaus in human understanding. Beginning with some of these remarkable medieval texts constitutes a very productive start opening the perspectives for advanced literature courses focusing on the pre-modern world, which obviously has much to tell us until today.

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