The relationship between picture and text in medieval German short stories contained in manuscript FB Codex 32001

Adultery, Sexual Frivolity and Nakedness

BY

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‘Mittelalterliche Kurzerzählungen in deutscher Sprache sind in großer Zahl überliefert.’1 Yet ‘relatively little work on German medieval culture has been published in English.’2 Although the written word of the German late medieval moralistic and comic short stories such as those written by Der Stricker as well as by other anonymous authors, have been well studied by academics in both the German-speaking and English-speaking worlds, the illustrations that accompany such tales have not been investigated as thoroughly in the academic sphere.3 This essay seeks to focus on a handful of German medieval short stories that can be found on manuscript FB 32001, which dates back to 1456.4 Of the 57 tales and 51 corresponding illustrations, 27 are comic tales of which 23 are illustrated.5 The focal point of this essay will be the relationship between these illustrations and the text and the themes of adultery, sexual frivolity and nakedness.

Adultery

The first short story of particular interest on this manuscript is ‘Daz snemære’ or under its modern title ‘Das Schneekind.’ There are in fact two versions of the story that have been discovered and published: Fassung A und Fassung B. Fassung A can be found on five different manuscripts, whereas Fassung B is only found on one.6 It is Version A of ‘Daz snemære,’ which is found on the manuscript of this study, FB Codex 32001, which is why this essay will mainly draw attention to this version.

1 Klaus Grubmüller, Novellistik des Mittelalters, Märendichtung (Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2010) p.1007.
5 Coxon, Sebastian, Laughter and Narrative in the Later Middle Ages: German Comic Tales C. 1350-1525 (Legenda Main Series, 2008)
6 Manuscript locations of ‘Das Schneekind Fassung A:
W (um 1280, bairisch-österreichisch), Bl. 161\(b\)-162\(b\).
E (um 1350, Würzburg), Bl. 85\(a\)-85\(b\) (Faksimile: Hausbuch des Michael de Leone, Bl. 85).
w (1393, Innsbruck), Bl.126\(a\)-127\(b\) (Abdruck: Schmid. Codex Vindobonensis 2885, S.434-436).
i (1456, Tirol, von w abhängig, Bl. 8\(a\)-8\(b\) (Faksimile: Sammlung kleinerer deutscher Gedichte, Bl.8\(a\)).
Donaueschungen, Fürstl. Fürstenbergische Hofbibliothek, Cod. 93, um 1400, nordbairisch: kleine Sammlung von Bispeln und Fabeln, Bl. 24\(a\)-26\(b\).

‘Daz snemære’, written by Der Stricker (an anonymous 13th century writer who lived from 1212-1250), is the tale of a deceitful wife and a patient, yet punitive husband. The husband loves his wife more than life itself, however his wife does not return this endearment. The husband, a merchant, one day sets out to sea. On his return three years later, he discovers that his wife has borne a child whilst he has been away. She claims how one day it was snowing, she felt her husband’s love, ate the snow and in this way conceived his child. The husband feigns belief at the time and brings up the child as his own for several years. When the child is ten years old, the husband takes him out to sea with him and sells him to a rich merchant; reluctant to admit that he ‘daz gouchelein het gezogen’ (58). He returns to tell his wife that the wind washed away the child at sea, which was all too easily done seeing as he was, by her word, a ‘snewes sun’ after all (53). The epilogue of the tale is that men should not trust women as they can often cause harm and force them with their evil and how deviance can be fought well with deviance.

The tale contains three main characters: the snow child, the cheating wife and the merchant husband. It is either through the title or the illustration, ‘damit man weiß, um welchen Text es sich handelt’ as ‘enthält sie eine Kennung, in der Regel eine zentrale Figur oder eine kennzeichnendes Objekt.’ Although the subject of the title both in the modern German ‘Das Schneekind’ and more inconspicuously in the original medieval ‘Daz snemære’, the child itself is not the subject of the illustration. Similarly the title of ‘Die halbe Birne’, found on page 18r of the manuscript, could have been named otherwise, with a title much more asymmetrical to the plot, however, this title was chosen instead as the half pear was what seemingly differentiated it from other tales. The story’s illustration depicts a knight holding half a pear (see Figure 1). Bearing this in mind, the image, on page 7v of manuscript FB Codex 32001 (see Figure 2.), representative of ‘Daz snemære,’ presents the tale’s adulterous wife. This illustration, showing a woman lifting her robe up with both hands so that her thighs and genitals are revealed, is arguably the most sexually...

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7 Der Stricker, Erzählungen Fabeln, Reden, trans. by Otfrid Ehrismann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1992), p.5.
8 ‘has brought up the bastard child’ Klaus Grubmüller, Novellistik des Mittelalters, Märendichtung (Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2010) p.88.
9 ‘snow son’ ibid.
11 ibid.
suggestive depiction in the entire manuscript. Bein notes it particularly for its ‘Exhibitionismus und Schamlosigkeit’ as in the Middle Ages ‘Man zeigt eben nicht einfach Penis, Vulva oder Brüste in der Öffentlichkeit – zuweilen stand dies gar unter Strafe.’\textsuperscript{12} What Bein also points out is that this imagery of a woman who ‘lädt geradezu zum Beischlaf ein,’ which possesses an air of a prostitute, is not actually a scene in the story itself.\textsuperscript{13} What he does not make a point of is that the character depicted in the illustration does not precisely match the wife outlined in the actual tale. The woman in the tale, who does commit adultery (this is more explicit in \textit{Fassung B} where within the first fifteen lines it is made clear that the wife ‘bi ainen andern man si ain kint gewan’ (11-12)), does not lavishly and openly display it, nor address it to her husband.\textsuperscript{14} Instead she makes up a tall, ridiculous and not very believable tale to try to disguise her sexual promiscuity. In addition the tale’s explicit emphasis on the husband’s patience and cunning in fighting this implied deviance are not captured within the rather one-sided illustration. In this instance the sexual content of the illustration initially appears to be more explicit than the actual written work it accompanies. This conclusion, however, cannot be fully drawn without closer inspection of the illustration’s positioning within the text.

The illustration of the cheating wife in ‘\textit{Daz snemære}’ presents itself in between the two columns of text. In the first column, the illustration aligns with the lines ‘die warheit darinne: daz waren valsche minne’ (5-6).\textsuperscript{15} This line corresponds well to the illustration and elicits its sexual content. The wife points to her genitals, which relates to the truth, which is inside her or ‘darinne’ quite literally as this is exactly where the adultery she has engaged in has taken place. The lexical choice ‘valsche minne’ in the context of the tale principally reconfirms that the wife does not return her husband’s unwavering love for her, despite the fact that she falsely tells him she loves him dearly. The line itself without the picture to elucidate its hidden meaning would not, however, appear to be as sexually suggestive, allowing ‘minne’ to be interpreted in its sexual rather than just emotional sense of the word. The term ‘minne’ often connotes both love and sex interchangeably and as can be seen in comic

\textsuperscript{13} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{14} ‘had a child from another man’ Klaus Grubmüller, \textit{Novellistik des Mittelalters, Märendichtung} (Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2010) p.82.  
\textsuperscript{15} ‘the truth was that it was false love’
tales ‘Daz snemære,’ and ‘Der Sperber’ and other medieval works such as ‘Erec’ by Hartmann von Aue. The lines at which the illustration cuts off in the first column are 21-22 ‘Si sprach herre mich geluste din, do gie ich in min gärte lin,’ which are preceded by lines 23-24 ‘do vragt er der mære, wes daz kint wäre’ which is the part of the tale where the wife lies to her husband about conceiving the child. In both instances the position of the illustration itself alludes indirectly to her act of sexual promiscuity.

In Der Stricker’s ‘Die eingemauerte Frau’ there is an element of adultery, however its representation is less central to the plot, which is reflected in the tale’s illustration (see Figure 3). The tale centres around a woman, who does not obey her husband and is allegedly possessed by the devil, and who is subsequently enclosed in a wall until she is transformed into the most well-behaved wife any man could wish for. Despite the fact that her husband beats her so fiercely that his hands are bloodied and commits adultery by kissing and embracing another woman in front of her very eyes, the immured wife and her transformation from evil to good is more significant tale’s community and therefore is the centre of the illustration. A woman’s sin of not obeying her husband appears to be much worse than a husband’s conspicuous adulterous actions. This aligns with the marital contemporary context in which ‘the wish to keep property within the family’s blood, meant that a woman’s extramarital affair was viewed much more harshly than a man’s’ is. This gives insight into the ‘Daz snemære’ illustration, as with the fairly frequent ‘Vorherssschen weiblicher Körper in erotischenden Kontexten,’ the overall didactic Christian moral values are upheld to a great extent by including this depiction.

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17 ‘She said, ‘Husband, I longed for you, then I went into my garden’ and ‘Then he asked to whom this child belonged.’
Tales of sexual frivolity

Two other comic tales that feature on Manuscript FB Codex 32001 are ‘Das Gänslein’ (original title: ‘Diz mere heizet das genselin und sagt von einem münche und von einem magedîn) on page 29v, written in the early 13th century, and ‘Der Sperber,’ (original title: ‘Diz ist ein schœnez mære von einem sperwære’) written around 1320-30 on pages 21v-22r. The comic tales, both written by anonymous authors, have similar narratives and themes as they both contain a nun or monk as a main character who has been brought up inside a monastery or nunnery with no knowledge of sex, who then, without realising it, experiences their first sexual encounter. ‘Das Gänslein’ comically tells the tale of an ignorant monk, who whilst leaving his monastery for the first time, is taught by his abbot about the creatures in the outside world he has never seen before. The two encounter women (this is the monk’s first time) and the abbot, as a joke, tricks the monk into thinking ‘women’ are called ‘geese,’’ hence the name of the story. In secret the woman he meets, the 20-year-old daughter of a stranger who hosts the two, seduces the unknowing monk into bed. The monk admits how ‘geese’ are the biggest treat of all to his abbot, revealing that he has in fact slept with a woman. Later he is punished for this.

The illustration on page 29v (see Figure 4) depicts the monk and the host’s daughter. What is noticeable about this illustration is its aesthetic brightness. The manuscript seemingly contains two types of illustrations: those that employ brighter colours such as the ‘Studentenabenteuer’ illustration on page 1r (see Figure 7) and those that employ lighter and paler shades such as the ‘Das heißes Eisen’ illustration on page 23v (see Figure 8) which depicts a scene in which a husband returns the offer to touch a hot iron to his wife. In Figure 4 the use of blue and red for the young lady’s tunic is vibrant in comparison to the light pinks, lilacs, greens and yellows that are used elsewhere and this combination of red and blue on a tunic is only found once on the entire manuscript. Perceptions are often unstable, making it difficult to confidently name colour-meanings and preferences in cultures. What is obvious by the red painted hair the female figure has on the top of her head that is combined with her unpainted white plait that the colours featuring in this artwork are not to be taken

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too literally. One could argue that the use of red symbolises love and blue the fidelity of a young woman (which here would be ironic and comical) as these perceptions of colour were commonly thought of at the time, however this would not embrace the simplicity and feat against literality of the drawings. Nicola Zotz supports this in saying that previously ‘war die Beschäftigung mit den Illustration in der bisherigen Forschung im Wesentlichen von deren qualitativer Bewertung und Einordnung geprägt,’ however that this initial perceived lack of artistic sophistication had overlooked the illustrations.

The lack of resources and paint colours is clear by the limited display of colour throughout the manuscript. Although the colours that are worn by the illustration’s female figure are not necessarily realistic, the role of the host’s daughter’s dress sense in ‘Das Gänsllein’ is to contrast the monk who wears a more modest grey. This inconspicuousness can be seen to reflect the monk’s sexual innocence and the host’s daughter’s sexual confidence. In addition the illustration depicts the monk as older than in the tale in Figure 4; his hair is grey and balding and the host’s daughter also does not appear her age of twenty years old. Although the ages of the figures in the illustrations do not coincide with the story, this could add to their comic value as in assuming an ignorant monk who was even older being led into his first sexual experience by a young girl would be perceived as even more amusing.

What also ties in with the essence of comedic value is the place the illustration has within the text. Unlike in the ‘Daz snemaere’ illustration, whose place in the text is in between the general format of two columns side by side (see Figure 2), the illustration for ‘Das Gänsllein’ falls just after line 20 ‘Nû was dar inne ein junc man.’ The placement of the illustration here serves to introduce the tale’s main character, who even more emphatically comically looks much older than the ‘junc man’ described. Simultaneously the illustration presents a female figure, who has not yet been encountered by that point in the tale. On one level the illustration employs a visual form of dramatic irony, as the audience will know that the comic tale will

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24 There inside [the monastery] lived a young man.
involve an unidentified female character. Despite this, Figure 2 still varies from ‘Daz snemære,’ in that it does not reveal the tale’s plot-centric sexual content.

‘Der Sperber,’ on pages 21v-22r of Codex FB 32001, however, presents the mirror image of ‘Das Gänselein’ in its approach to sexual frivolity involving a sheltered young nun instead of a young and ignorant monk, which refutes the simplification of the above statement. In fact the tales are so similar that their introductory lines are identical and both state how the cloisters in which the nun and monk respectively live are ‘rîch unde erbûwen wol, als man von rehte ein klôster sol’ (Gs, 3-4, Sp, 9-10). A fifteen-year-old nun leaves the walled confines of the nunnery for the first time and encounters a knight with a sparrow-hawk. She is impressed by his bird, and he strikes a deal with her that he will sell it to her for her minne. The two have sex in a sheltered wood nearby. The girl reveals to her superior, on her return, that she has lost her virginity without knowing it and is punished. The young nun goes back to retrieve her virginity from the knight who reverts to sex with her once again. In the same way that the young monk in ‘Das Gänselein’ enjoys his first sexual experience, so does the nun in ‘Der Sperber.’

The illustration of ‘Der Sperber’ on pages 21v-22r features the fifteen-year-old nun on the left-hand page 21v and the knight on the right-hand page 22r separately (see Figures 5 and 6). It can be observed that they ‘eindeutig aufeinander bezogen sind’ as the two figures are made to look at each other across the page. These illustrations like ‘Das Gänselein’ are in no way sexual and are not revealing of any scene or aspect of the plot. The common format as to where illustrations are placed in the text (following a usual pattern of one picture per short story) is either at the bottom of the page or between the two columns. The young nun’s position within the text follows the latter of these possibilities. The top of this illustration on page 21v falls on line 8 ‘ein klôster guot und wol bereit’ and ends on lines 25-6 ‘ir ieglich nâch ir ahte//worhte, swaz si mahte.’ Similar to ‘Das Gänselein’, the picture serves as an introduction to the characters in the tale as it is placed just after a line of

25 ‘rich and properly kept, as a monastery/nunnery by law should be’ Klaus Grubmüller, Novellistik des Mittelalters, Märendichtung (Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2010), p.648 & p.568.
27 ibid. p.361.
28 ‘a large and wealthy nunnery’ and ‘they painted and wrote with that which they could’
text, which introduces the setting of the tale. The term ‘klôster’ can refer to both a male monastery and a female convent and so the depiction of a female figure preceding it would dispel this ambiguity. The knight on page 22r features within the text in between lines 107-10 ‘der ritter vil wol hörte//an der juncvrouwen wrote,// daz si benamen wære//guot und alwære.’ and lines 121-2 ‘sô gerne hæte ichz vogelîn.//Er sprach vil liebe vrouwe min.’ This is significant as the knight’s visual representation begins at the point in ‘Der Sperber’ when he realises he can take advantage of the young and ignorant nun sexually. The extract of the text, which is side by side with the illustration of the knight, coincides with his spoken word in a part of their dialogue. This is when he proposes to her the prospect of exchanging his sparrow-hawk for her love. This part of the comic tale is a turning point as the nun’s encounter with the knight and the knight’s decision to act upon his sexual desires will result in the nun losing her virginity and ultimately being punished. The fact that the visual depiction of the tale is placed to end on line 121, ‘sô gerne hæte ichz vogelîn,’ a line which can be taken as an innuendo for her own subconscious burning sexual desire. One can conclude that the positioning of the tale’s illustrations within the text can emphasise the short story’s implicit sexual content and assist characterisation.

Nakedness

In ‘Daz snemære,’ ‘Das Gänselein’ and ‘Der Sperber,’ no full-frontal nakedness is to be observed in the tales’ illustrations. An important note to make is that despite the sexual implicitness and explicitness present in some of these short stories, the only three depictions of nakedness in the entire manuscript are more exceptionally a naked cupid, symbolic of love in ‘Das Herzmäre’ on page 10v (see Figure 9) and two other tales by Der Stricker, which involve nakedness in their respective titles. The illustration of ‘Der nackte Ritter’ on page 69v (see Figure 10) shows the ultimate scene of shock and shame whereby a hosted knight is stripped of his coat to complete nakedness upon the request of a rather forceful landowner. Similar shame in nakedness is portrayed in the image on page 63v depicting ‘Der nackte Bote’ (see Figure 11). Although the nakedness in ‘Der nackte Bote’ is a conscious decision made by the messenger and is dissimilar to the unintentional nakedness in ‘Der nackte Ritter,’ it still underscores the messenger’s willingness to

29 ‘I would love so much to have that bird//He answered my honoured lady’
adhere to the perceived traditions at the host. In either case, although embarrassing and shameful, nakedness remains comical when it is linked to stupidity and is not sexual.

In conclusion there is a strong relationship between the illustrations and the text on two levels. The first, as Zotz points out, is to visually produce a significant object, main character or main scene in the plot to aid recognition of the tale.\textsuperscript{30} Secondly, the positioning of the illustrations within the text on the manuscript provides insight into emphasises and pivotal points in the plot of the tales. Often the illustrations are inserted into the text at a point where a character or setting is introduced, are employed to pinpoint where an important section of speech occurs or are used to insist on didactic implicit or explicit morals in a tale. Although the illustrations present limitations in some regards as to their consistency, these usually add to the comical effect of the tale or reflect perceived moralistic thinking at the time. These illustrations have a fundamental role in accompanying the written word and without them one’s interpretation of each tale is not yet complete.

Appendix 1

Figure 1 – Page 18r ‘Die halbe Birne’

Figure 2 – Page 8r ‘Daz snemære’

Figure 3 – Page 60r ‘Die eingemauerte Frau’
Figure 2 – Page 8r ‘Daz snemære’
Figure 4 – Page 29v ‘Das Gänslein’
Der Sperber
The Nun
Figure 6 – Page 22v ‘Der Sperber’ The Knight
Figure 7 – Page 1r ‘Studentenabenteuer’

Figure 8 – Pages 23v ‘Das heiße Eisen’
Appendix 2 – List of Illustrations

Figure 1 – Die halbe Birne 18r

Figure 2 – Daz Schnemære 8r

Figure 3 – Die eingemauerte Frau 60v

Figure 4 – Das Gänsllein 29v

Figure 5 – Der Sperber – The Nun 21v

Figure 6 – Der Sperber – The Knight 22r

Figure 7 – Der Studentenabenteuer 1r

Figure 8 - Das heißes Eisen 23v

Figure 9 – Das Herzmäre 10r

Figure 10 – Der nackte Ritter 69v

Figure 11 – Der nackte Bote 63v
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