Gender, Reading, and Truth in the Twelfth Century

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Appendix

THE PROLOGUE TO WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH’S PARZIVAL

A translation of Wolfram’s prologue is always also an interpretation. The prologue operates primarily through metaphors, images that are calculated to evoke a realm of associations familiar to the audience. To supply this common denominator in translation is to interpret the whole. But not to do so would be to leave the text an unintelligible and clumsy approximation of the literal meaning of its metaphors. Thus, I have rendered *bîspel* (line 1,15) as “fable” because we have no equivalent, and I understand Wolfram’s primary message to his audience to refer to the incommensurability of allegorical teaching and the layman’s experience. The “blind man’s dream” (line 1,21) is rendered as a vision, not only because dreams were treated as visionary seeings in the Middle Ages but also because the focus is on the idea of a communicable knowledge of the divine. *Antlützes roum* (line 1,22), always troublesome, I have rendered as a “shimmer” of the “true visage” i.e. God’s), and “trüebe lîhte schîn” as “darkling-light image,” because with these terms Wolfram’s mirror evokes Paul’s *speculum* (1 Corinthians 13.12), the all but universal image in the High Middle Ages for human incapacity to know God “face to face.”

1  *Ist zwîvel herzen náchgebûr,*  
   *daz muoz der sêle werden sûr.*  
   gesmæhet unde gezieret  
   ist, swâ sich parrieret

5  *unverzaget mannes muot,*  
   *als agelstern varwe tuot.*  
   *der mac dennoch wesen geil:*  
   *wand an im sint beidiu teil,*  
   *des himels und der helle.*

10  *der unstæte geselle*  
    *hât die swarzen varwe gar,*  
    *und wirt och nâch der vinster var:*  
    *sô habet sich an die blanken*  
    *der mit stæten gedanken.*

15  *diz vliegende bîspel*  
    *ist tumben liuten gar ze snel,*  
    *sine mugens niht erdenken:  
    wand ez kan vor in wenken*  
    *rehte alsam ein schellec hase.*

When doubt lives close by the heart,  
the soul is surely imperilled.
Wherever the steadfast, manly disposition  
makes room for company, it is both debased  
and glorified,  
as in the colouring of the magpie.
Such a one can still meet with a happy end,  
for in him both Heaven  
and Hell have a part.
The wholly inconstant fellow  
is black all over  
and will come to a dark end,  
while he whose intentions do not waver,  
holds fast to the light.
This fluttering fable  
flies too fast for simple folk.  
They’re unable to think it through,  
for it can cut and dash before them  
just like a startled hare.

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It's like tin on the backside of glass
or the visions of a blind man:
they offer a shimmer of the true visage,
but such dim and darkling light
never lasts long;
it gives brief comfort indeed.
Who would try to get hold of me by hair
that’s never grown, on the palm of my hand?
He’d need a sure grip, indeed!
And if I cry “ouch!” for fear’s sake alone,
even so may my wits be judged.
Shall I seek true fellowship
where it’s as like to vanish
as fire in a fountain
or dew under the sun?
It’ll show you its heels and then come charging,
it will leave you the field and then take it back again,
doling out both shame and honour.
He who can hold the saddle through these ups and downs,
he has the gift of wit indeed:
one who neither sits out the fight or takes to flight
and other-wise knows where he stands.
The false fellow’s friendship
deserves the fire of Hell
and batters noble bearing like a hailstorm.
His loyalty has such as short tail
that it couldn’t beat off the third bite
if flies chased it into the woods.
But all these deliberations
pertain by no means only to men.

As argued in Powell, “Parzival’-Prolog,” 66–67, Lachmann’s conjecture, geleichet, is no longer necessary, so that I have restored the reading in all manuscripts but D.
für diu wîp stôze ich disiu zil:
swelhii mîn râten merken wil,
diu sol wizzen war si kêre
ir prîs und ir êre,
und wem si dâ nách si bereit
minne und ir werdekeit,
sô daz si niht geriuwe
ir kiusche und ir triuwe.
vor gote ich guoten wîben bite,
daz in rehtiu mâze volge mite.

scham ist ein slôz ob allen siten:
ich endarf in niht mër heiles biten.
diu valsche erwirbet valschen prîs
wie staete ist ein dünnez ûs,
daz augestheize sunnen hât?

ir lop vil balde alsus zergât.
manec wîbes schœne an lobe ist
breit:
ist dà daz herze conterfeit,
die lob ich als ich solde
daz safer ime golde.

ich enhân daz niht für lîhtiu dinc,
swer in den kranken messinc
verwurket edeln rubîn
und al die âventiure sin
(dem glîche ich rehten wîbes muot)

For the women I promise this reward:
she who pays heed to my counsel
will know well where
to entrust her honour and her good name,
likewise on whom she should thereafter
bestow her love and her precious person,
such that her chaste virtue
and her true devotion be not abused.
Before God I pray that all good women
might keep proper discretion as their
constant companion.
Modesty holds the key to all other virtues;
I can wish their souls no greater help.
The false woman wins false praise. The
false woman wins false praise.
What constancy is there in a thin sheet of ice
exposed to the hot August sun?
Her reputation will fade just as fast.
Many a woman's beauty is praised far
and wide,
but if her heart is counterfeit,
then I praise her as I should [as Isolde]:
a glass bauble set in gold.
But I hold it to be no small feat,
when someone works into base brass
a noble ruby
with all the âventiure it contains;
the true woman's disposition.

3 Something is lost regardless of which punctuation mark is used here, although I find Nellmann's
colon an improvement over Lachmann's period. The line artfully carries the relevance of the
aforegoing underbint into the prologue's second half, and simultaneously announces something
very different. The resulting apokoinu is a rhetorical figure of the woman's significance to the
argument, and to the poetic project.

4 The entire women's prologue exhibits the dual meanings of prîs and its complement, lop. Prîs
is both the opinion of others (clearest here and in line 3,24) and an attribute of the subject itself
(line 2,28), both "praise" and "honour" or "worth." It is characteristic of Middle High German usage
that the overlap between these two is not yet objectified as "reputation." Lop is the action through
which others manifest prîs and the latter accumulates to the subject. Prîs and lop thus imply moral
obligations in both beholder and beheld. Through this idea the remarks on moral disposition con-
tinuously collapse the distinction between the truth (here: rehter wîbes muot) and its appraisal, the
narrative and its reception.
Where a woman to woman is true,
you won’t find me examining her
complexion
or the mere cover of her heart, that which
meets the eye.

If she be steadfast within her breast,
there no noble name will come to shame.

Were I to go on and tell you all I can
on the judgment of woman and man,
it would make a tiresome tale.

now hear what sort of story this one is.
it will give you a part in either,
in love and in sorrow.

joy and fear go along for the ride.

If there were three men here in my place
and each of them with skill enough
to equal my own:

they’d still need a wild imagination,
to try and tell you all
that I alone intend to do.

They’d have trouble enough.
I intend to renew a tale,

that tells of great devotion,
of true woman’s womanhood
and man’s manhood no less upright,
that never faltered under trial.