Appendix: The Prologue to Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival

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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.”

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.
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?
And I’ve yet to meet a man so very
learned that he didn’t himself need to ask
how to approach this story
and what good teaching it delivers.
It’s no slouch on that score!
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.
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 foregoing 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 continuously 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.