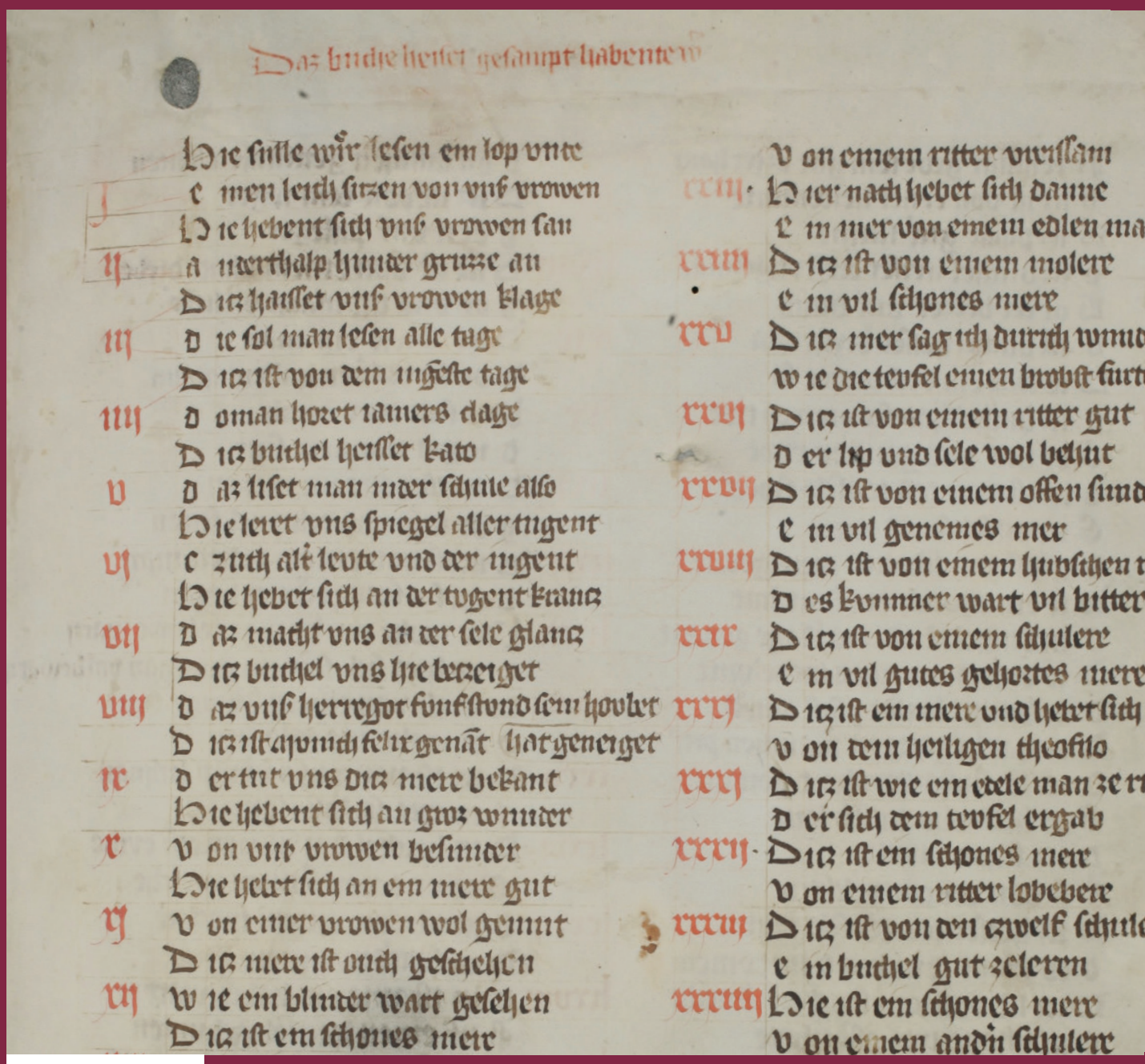


# German Verse-Couplet Tales from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century (DVN)

Edited by Klaus Ridder  
and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler

Vol. 5:  
English Translation by Sebastian Coxon







# Deutsche Versnovellistik des 13. bis 15. Jahrhunderts (DVN)

Band 5:  
German Verse-Couplet Tales from the Thirteenth to  
the Fifteenth Century

English Translation by Sebastian Coxon

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Schwabe Verlag

Diese Publikation wurde durch die  
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) gefördert.



Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der  
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind  
im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

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Abbildung Umschlag: Coligny, Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cod. Bodmer 72, Bl. Iir

Umschlaggestaltung: icona basel gmbh, Basel

Satz: pagina GmbH, Tübingen

Druck: BALTO print, Litauen

ISBN Printausgabe 978-3-7574-0042-2

ISBN eBook (PDF) 978-3-7574-0051-4

DOI 10.31267/978-3-7574-0051-4

Das eBook ist seitenidentisch mit der gedruckten Ausgabe und erlaubt Volltextsuche.  
Zudem sind Inhaltsverzeichnis und Überschriften verlinkt.

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[www.schwabe.ch](http://www.schwabe.ch)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These translations have been a long time coming. Since first being invited to join the *Deutsche Versnovellistik*-project by its leads, Klaus Ridder and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler, in early 2013, I have found myself spending more time than I ever thought likely working on these short – and not so short – texts. Over the years I have received help from a number of quarters, not least from PWC who has supported me enthusiastically and happily acted as a trial reader. I should also like to extend my thanks to everyone involved in the project in both Cologne and Tübingen, who have all been most patient. Co-operation with colleagues in Germany is in fact something that I have come to appreciate more since the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2016. If I were allowed the luxury of a motto for this volume then it would surely be: Brexit *zum Trotz!*



## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

### Literary historical context

This collection of translations seeks to make available a relatively large corpus of German verse-couplet tales of the thirteenth to the fifteenth century in strict accordance with its transmission in over 100 manuscripts. The short narrative texts in question, known by specialists in the field as 'Mären' and not infrequently compared to Old French fabliaux, tend to be distinctly worldly in their interests, are often if by no means always humorous and vary quite considerably in their literary ambitions.<sup>1</sup> All things considered 'Mären' constitute a remarkably successful literary tradition: from their beginnings in the first half of the thirteenth century (if not before) they continued to be composed for at least another three hundred years.<sup>2</sup> As early as the second half of the thirteenth century these narratives were compiled and transmitted together with other shorter text-types including 'exempla', fables, dialogues and miracle-tales. Indeed at times it is not always easy (or practicable) to maintain a strict categorical distinction between 'Mären' and non-'Mären'. Thus, for the first time in an edition of this kind, this project also includes texts from the fringes of the 'Märe'-tradition, or borderline 'Mären', helping readers to get a vivid impression of the rich process of transmission of shorter literary texts in the vernacular throughout the (German) Middle Ages.

Some of the material on show here will be familiar to specialists in other European vernacular literary traditions (whether French or Italian, Dutch or English) and the general reader will recognize several of the stories from their knowledge of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>3</sup> Analogues in neighbouring literary cultures aside, a number of these 'Mären' can doubtless be traced back to medieval Latin 'exempla' and *ridicula*; others provide versions of anecdotes contained in late medieval collections of Latin *facetiae*. 'Mären' may therefore be regarded as one manifestation of a kind of storytelling shared by many literary cultures and as such they lend themselves to comparative analysis.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, as far as this German tradition in particular is concerned, the enduring popularity and continued transmission of 'Mären' in the later Middle Ages has consequences both in terms of content

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<sup>1</sup> There is of course a large body of secondary literature on German 'Mären', as listed and discussed in vol. VI of this edition. For ease of reference an English-language bibliography for 'Mären' is included here (pp. 588–90). Many of the relevant publications in English deal with individual texts; for a more detailed study of overtly humorous 'Mären' in the later Middle Ages see Coxon (2008).

<sup>2</sup> 'Mären' from the first half of the thirteenth century are associated above all with the poet Der Stricker (see Thomas [1999]). Since these texts have already been fully edited, they are not included in the Ridder/ Ziegeler-project. This same principle also applies to the 'Mären' of other notable poets such as Konrad von Würzburg, Heinrich Kaufringer, Hans Rosenplüt and Hans Folz.

<sup>3</sup> Nr 18 'The students' adventure [version A]' and nr 70 'The students' adventure [version B]' are clearly related to Boccaccio's *Decameron* IX,6 and Chaucer's 'Reeve's Tale'. Nr 41 'Banishing the devil' and nr 113 'The monk as go-between [version A]' bring to mind Boccaccio's *Decameron* III,10 and III,3 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. nr 13 'The snow-child [version A]' and nr 154 'The snow-child [version B]' which offer two different German versions of a story also found in the eleventh-century Latin 'Cambridge Songs' in a text known as the 'Modus liebinc' and treated elsewhere, for example, in the OF fabliau *L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil*.

and form. On the one hand, in numerous instances multiple versions of the same basic story came to be composed, with medieval storytellers finding different ways to tease out meaning from the most well-known of tales. On the other hand, quite apart from their transmission in manuscripts a number of 'Mären' such as (nr 122) 'Beringer' (the German parallel to Garin's *Berangier au lon cul*) are also preserved as printed texts from as early as the last decades of the fifteenth century (see Appendix, part II). Thus in the very early days of printing at least the 'Märe' was evidently regarded as a viable literary product for new book-markets.

#### 'Types' of 'Mären'

Broadly speaking, 'Mären' tend to fall into three categories based on their narrative content and thematic interests. Just under half of all the texts in this collection are comic tales (otherwise known as 'Schwankmären'), thus representing the most significant 'type'. Many of them have an affinity with Old French fabliaux, with which they share certain narrative structures (such as provocation and retaliation), themes and motifs. Plots are often shaped by marital strife and/ or the 'erotic triangle' of husband, wife and (her) lover, whereby the weighting of the respective roles and the outcome of the stories can vary quite considerably depending on which figures are presented as clever (and superior) and which as stupid (and inferior). 'Schwankmären', like fabliaux, depend upon a cast of well-known character-types: from cuckold to shrew, from lecherous priest to smart wandering scholar, from the arrogant blind man to the universally despised and derided miller. The comedy at the heart of these stories is generated by both *facete dictum* (word-play and wit, whether voluntary or involuntary) and *facete factum* in the form of ludicrous and outrageous actions, foolish misunderstandings and shockingly naïve behaviour. The delight taken in religious parody, which at times borders on the blasphemous, is palpable in a number of these texts and does not shy away from subjecting all sorts of religious practices and icons to comic treatment: whether confession (nr 20 'The two confessions [version A]'), charity (nr 50 'The alms'), excommunication (nr 96 'Priest and adulteress [version A]'), prayer (nr 102 'A drunken knave') or even carvings of Christ on the Cross (nr 29 'The artisan who carved figures of our Lord'). Transgressions, obscenities and the breaking of linguistic taboos abound (nr 134 'Konni', nr 168 'Bollocks the gardener'); and, as is perhaps only to be expected, there is an undeniable fixation with certain body-parts, whether male (nrs 95, 101, 121, 171) or female (nrs 49, 90, 122, 132, 175).

The conventional thematic range of gender, marriage and sexuality, together with a good dose of social satire, whether directed at the boorish peasantry (nr 57 'Changeable', nr 90 'Honor the idiot', nr 153 'The peasants' wedding') or at representatives of the Church, occasionally gives way to other interests in rather less familiar texts. 'The miner' (nr 40), for instance, offers a rather unusual account, from a first-person point of view, of the dangers of being swindled out of a fortune when investing in a mine, and warns about the false allure of prospecting. The chastened narrator concludes by heaping curses upon the cheating miner – *God willing, he will be stabbed with a rusty pitchfork* – and by urging everyone else to concern themselves more with true treasure, which is to say, God's grace. Laughter itself is thematized quite spectacularly in another largely unknown text, a fable-cum-'Märe' entitled 'The hound's ordeal' (nr 31), in which a little bird seeks to cheer up a rather needy hound by causing two bald peasants to beat each other's hairless pate. The humorous depiction of the ensuing battle of the baldies aligns the audience full square with the laughing hound.<sup>5</sup> How-

ever, this process of identification gives way to critical (self-)reflection when the hound's position of superiority proves to be very short-lived and his hilarity brings him crashing down to earth.

In terms of sheer quantity the next largest group of 'Mären' (roughly half the number of the 'Schwankmären') are those that set greater store by the moral-didactic conclusions they draw from stories which may involve some comedy but are often quite serious. The lessons conveyed here for the benefit of recipients are manifold. Apart from those texts with the more explicitly religious remit of upholding virtue and piety, there are others that highlight the ways of the world, social wisdom and prudent behaviours of one kind or another, such as the value of being able to take a joke and laugh at oneself (nr 10 'The bald knight') or the impossibility of pleasing everyone all of the time (nr 151 'The miller, his son and the ass'). Moral-didactic 'Mären' can vary tremendously in terms of their length: texts concerning the thematic complex of responsible parenting and the dangers of filial ingratitude, for example, include one of the shortest (nr 143 'Children require discipline') and one of the longest texts in the entire collection (nr 34 'The cudgel' by Rüdiger der Hinkhofer). Some of the most popular tales – in terms of reworkings – also fall into the category of moral-didactic 'Mären': three versions for 'The little bird's teachings' (nrs 8, 146, 161), three for 'The bear-hunt' (nrs 65, 83, 106) and five for the really very effective 'Half a blanket' (nrs 33, 82, 104, 118, 136).<sup>6</sup> The various 'Half a blanket'-texts all tell the same relatively straightforward tale: a man neglects his ailing elderly father until he realizes that his own son is determined to treat him in exactly the same fashion by saving half of the coarse woollen blanket, which is destined for his grandfather, for him. What is striking are the shifts of emphasis from version to version, on issues such as whether it is the man or his domineering wife who is to blame for the neglect, for example, or where the young boy's idea comes from (God? his grandfather?). Narrative detail pertaining to the wretched condition of the old man varies too, one outstanding moment being his pathetic tears of joy – in version A (nr 33) – when handed half a blanket by his grandson: *his eyes brimmed over and the tears streamed down over his grey beard*.

The third 'type' of 'Mären', sentimental tales of love (not infrequently in a courtly context), encompasses far fewer texts but some of the very longest ones. Pride of place in this context should probably go to the four versions of 'The heathen lady' (nrs 35, 76, 92, 174 respectively), which push and pull at the story of a Christian knight's indefatigable attempts to woo a married heathen lady, and at times read very much like short romances.<sup>7</sup> This impression is further strengthened by one of the five manuscripts preserving version II (h<sup>6</sup>), which contains over 70 relatively lavish pen-and-

<sup>5</sup> The comedic portrayal of the fight centres around a passage of ten or so lines (209–20) in which the rhyme of MHG *kratzen* (to scratch) with *glätzen* (bald heads) is repeated to a hilarious extent: *kratzen – glätzen – glatz – kratz – kratze – glatzê – glatz – kratz – gletzen – kretzen*. The effect of this strategy is necessarily much diminished in translation.

<sup>6</sup> Yet another version of the story is composed by Heinrich Kaufringer.

<sup>7</sup> Version A/ I (nr 76): heathen lady eventually falls in love with Christian knight but he returns home, leaving her behind (1170 lines). Version B/ IV (nr 35): heathen lady returns with Christian knight and is baptized (1900 lines). Version II (nr 92): heathen lady's husband (Beliant) raises an army and retaliates by invading Christian territory; heathens are defeated but Beliant falls in love with a Christian beauty and agrees to be baptized in order to marry her (2675 lines). Version III (nr 174) goes into even more detail (in 4625 lines) and includes a dragon-slaying episode; after the defeat of the heathen army Beliant is released as a hostage and is eventually offered a heathen princess as compensation.



ink illustrations.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere 'Mären' celebrate the cult of courtly love with tales that see lovers reunited after prolonged periods of anguished separation (nr 80 'The buzzard', nr 100 'The queen of France', nr 116 'The duke of Brunswick'), or portray their 'tragic' deaths, as epitomized by renderings of classical (Ovidian) stories of doomed love (nr 87 'Pyramus and Thisbe', nr 131 'Hero and Leander'), where the youthfulness, (Christian!) virtue and unfulfilled potential of the lovers is emphasized. Indeed, the power of the motif of dying of a broken heart, as also exemplified by the various versions of 'The scholar of Paris' (nrs 75, 91, 112), never seems to diminish. Such texts are in general characterized by rather predictable narratorial commentary on love as both the cause of joy and suffering; nevertheless, they also feature some of the most memorable scenes in the whole collection: a beautiful wife mutilates herself to reassure her ugly and disfigured husband that she still loves him in spite of his latest tournament injury (nr 64 'The eye'); a young prince shocks those in his company by biting the head off a buzzard, this being the bird that he holds responsible for being separated from his beloved (nr 80 'The buzzard'); a lady offers her would-be lover the choice between the top or bottom half of her body, determined as she is to keep one part for her husband ('The heathen lady').

Other text-types which are transmitted together with all of these 'Mären' (whether overtly humorous, didactic or sentimental) expand our medieval literary horizons in different directions. Nonsense-literature is represented in this collection by several open-ended texts; what these lack in terms of narrative content, they make up for as carnivalesque exercises in imagining the incongruous and preposterous, whether it be the sight of *a dwarf and a giant wrestling for half a day* (nr 6 'Tall tales'), the idea of a marvellous land where *the high towers and fine churches are built of butter* (nr 56 'Quail-tales'), or the sound of *a cuckoo singing sweetly* (nr 139 'Fibs'). A number of other texts present themselves in the form of extended dialogues (within a cursory narrative framework), this being quite typical of another very large body of late medieval poetic material, referred to by scholars as 'Reden' or 'Minnereden'. Stylized accounts of wooing seem to have been very popular in this context (cf. nrs 94, 99, 148, 156, 169). These pit the wits of persistent suitors against invariably hostile ladies who test the mettle of their would-be lover with an array of amusing insults and put-downs, not all of which are obvious (to the modern reader) in their meaning. Other dialogue-texts stage arguments between representatives of different attitudes (nr 59 'Lover and drinker', nr 138 'The lover and the soldier') and beliefs (nr 117 'Disputation between Christian and Jew'), or host veritable debates on topics such as laziness (nr 119 'The twelve lazy servants to priests') or the greatest (bodily) pleasure (nr 155 'The seven greatest joys'). There is plenty of scope for bawdiness if not outright obscenity in many of the above texts. It should be noted, however, that the sincerest of religious tales too belong to the literary environment of 'Mären', including miracle-narratives (nr 24 'The poor woman's penny', nr 51 'A knight of good faith'), a legend of sorts (nr 36 'Crescentia'), visions of Hell (nr 97 'The knight of Württemberg', nr 123 'Knight Gottfried'), and stories involving the Virgin Mary, ever willing to help those who call upon her whether knight (nr 19 'Our Lady's knight'), young scholar (nr 21 'Thomas of Canterbury'), monk (nr 22 'Mary's garland of roses') or battered housewife (nr 23 'Solace for women').

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<sup>8</sup> The codex in question – Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cpg 353, c. 1470, fols 1r–69v – is easily viewed online: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg353>.

## Literary character

One index of the literary status and character of 'Mären' (of all 'types'), notwithstanding their textual variance across manuscripts, lies in the differing attitudes towards authorship that they display. Many of the texts collected here are marked by authorial anonymity, even when the voice and presence of the respective author-narrator is relatively well-developed. By comparison in a much smaller number of texts the person or persons (cf. nr 25 'The Viennese sea-voyage' and nr 43 'The girdle') responsible for giving the story literary form are identified, with authorial signatures occurring either in the prologue, or more frequently in the epilogue,<sup>9</sup> or occasionally in both, as in (nr 70) 'The students' adventure [version B]' by Rüdiger von Munre. In some cases it is hard to avoid the impression that we are dealing with pseudonyms used to highlight certain thematic preoccupations (cf. nr 23 'Solace for women' by Siegfried 'the Villager') or to underscore the bawdy comedy (nr 103 'The hollow tree [version B]' by Hans 'Without-honour') or the extremely provocative character of the story material (nr 130 'The three monks of Colmar' by a certain 'Nobody'). Elsewhere the authoritative aspect of authorship is upheld most conspicuously by spurious attributions to several of the most famous medieval German poets of the thirteenth century. Thus in one manuscript (w) of (nr 97) 'The knight of Württemberg', a tale concerning sin and redemption, Wolfram von Eschenbach, the renowned author of *Parzival* and the German chanson de geste *Willehalm*, is proclaimed at the very end as author (*This book was composed and read out by Sir Wolfram von Eschenbach*), a revelation incidentally that makes no attempt to mimic Wolfram's own hallmark of first-person authorial self-presentation.

Another index of literariness may be seen in the cultural references and intertextuality that explicitly situate a number of these 'Mären' within a broader literary landscape. Classical allusions, for example, are a feature of some of the more aspirational stories, especially those dedicated to the cult of courtly love, and not just as food for narratorial thought but as rhetorical highlights in the direct speech of impassioned characters. Hence, in (nr 35) 'The heathen lady [version B/ IV]', the knight who sets himself the seemingly impossible task of wooing a virtuous married woman declares his desire to win a prize greater than any gained by *Hector or Paris* and (to the lady herself) he explains that he suffers greater anguish than that of *Priamus* [sic] and *Thisbe*. A garbled(!) allusion to female figures from the (German) Arthurian romances *Iwein* and *Parzival* occurs in another sentimental tale, (nr 75) 'The scholar of Paris [version A]', as a benchmark for female suffering in love: *neither the Duchess Laudine nor her niece Sigune nor even Jeremiah ever lamented as much*. Conversely, in (nr 81) 'The pennyworth of wit' by Hermann Fressant, the author-narrator demonstrates his literary credentials in a cynical digression on the power of money to win the hearts of women: a poor suitor stands no chance, not even if he is *as handsome as Parzival*, or *a better lover than Tristan*, or even *as virtuous and chivalrous as Gawan*. References to stock figures from the tradition of the German heroic epic (Dietrich von Bern, Hagen, Ecke, Alphart, Hildebrand) are significant perhaps less in terms of their literary 'weight' than as familiar and highly valued points of cultural reference. Most intriguing are those allusions that occur in comedic narrative contexts, since this strategy in turn appears to cast epics like the *Nibelungenlied* in a less than serious

<sup>9</sup> This model of authorial identification is a standard feature of the 'Mären' of Hans Rosenplüt and Hans Folz, prolific urban poets of the later fifteenth century who both had a highly developed sense of their own literary craftsmanship.

light, such as when the (useless) rage of the hoodwinked husband in (nr 32) 'The heron' is compared to that of the tempestuous warrior *Wolfhart*; or when a frustrated and henpecked father, in Sibote's 'The taming of the shrews' (nr 45), berates his daughter for wanting to emulate her shrewish mother: *You wicked Kriemhild!*

### Transmission

The overwhelming majority of 'Mären' known to us today are transmitted in large collective manuscripts from the late thirteenth century onwards.<sup>10</sup> It seems likely that in many cases these compilations constituted a secondary phase of reception: in other words, from being recited or memorized by their 'authors' and/ or other storytellers on the basis of single copies or 'booklets' (which no longer survive), 'Mären' were subsequently collected and preserved cheek by jowl with other shorter literary forms for recital in front of larger groups of listeners, or perhaps even for reading aloud in smaller circles of recipients. As part of this process 'Mären' were subject to reworking and alteration without there always necessarily being a substantive reason for such textual variance; nor is it normally very clear who was responsible for such changes and at what point they took place. When reading 'Mären' that are found in more than one manuscript it becomes quite evident that some textual components were more vulnerable or liable to be changed (or even misremembered) than others. Numbers denoting quantity very frequently diverge from manuscript to manuscript; more significantly perhaps, closing narrative sequences are shortened or expanded, and epilogues are often markedly different in their thematic focus. It is by no means uncommon either for the scribes involved to have the last word with 'humorous' verses of their own.<sup>11</sup> These range from the formulaic to the apparently spontaneous and rather more unpredictable;<sup>12</sup> in some cases such additional scribal lines even ensure the circulation of certain sub-literary mini-texts<sup>13</sup>.

Some 'Mären'-manuscripts, as a rule the ones containing the most texts, are more obviously important than others. These collections form the spine of this edition, the 'Mären' here being arranged in chronological blocks in accordance with the dating of their main manuscripts ('Leithandschriften'). Hence our corpus of material begins with those texts (nrs 1–16) preserved in the earliest extant collection of short verse-

<sup>10</sup> The Appendix in this volume includes a list of all 'Mären'-manuscripts (and sigla). Many of these codices can be viewed online; for orientation and further links see the website of the medieval German 'Handschriftencensus' hosted by the Philipps-University Marburg ([www.handschriftencensus.de](http://www.handschriftencensus.de)).

<sup>11</sup> See Zotz (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. (nr 81) Hermann Fressant's 'The pennyworth of wit', whose moral-didactic lesson (the value of a loyal wife is not to be underestimated) is somewhat undermined in one of three manuscripts (i) by an unexpected final rhyming couplet: *This is what the Peterman says: 'Kiss my arse and I'll be on my way!'*

<sup>13</sup> In one of the nine manuscripts (l) of (nr 45) 'The taming of the shrews' by Sibote, a scribe adds his own relatively lengthy epilogue (*I, the scribe, want to say my piece too*) which culminates in mock(?)-aggressive words of advice to henpecked husbands: *Anyone who is married to a shrew should get rid of her quickly. Wish a fever upon her and put her on a hurdle and buy a sweet little rope for her and hang her from a sweet little branch and hang two or three wolves next to her! Has anyone seen a gallows decorated with worse hides?! Unless it so happened that the devil was caught and he was strung up beside them.* Lines very similar to these are preserved in the transmission of three other texts in this collection: (nr 66) 'The knight with the nuts'; (nr 97) 'The knight of Württemberg'; (nr 162) 'The shrew [version II]'.

couplet texts in German, W (Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. 2705, c. 1250–75), and ends with the 'Mären' of l (Karlsruhe, BL, Donaueschingen 104, c. 1433), nrs 125–154 and k (Karlsruhe, BL, Karlsruhe 408, c. 1430–35), nrs 155–173 respectively. The order of the texts within these collections is a matter of ongoing debate: a certain degree of thematic bunching is observable but more often than not scholars are challenged by the apparently random way that most 'Mären' are arranged most of the time.<sup>14</sup> Karlsruhe, Donaueschingen 104 (or l) is unique in this context with its arrangement of texts in alphabetical order (on the basis of the first letter of the first word).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that unlike certain other literary traditions, such as chronicles of world history, which were found worthy of lavish illustration throughout the Middle Ages, illustrated 'Mären' appear to have been few and far between; it is only really with the printed 'Mären' of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century (see Appendix) that images in the form of woodcuts became more customary.<sup>15</sup> The one striking exception is the collective manuscript 'i' (Innsbruck, Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Cod. FB 32001, dated 1456), the first part of which is illustrated throughout, including pen-and-ink drawings for 27 of the 'Mären' edited and translated here.<sup>16</sup> Most are given a single picture which is almost always located near the beginning of the respective tale. The overriding function of the illustrations is thus 'titular', either depicting a figure in isolation or as part of a scene that defines the tale. In two instances, 'Pyramus and Thisbe' (nr 87) and 'The sparrowhawk' (nr 46), where the stories revolve around a couple, the figures in question are portrayed on facing pages (mortally wounded Pyramus on fol. 14v, mortally wounded Thisbe on fol. 15r; nun on fol. 21v, young nobleman holding bird on fol. 22r). In spite of the extremely bawdy content of several of the stories, only one image points in this direction, that being the picture of a young woman lifting her skirts on fol. 8r, which belongs to 'The snow-child [version A]' (nr 13).<sup>17</sup> In fact the provocative nature of this gesture seems to have invited further obscenity, as the sketched outline of a large phallus levelled directly at the female figure can still be clearly seen.

## Translations

The following translations aim in the first instance to make a relatively large corpus of medieval German verse-couplet tales accessible to readers with no or very little German. At the same time the resulting English versions can also be read against the original texts with line-numbering for ease of comparison and reference. I have tried throughout to strike a balance between literal and more idiomatic translation, erring on the side of the former. As a result the English renderings are not always as free-flowing or as free from repetition as one might normally expect. The content of the

<sup>14</sup> See Westphal-Wihl (1993).

<sup>15</sup> The two 'Mären' that would seem to buck this trend – (nr 92) 'The heathen lady [version II]' as transmitted in h<sup>6</sup> (Heidelberg, Cpg 353) and (nr 116) 'The duke of Brunswick' as found in h<sup>10</sup> (Heidelberg, Heid. Hs. 1012) – are much more expansive texts with grander literary or historical pretensions and not typical of the majority of short verse-couplet tales.

<sup>16</sup> Listed here in the order they appear in the codex: nrs 18 (picture on fol. 1r), 13 (fol. 8r), 82 (fols 10v, 11r), 83 (fol. 12r), 84 (fol. 13r), 85 (fol. 13va), 86 (fol. 13vb), 87 (fols 14v, 15r), 59 (fol. 17r), 62 (fol. 18r), 88 (fol. 20v), 46 (fols 21v, 22r), 66 (fol. 27r), 89 (fol. 28r), 47 (fol. 29v), 52 (fol. 31r), 90 (fol. 32r), 91 (fol. 36r), 34 (fol. 49v), 93 (fol. 67), 56 (fol. 69r), 8 (fol. 71r), 94 (fol. 72r), 45 (fol. 76r), 50 (fol. 80v), 95 (fol. 81r), 96 (fol. 83v).

<sup>17</sup> This is one of the better-known illustrations from this codex; for a reproduction see Coxon (2020), p. 145.

English is primarily determined by the medieval German texts and these vary quite considerably in their stylistic sophistication and their narrative coherence. I have deviated from the 'original' (in so far as it is possible to speak of 'originals' in this context) only in the interests of comprehension and to avoid (serious) misunderstandings. Where, for instance, the medieval tales do not always make very clear which figure is speaking or acting but refer rather (within one particular passage) to a number of different characters as 'he', 'she' or 'they', the subject is identified more explicitly in the English. I have also taken some liberties when translating modal verbs (*sol*, *muoz*, *wil* etc), since these are not nearly as semantically differentiated in MHG as in NHG and modern English.

In keeping with the principles informing the German edition of these narratives, basic information pertaining to the manuscript transmission of each text is also made available to readers of the translations. Each work is accompanied by a list of the relevant textual witnesses (by means of their sigla), which highlights – in bold – the manuscript upon which the translation is based and demarcates – by means of punctuation (comma or semi-colon) – manuscript groupings and different redactions or versions of the text. Thus the list of sigla for 'The pregnant miller' (nr 93), for instance, – **w**, **i**; **k**, **d** – indicates that the translation is that of the text found in **w** and that the four manuscripts of this work can be split into two groups with **i** more closely aligned with **w**, as is so often the case with these two manuscripts, and **k** more closely related to **d**. Information concerning significant or curious variants is provided by means of endnotes that are designed to give a flavour of the differences between certain manuscripts rather than be exhaustive. In cases where the principal manuscript is fragmentary supplementary passages from other manuscripts are placed in curly brackets { }.

## TRANSLATIONS



## 1: 'Blind and duped [version I]'

Transmission: W, I<sup>2</sup>

A blind man married a woman who had a lovely figure. The contract was signed and sealed; she was presented to him as a virgin. When he was lying with her in the nuptial bed [5] and doing as he pleased with her, he grew very agitated. He said: 'Lady, I detect damage.' She said: 'The same thing disturbs me. I find you greatly damaged.' [10] Then he said: 'Lady, what might that be?' 'You've lost your eyes.' 'Not a word more, dear wife! My foes maimed me.' She said: 'In that case there should be no strife between us, [15] for it was my friends who did this [to me].' Thus their bitter argument was at an end.

Please take note of this. Whoever has a serious flaw and yet is so vain [20] that he seldom refrains from mockery, he too will be paid back with mockery. He rightly suffers the same fate as the blind man. Good sense failed the blind man when he spoke derisively to his wife [25] until she used mockery to avenge herself on him so keenly that he never mentioned it again.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The text in I<sup>2</sup> ends on a note of caution in respect of the witty bride: *Still, this was hardly honourable of her.*

## 2: 'Three friends'

Transmission: W, H, K

Listen to a true tale! Anyone blessed with the wits to retain its meaning could never be so wild at heart [5] that they could not learn from it.<sup>1</sup>

A people held hereditary land where no rulers were acknowledged other than the one they chose to elect. For one year and no longer [10] he would wield power. Whether he liked it or not, when the envoys returned they brought another king with them. As soon as this one's year came to an end [15] they would do the same to him. This was their custom for a long time until they got a ruler who was so dedicated to being a good king, [20] all who beheld him declared that he would be too great a loss.

He had chosen two<sup>2</sup> friends for himself who offered counsel [25] and were loyal to him. Now hear how they proceeded! One day they went to him and said: 'Sire, please listen to these words, they may well be to your advantage [30] and you should really heed them. Soon it will be one year since you were elected king. Your honourable position will inevitably be lost. Then you will be obliged to go to the same land [35] you were told about when you were elected king.' 'Are you speaking the truth?' said the valiant man. 'Indeed, we are!' 'Then may God Almighty reward you,' [40] replied the noble warrior. 'You are loyal and true.' At once he sent messengers throughout his kingdom. Any good ships that were found, [45] these he ordered to be brought straight away. He waited no longer; very speedily he stocked them with clothing and with food. The king was very wise. [50] He ordered for them to be conducted to the same land to which he himself was sent afterwards. Thus he found a plentiful supply there of every worldly delight.



Now if you would like me to explain [55] who the friends were who helped him to survive, then you should be quiet for a while. One is true repentance: that is an utterly faithful friend. [60] Whoever has it always in his heart will no doubt be saved. The other is proper confession: it eases people's sins and helps with the pain of sins [65] and heals the heart sick with sin. The third is penance: whoever submits in his heart to this sweet labour is received by our Lord Christ. [70] Blessed is the man who does such penance in this life that God himself welcomes him in the next. What then does the [hereditary] land stand for? Many a man does not know and yet it would be harmful not to say. [75] It stands for lowly Christendom and afterwards the Roman Empire. Now know for certain that if the mighty emperor is not a just ruler, [80] then he is bound for that same land to which those others were dispatched: the land that is bitter hell. May he heed this, if he so pleases. But if he is such a righteous man [85] that he wishes the greatest good for himself (which he has sent on ahead in time), then he will find the gates to glorious heaven open, then he will undertake that journey in majesty. [90] Now those who elect the king should be careful too that they do not condemn themselves to eternal perdition. May God keep us all from this in the name of his honourable death. [95] May he through his goodness rid us of all imperfection. Here the tale is at an end.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The prologue is not transmitted in **H** and **K**; instead these manuscripts feature a titulus attributing the story to the renowned thirteenth-century poet Der Stricker: *Here the Stricker tells of three friends who know how to help.*

<sup>2</sup> In **W** the king himself is evidently counted as being one of the three friends. In **H** and **K** the king's counsellors are *three* in number.

<sup>3</sup> In **H** and **K** the expression of pious sentiment continues to the very end: *and lead us to true repentance in the end.*

### 3: 'Two blind men'

Transmission: **W**

Listen to a true tale! The poet is going to tell a delightful parable now.

A king was called Emanuel and was born in the land of the Greeks. [5] Both the healthy and the sick benefited greatly by him while he lived. I believe that even today his reputation is not in the least bit tarnished. He saw out his life [10] with such majesty and honour that it should still be used to raise and educate all princes [today]. He conducted himself so regally and with such worthiness in his days [15] that by rights the world should mourn him forever. Moreover it was his custom to serve God always.

One day, when he was going to church, he heard what was said by two blind alms-seekers [20] who were bemoaning their utter misery. The more foolish of the two said: 'Now may King Emanuel provide for me! He was always quick to act in God's service.' Then the other said, not in jest: [25] 'Then may our Lord God provide for me! He is even mightier than the king. Through his goodness may God grant me what I desire!' The king heard this. He walked past. He stood in the porch by the [church] door. [30] He waved a squire over. He said: 'Keep an eye on the two beggars. When I go to dine, make sure that they are not left outside. On no account forget [35] that they are both to eat in front of me.'

When mass had been sung and people were leaving the church in droves, the squire dared not fail to tell them both to accompany him [40] up to the king's palace where there would be all sorts of things to enjoy. Once he had brought them both there, scarcely anyone paid them any attention other than the king and he alone. [45] He was so noble and so virtuous that he had them both sit down and did not withhold his greeting. When it was time for the tables to be prepared and the hour to dine had come, [50] the worthy king called for a steward: 'You are to get hold of a loaf of bread for me – I really do need you to do this – and hollow it out for me [55] and fill it up for me with red gold and place it on the table before me. Be sure, on your life, that you observe carefully what the man does with it, [60] the one to whom I have it served. That is what you are to report back to me!' The steward did not fail to do what his lord had ordered. As soon as the bread was ready [65] he set it before the king. After he had taken his place and had eaten a little, the honourable man gestured over to the same steward: [70] 'Take this bread and place it before the poor blind fellow by the door. He wished for me to provide for him. Now take it to him as a gift! As quickly as you can, [75] take this capon: serve it to the other poor man. I should take pity on him too. He asked his Creator to be merciful towards him.' [80]

When the king had sent these things over to both, one of them asked straight away: 'What were you brought from the king? Tell me at once!' 'A fine capon. [85] I have no cause to regret entreating God for what I did. I have been blessed. The king has given me a fine gift. May God grant him a joyous life!' [90] 'You have no choice but to wish that for him. But he has sent me bread that is heavier than stone. This fills me with very little joy. Judging by its weight [95] the crust is not free of unbaked dough.' 'Show it here, dear sir! It is better mine than yours!' 'Then give me the capon [100] and take you the same bread. You need it for your children who are still very young. I, on the other hand, am all alone. I have neither children nor a wife [105] to look after: only my own person.' The other handed over the capon to him and took the bread. This was noted by the squire.

When the first beggar received the capon, he cheerfully went on his way [110] and was delighted by the gift. The other beggar had this thought: 'I know full well that my children will be happier with this bread than any man given land by the emperor.' [115] He took the bread in his hand. With that they intended to go their separate ways. Then a messenger came and told them both that first they were to come to court and have an audience with the king. [120] They both entered the hall, whereupon the king told everyone the strange tale of what had happened to them. When they had heard this [125] the king said: 'No one should stray from the path of trusting in God. It is his wish and his decree that no one ever doubt him, for God remains mighty [130] and may give much. Indeed, he gives and takes from whomsoever he pleases.'

When the lords had heard this and fathomed the meaning of this strange tale, [135] they declared: 'We clearly see now that Jesus Christ is the King of all Kings. We shall revere him always and faithfully worship him [140] with both our hearts and minds. His reward is pure and good.'

Now to those who are truly repentant, to them this sign [of God's grace] – which occurred back then – is as vivid today [145] as it was to anyone who witnessed it with their own eyes. Now I wish to instruct and advise that we do as those people did who saw it with their own eyes and declared God to be just, [150] [recognizing] that he is mightier than mighty and that he may lessen the suffering of those who faithfully desire this of him. Let us repent in our hearts whatever we have done to offend him!

[155] There can be no other way. For just as we do penance in this life, so shall we be rewarded in the next for evermore – whether with forgiveness or with punishment. [160]

#### 4: 'The woman and the hen-chicks'

Transmission: **W**, 1<sup>2</sup>

A woman was lucky enough for a hen to hatch a great number of chicks for her. At this point she came up with a typically crafty plan [5] for keeping the hens safe. She thought: 'I want to prevent my enemies and the eagles from harming them in any way.' She used a strong length of cord [10] to tie all of the young chicks together. But when an eagle snatched one of them, the others were hanging from it, and it carried them all away in one go; and so the crafty plan ended in disaster. [15] If the eagle had taken one of them and the cord had not existed, then the others would have survived.

The eagles signify the foul fiends of hell. The avaricious and mean, [20] those who horde their wealth, hiding and burying it from God and other people: they lose much love and affection. Whoever hordes their wealth like this [25] and believes that all their happiness lies with it, that person has not taken proper care of their wealth. Whoever spends their wealth on friends<sup>1</sup> [and family] and bequeaths God his due share, [30] that person cannot lose out when it is their turn to die. God rewards them for it one hundred times over. It is a blessing and good fortune should someone earn the praise of virtuous people [35] such that God himself thanks him for it.

<sup>1</sup> Variant: *on delights* (1<sup>2</sup>).

#### 5: 'Fair hair, grey hair'

Transmission: **W**, 1<sup>2</sup>

A man, he had an old wife and was himself old in body. At least half of his hair was grey. There was a beautiful maiden nearby, whom he secretly wooed. [5] He was lucky enough to be adored by [both of] these women. His lady-friend's spirits soared whenever she took him in her arms; his lady-wife felt the same. [10]

Now hear what they used to do! His lady-friend detested his greyness. Time and again she would lay him down in her lap – she did not mind this at all – and pull out his grey hair. [15] She would have made him young and handsome (if she had been able to), for she wished him well. His lady-wife too declared that he was as dear to her as her own life. [20] Whenever he was lying in her lap, she grew accustomed to plucking out the fair hair from all over his head, because she herself was grey. [25] At least half of his hair was fair, so he seemed to her to be too youthful. She thought: 'I shall make him and myself the same, so that I might be even more to his liking [30] when he is as grey as I am.' Thus the man's hair disappeared. Thus the women made

him bald. Whatever was youthful and fair, his lady-wife would tear that out; [35] his lady-friend examined his grey hair and left not one strand of it intact. Fair or grey, not a single hair on his head survived the attention of the women. [40] So, much to his detriment, it came to pass that they both made a laughing-stock of him.

Even today this is what a good man does who mistrusts no one. Whoever is foolish and simple [45] and [is] incapable of [recognizing] wicked deceit, that man has his possessions taken from him by friends and foes alike. It is a foolish man who is content to let others [50] strip him of his possessions, for he is subjected to the ridicule of both. Friend and foe make a laughing-stock of him. He is stripped as bare of honour as that other fellow was of his hair [55] when it was all plucked out.

Let this be a lesson to any man who is fair and grey – the grey hair is his wealth – [and] who is over sixty years old [60] and held in such high esteem on account of his wealth that a young woman desires him and not the young man who is poor. Whoever is seen to squander his wealth [in that way], when he could very well avoid doing so, [65] that man is regarded as a fool. He deserves to be ridiculed: that is only right. Actions are the servants of the mind: whatever a man does willingly allows others to know his mind. [70]

## 6: 'Tall tales' [fragmentary]

Transmission: **W**

The liar is so very full of lies that he lies all the time and lying does him good. He lies at night; he lies during the day. [5] He lies about whatever he can. He lies to his father; he lies to his mother likewise. He lies to his sister; bigger still is the lie [10] he tells his brother. His mind is wholly intent upon lying. He lies here; he lies there. He lies on the quiet and out loud. Thus he lies throughout the year [15] until people become wise to his lies.

Rather than not tell a lie, he would sooner lie that a stairway reached the heavens. He would lie that a fly had pissed enough [20] to drive four millwheels or more. He never has his fill of lying. He can lie prodigiously. He lies that an ant drank the sea dry; [25] and he lies that he did a crap large enough to knock down a mountain.

He is so very at ease with lying, he would sooner lie that the mountains flew [30] more swiftly than falcons. He can fabricate greatly like a proper fuller of lies. He lies that the spleen of a mite is larger than a sturgeon. [35] He lies that he caught a whale with mice and laid it on his lie of a table. He found it to be three leagues long. Since he had success with this lie, [40] he lies as much as he wants and he lies about whatever he wants.

Moreover he lies aloud that he carried forty masons in the shell of a nut – [45] he prides himself on lies like this – right into the middle of the sea. There he ordered, as a defence, two towers to be built on a linden-leaf. The liar demanded [50] that the stones be of red marble so that if the liar should ever be hard pressed, he would be able to save himself inside, should anyone wish to harm him. The same expert liar [55] lies that he makes a good fire out of ice; and [he] lies that it snaps like crackling firewood. That is enough of that lie. [60]

The same fanciful liar, he lies that he saw a sleigh travelling across the clouds with such great speed, it looked like it was flying. [65] He observed that it was being drawn by an ass, and that on the same sleigh were riding seven beautifully dressed ladies; they all wore crowns. At their side ran [70] twelve squires who were blowing trumpets and sounding a fanfare. Many golden bells were hanging from the sleigh. [75] A thousand knights were riding after it with just as many sumpters. The liar observed that they were all riding on the clouds in pursuit of the sleigh [80] and with the aim of crossing the sea in this way. Thus his lies know no limits.

He lies that he saw – in a meadow – a dwarf and a giant wrestling for half a day. [85] The dwarf then took a sack and shoved the giant inside. And he lies that the dwarf ran away with it for seven long leagues and tied it to a branch [90] of a tree a thousand spans high. Then the dwarf hoisted it up and left the giant hanging. And that was the end of that lie.

He lies that he saw – on a green – [95] a wild hare fighting [...]

## 7: 'The generous king'

Transmission: **W**, H, K, E, w, d, d<sup>4</sup>

There was a king so generous, it did not irk him [to ensure] that whatever someone requested of him by way of honour, they were granted it on the spot.

He encountered two men in the street [5] who were not in the habit of doing what was fit and proper. They were in themselves full of envy and avarice. Nevertheless the king did the right thing. He greeted them in a friendly manner and said: 'Would you care at all to be rich? [10] Please let me know.'

They both began to laugh. At the very same time they spoke with one mouth: 'Alas, dear lord! [15] Wealth is only a faint prospect for us, unfortunately. We've never been able to think of a way of making a fortune, and yet we should dearly love to be rich!'

The king spoke graciously: [20] 'One of you may wish whatever he wants of me. I swear most faithfully that whatever it is that he desires, he will indeed be granted it. Likewise, it is my sworn intention [25] to give the other twice as much.'

It immediately occurred to the one who was avaricious that if he held his tongue until the other had made his request – so his avarice counselled him – [30] then he would get twice as much. His companion said: 'Make your wish!'

'No, I won't, for then you would get more, methinks.'

'Friend, in that case I'll make mine. Sire, you must not break your word. [35] Be mindful of your honour and have one of my eyes poked out, for I desire nothing else.'

The king said: 'I am prepared to do that. It pains me that you desire nothing else.' [40]

When this one's eye had been taken, he said: 'It's a good thing I came here. You have rewarded me honourably. May God keep and bless you! But don't forget my friend. [45] Although he is only getting what is rightfully his, he richly deserves it! I'm the one who made the first wish. In this way we will both become wealthy.'

The king spoke courteously: [50] 'By my faith, you have spoken truthfully to me. Your envy and his avarice have cost you three eyes. How I wish that had never happened!'

This kind of thing still happens from time to time. [55] Whoever hides avarice in their heart, and dishonourable envy, they lose much more than they profit by it. Think and learn from this! [60]

## 8: 'The little bird's teachings [version A]'

Transmission: W, E, w, i, d<sup>4</sup>

A birdcatcher went to a place where he caught a lark. He would have killed it there and then but it pleaded with him at length. It said: 'Sir, let me live! [5] I will teach you three lessons which will be to your profit and honour.' He said: 'I shall. Now teach!' 'Never direct your efforts at anything [10] which is not yours to have. I shall teach you something else: whenever something unbelievable occurs, you should certainly not believe it. And never despair [15] on account of any lost wealth you are unable to recover.' Thus the teachings were at an end.<sup>1</sup> The lark flew up very high and said: 'Alas! That this should ever have happened to you! [20] You blockhead, fool, well may you bemoan [your lot]! After all, there's a precious stone in my stomach which is bigger than an ostrich egg! If you had cut me in two, anybody you shared it with [25] would have been happy and blessed forever.' The man gazed wretchedly after the bird and said: 'Indeed, I was too hasty. The stone was large and good. I will train my every thought [30] on catching you.' The bird said: 'You've ignored my teaching and instruction. Now I told you in God's name not to believe any story [35] that was unbelievable. How could a stone get inside me, if it was twice as big as I am? What's more: you are desperate to catch me [again]. Well, I shall always fly a safe distance away from you. [40] All your crafty plans are a waste of effort. I won't be falling for your snare again. How I wish to praise God that I was able to dupe you!' [45]

A simple man who is incapable and unwilling, either by night or by day, to guard against and protect himself from very deceptive ruses, [50] a man who is too trusting – as soon as he is assailed by a cunning compatriot who is false and untrue, [he must expect] the latter to laugh gleefully even as he strips him [55] of both honour and wealth. No one is safe from this unless they are versed in bad and good. Now let no one be so hasty that upon catching a bird [60] they let it out of their hand (unless they have surety or a bond), lest the same thing should happen to them. For insult adds to injury.

<sup>1</sup> In all the other manuscripts this line reads: *Thus the lark was set free.*

## 9: 'The roasted egg'

Transmission: W, E, l<sup>2</sup>, H<sup>2</sup>

I witnessed something by a fire that made me laugh. A roasted egg was lying there. A simple-minded child approached the fire [5] and wished to take the egg. When no one there offered it to him, he was so afflicted by pangs of hunger that he desired