



Masculinity in Late Medieval German Literature: Toxicity or Virtue? The Case of Konrad von Würzburg's *Heinrich von Kempten* and *Partonopier und Meliur*

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Abstract

Recent theoretical studies on masculinity have sensitized us to deeply layered problems hidden in many literary texts, both in the modern world and in the Middle Ages. We do not always simply face 'toxic masculinity,' but many conflicts addressed by the various poets can now be analyzed more closely by means of the theoretical model developed by Masculinity Studies. Numerous times, masculine identity emerges as surprisingly weak, troubled, or uncertain, and when the various male protagonists endeavor to compensate for their shortcomings, new challenges emerge affecting all society. Masculinity is displayed in many different manners, reflecting on a variety of social, psychological, and physical features. In male-dominated medieval society, the ideal of masculinity was probably much more pronounced than in later centuries because feudalism, intimately tied in with patriarchy, clearly favored men and promoted a specific model, the knight. Nevertheless, medieval poets often indicated considerable concerns with this aspect and revealed noteworthy cracks in the idealistic image of the glorified male, if they did not even present the collapse of that concept. To explore this issue further, this study takes a stab at one of the most popular short verse narratives by the Middle High German poet Konrad von Würzburg, *Heinrich von Kempten* (ca. 1261) and examines the various roles assumed by the male protagonists.



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Introduction

The literary discourse serves exceedingly well to study major or minor aspects in human culture and life, seen through the various lenses determined by cultural history, currently focusing increasingly on the history of emotions, history of mentality,

history of genders, or history of the environment. Genres matter as well, but they are not decisive in identifying special themes, issues, concerns, troublesome topics, and motifs in the various narratives. Critical questions can be raised in drama, heroic epics, courtly poems, verse narratives,

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romances, or novels. In many respects, literature addresses human life and serves, if it meets a basic qualitative standard, as a mirror of our existence, often refracted through the historical distance from the Middle Ages to our own world, for instance, but fundamental aspects have always been in the center of the narrative discourse. Those pertain to love, death, happiness, the quest for God, the relationship between humans and their natural environment, and finally also identity, whether male or female, or anything in-between, as we acknowledge today in liberal societies.

The latter topic will be the focus of this study, especially concerning gender identity, and then, even more specifically, masculinity. While in the past, we had naively assumed that gender roles were cleanly established since birth, that is as male or female, today we understand much better the constructive nature of gender within its social context. However, it amounts to yet another wrong stereotype to assume that medieval poets were completely ignorant of this phenomenon and depicted only physically strong and active males and aesthetically pleasing but passive females. Romances such as Heldris de Cornwall's *Roman de Silence* (mid-thirteenth century) and the *chanson de geste*, *La chanson d'Yde et Olive et de Croissant* (late thirteenth century) already signaled a curious awareness that social gender was often the result of public assumptions as if character attributes were absolute and invariable. Hence, the new theoretical concepts underpinning Masculinity Studies make it possible for us now to re-read many pre-modern texts (or art works) in new light.

Recent theoretical discussions have isolated, above all, the problem of 'toxic masculinity' (De Dauw and Connell, ed., 2020; Racette-Campbell and McMaster, ed., 2024), but this would be too narrow in the quest for our more global understanding of what male gender identity could have been or continues to be until today (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Connell, 2020; Harrington 2020; McGlashan and Mercer, ed., 2023). All gender identities – male, female, binary, etc. – are the result of a long process of social negotiations and formations and are not simply written in stone (Kiefer, ed., 2009). And most individuals would have to admit both in the past and in the present that their identity consists of many different features, qualities, and characters. In short, the discourse on masculinity – or by the same token

on femineity, binary, gay identity, etc. – proves to be an ongoing process we have to try to understand well so that we can come to terms with it and approach it sensitively and respectfully since it has such a deep impact on society at large until today. To be sure and to re-emphasize it for clarity's sake, social gender is not determined at the moment of conception. Instead, it is, apart from the biological gender, the result of countless social, economic, political, or religious forces influencing the individual, as Judith Butler has taught us already several decades ago (Butler 1990; Butler 1993).

There are many possible avenues toward that goal of analyzing the formative process of masculinity, and here I suggest, following many previous scholars, the literary discourse as one of the most intriguing ways to gain deeper insight into the issue at hand. Poets and writers regularly present projections of successful or failed identity formations, perhaps best represented by the so-called *Bildungsroman* in which the young protagonist goes through a long process to find him/herself and to establish a firm self-awareness and confidence to cope within society. One of the earliest examples of this genre might be Wolfram von Eschenbach's grail romance, *Parzival* (ca. 1205), in part based on the French romance *Perceval* (ca. 1170) by Chrétien de Troyes, and from then on, we could trace its development until the twentieth (James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1916; Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 1924; cf. Jeffers 2005; Summerfield and Downward 2010) and twenty-first century (for a particularly useful overview and detailed list of relevant novels from throughout the ages, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman>; for most recent comments, however, see the scholarly contributions to Graham, ed., 2021).

As medievalists have learned in recent years, the concept of 'masculinity' can serve very well to engage more critically with some or most of our surviving literary examples where problems with the protagonist emerge (Cohen and Wheeler, ed., 2000; Karras 2003; Pigg 2010). After all, the entire corpus of courtly love poetry was predicated on a man's quest for his lady's unrequited love, which more often than not did not yield any results in practical terms, whereas the wooing itself is recognized, at least within the poetic sphere, as the most relevant process that allowed the young nobleman to gain

a deeper understanding of himself in his gender role vis-à-vis women. Courtly romances were more concerned with the individual male protagonist and the challenges waiting for him in the outside world, such as in the case of Hartmann von Aue's *Erec* (ca. 1180; based in part on Chrétien de Troyes's eponymous romance, ca. 1160).

As much as *Erec* performs exceedingly well as a knight, it quickly becomes quite clear that without his wife Enite's help, he would fail the challenges that he has to face. However, for a long time, he punishes her more and more for alerting him to the imminent dangers. Only fairly at the end, after he has woken up from a coma, does he realize that his concept of masculinity is not sufficient to survive in the world of violence, robbery, and jousts. He is simply in great need of his wife Enite's support (Classen 2008). In short, even here, the concept of masculinity was already debated.

Heroic epics presented conflicts between the male hero and monsters or other threats which normal people could not face with any hope for victory. Masculinity was often not fully questioned and did not constitute a true issue when a male protagonist had to struggle against another male, such as in the alliterative Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1387). Recent research, however, has also recognized the extent to which even there the individual protagonist faces, at least in the background, highly influential females without whom he could not survive, which unsettles the entire gender debate further because Gawain's masculinity suddenly proves to be at stake because it is unstable – he becomes the target of the courtly lady's sexual pursuit and he feels almost unable to resist her repeated seduction attempts.

The situation seems to have changed by the thirteenth century, as was reflected particularly by the rise of new literary genres, such as the fabliau, the *mære*, the tale, or the novelle. The anonymous verse narrative *Mauritius von Craûn* (ca. 1220), for instance, presents a male protagonist who does everything in his power to impress his lady and to win her love, but he outdoes himself, finally confuses love with a contract, thus rapes the countess, and subsequently abandons her. The reader of this text has no other choice but to view this male figure as a caricature of traditional courtly values, and

hence also of masculinity in courtly terms (Classen 2019). Scholarship has noticed, for instance, that increasingly female protagonists gain the upper hand and are described as surprisingly independent, witty, cunning, and willing and ready to take on their own agency, and this often at the cost of the male partners in many different stories (Classen 2021). Concomitantly, marriage as the traditional form of partnership to form a family became increasingly a staging ground for conflicts, debates, and negotiations between the two genders (this topic has been discussed already at length; see, for instance, Andersen, ed., 1991; Karnein 1997; d'Avray 2005). In fact, late medieval literature commonly reflects on tensions between marriage partners – an issue which Marie de France had already addressed in her *lais* (ca. 1190; cf. Kinoshita and McCracken 2012, 87–89, 150–51; 152–53, et passim; see also my comments on “*Eliduc*” above).

Masculinity in the Works of Konrad von Würzburg
To explore this issue more concretely, this study turns to a most remarkable verse narrative by the South German poet Konrad von Würzburg, whose wide range of works have already been acknowledged as major contributions to the history of German literature (Lienert 1991). He flourished at the end of the thirteenth century and left us both long romances (*Partonopier und Meliur*) and numerous short verse tales. He is also famous for his *Der trojanische Krieg* (The Trojan War), the romance *Engelhart*, and the religious allegory, *Die goldene Schmiede* (Brunner 1985; Brand 2000/2009; Stock, ed., 2023). However, as far as I can tell, the topic of masculinity in Konrad's works has not yet been fully addressed, if at all. Focusing on the brilliant verse narrative *Heinrich von Kempten* from ca. 1261, we have an excellent opportunity to explore various features of masculinity, which is both critiqued and supported by the poet (Konrad von Würzburg 1924/1968). The text has survived in seven full manuscripts and in one fragment, most of them from the early fourteenth century, but one was copied at the end of the fourteenth century and one as late as ca. 1645 (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 10100a; this one lists as a source from which it copied the text a manuscript version from 1402, which has not survived; for a list of all manuscripts, see <https://handschriftencensus.de/6609>; for an excellent analysis of the manuscript tradition, see Schnyder 2023).

Scholarship has recognized the high literary quality of this poem already for a long time, as documented by the critical comments in many different specialized studies and then also in literary history (cf., e.g., Bumke 1990, 285). Konrad drew from a Latin source, Godfrey of Viterbo's *Pantheon* (ca. 1190), but he addressed a specific historical event, an incident at the court of Emperor Otto IV, and later another one during the siege of Milan. While scholars have correctly noticed the strong presence of violence throughout the narrative and have pointed out at the same time the complete absence of women (Kellner 2004), the question of masculinity does not yet seem to have been addressed adequately (for a survey, see Brandt 2009, 100–02, with a brief summary of the relevant research literature; see, especially, Dobozy 1988; the most recent survey was provided by Liebttag Miller 2023, but his research is already a little outdated and only indicates, apart from a good reflection on our current knowledge, what research desiderata there might be).

The honorable and greatly respected knight *Heinrich von Kempten* serves as the tutor of a young nobleman, the son of the Duke of Swabia, and takes him to the imperial court to acquire traditional and standard “hovezuht” (50; courtly manners). Before dinner is served, however, the youth already feels hungry and grabs a piece of bread from the table. The imperial steward observes this with the greatest irritation because it breaks, as he sees it, the standard norms of courtly manners, so he hands out an extreme punishment, and this irrespective of the child's young age. He beats the ‘culprit’ so badly with a staff that he falls down bleeding on the head. Heinrich observes this with greatest anger, attacks the steward, and then slays him in the course of their bitter exchange which amounts to a mutual challenge of their respective identity and masculinity. The narrator calls Heinrich von Kempten “ein ritter ūzerwelt” (94; a highly accomplished knight), filled with a “edel muot” (96; noble mind), who is committed to “rīlicher manheit” (97; brave masculinity). After all, he is the mentor of the young prince, so he was obviously selected because of his character strength. But the vehement and rash response to the steward's actions and words problematize all that.

Tragically, as the narrator informs us, the emperor is similarly known for his brutality as a ruler and that

he would never take back his words once he would have touched his beard, which signals that the death penalty is to be imposed on Heinrich (4–13). Indeed, as soon as he has discovered the bloody corpse on the floor of his palace, he swears: “ir garnet ez, sam mir mīn bart” (242; you will pay for it, by my beard). Heinrich now realizes that his life is lost unless he makes a radical move. In his desperation, he jumps upon the emperor and drags him at his beard out of his chair, across the table, and down to the floor. With the knife at his throat, he threatens to kill Otto if he does not let him live and grant him freedom. Otto has to submit to this, but he warns Heinrich never to come into his presence again, otherwise he would have to die.

Later, however, the protagonist is forced to join the military contingent of his feudal lord, the Abbot of Kempten, who in turn is required to join Otto's army when he fights against Milan and tries to conquer that recalcitrant city in Northern Italy. Heinrich, afraid of potential danger for him, pitches his tent far away from the main army to avoid running into the emperor who at that point knows nothing about his presence. One day, the emperor has a secret meeting with representatives of Milan assuming that he could take the city peacefully, but those have really set up an ambush intent on killing him. At that moment, Heinrich is actually sitting in his bathtub and observes from the distance what evolves in front of his eyes, a direct ambush of and attack against the emperor (560–67).

Horried about this treason committed by the Italians (for treason in the Middle Ages at large, though without a reference to Konrad's narrative, see Tracy, ed., 2019), the protagonist, not caring about his own life, jumps out of the water and, naked as he is, grabs his shield and sword and rushes toward the group of people, fighting with all his might to liberate the emperor from his potential assassins, killing many of the enemies, chasing away the others, and then he simply returns, completely undisturbed by this enormous rush of energy and the fight against the Italians, to his tub as if nothing had happened. The narrator has only words of praise for him: “und dô der ritter zūhtec / den keiser hæte enbunden, / dô lief er an den stunden / nacket in daz bat hin wieder” (596–99; once the knight had bravely liberated the emperor, he ran, all naked, immediately back to the bath; the term ‘zūhtec’ carries, as was not unusual

in any medieval language, numerous meanings; cf. Ehrismann 1995, 248–53).

Of course, the emperor, now having regained his safety, is completely stunned about this naked knight who had bravely beaten back the traitors and inquires among his courtiers about the identity of his savior. Filled with anger about the Italians' treason, he sings a song of great praise of the unknown warrior who had rescued him without asking for any recognition or award. In other words, Heinrich had carried out his deed entirely selflessly and at a great risk for his own life, and we would have to underscore here that he had rushed to the defense of his worst enemy, the emperor.

Otto knows only too well that he would have lost his life if the naked knight had not arrived in the last minute, so the emperor promises to provide him with a huge reward (620). As he pronounces, "nie ritter wart sô tiure / noch sô frech ân allen spot" (628–29; seriously, no other knight has ever been so bold and so daring). Whoever he might be, he states, he would be grateful to him for the rest of his life (635).

In fact, the emperor identifies his rescuer as the worthiest knight on earth (636–37), so he fully acknowledges his bravery and hence also his great demonstration of masculinity in purest form, thus granting him the highest praise. Those at court who know Heinrich and are fully aware of the emperor's strong anger about him from the past only tell Otto that his savior suffers from the emperor's disgrace. If the latter would let go of his anger, they would introduce the outstanding knight to him. Just as a side note, we can observe the same topic in the anonymous *Herzog Ernst* (ms. A., ca. 1180; ms. B., ca. 1220). But Duke Ernst is never questioned in his masculinity and only needs to regain Emperor Otto's grace upon his return from the mythical East, which he gains through some deception by the other courtiers. By Konrad's time (end of the thirteenth century), however, the issue of masculinity had obviously gained in prominence and was regarded as unstable.

Willing to accept that condition, the emperor in *Heinrich von Kempten* pronounces that even if the mysterious rescuer had killed his own father, he would grant him his mercy as a reward for his astounding act of fighting spirit, loyalty, and strength

(658–61). Only then do the courtiers introduce Heinrich to Otto, which shocks the emperor, but at the same time, he now recognizes and praises him as the true hero who he really is. In fact, he even acknowledges his courage and bravery when he had saved his own life by attacking the emperor in the past: "wand er ouch die getürstekeit / truog in sîme herzen hôch / daz er bî dem barte zôch / einen kaiser über tisch" (670–73; since he greatly held the boldness in his heart to pull an emperor at his beard across the table).

Otto then stages a game and pretends, when Heinrich is brought to him, to hold great wrath against him. The protagonist tries to defend himself by pointing out that his feudal obligation to the Abbot of Kempten had forced him to join the army. But then the emperor bursts out laughing (719) and praises him greatly, welcoming him most dearly, acknowledging that Heinrich had saved his life (726–27) (for the epistemological function of laughter, see Classen, ed., 2010; there, I did not discuss *Heinrich von Kempten* but another verse narrative by Konrad von Würzburg where laughter also plays a significant role). Thus, all tensions are finally resolved, the knight enjoys the emperor's greatest respect and love once again, and the latter rewards him with much wealth. The poet then concludes with the significant observation: "sîn manheit frevel unde starc / brâht in in hôhen rîchtuom / unde in ganzer wirde ruom / daz man sîn noch gedenket wol" (740–43; His manliness, bravery, and strength gained him much wealth and highest honor, and for that he deserves to be remembered).

Masculinity and Its Many Features

To gain a better understanding of the messages, concepts, and values contained in this verse narrative, or to recognize the specific comments regarding the role of masculinity here, we need to unpack some of the thematic elements that appear to be almost contradictory at first sight. Heinrich serves as a tutor, and so he enjoys great respect from his lord, the Duke of Swabia, who entrusted his young son to the protagonist's care. We do not learn much about him except that he commands an "edel muot" (96; noble spirit) characterized by his "rîlicher manheit" (97; strong manhood). His primary concern is to raise the prince "nâch ganzer wirde zôch" (101; to educate him worthily). Witnessing the brutal attack by the steward, it is entirely natural and to be

expected that Heinrich feels greatly upset about the evil man, his lack of compassion (103), and hence his brutality, especially because the prince was only a child and did nothing but to break off a piece of white bread because he was hungry and could not wait for the dinner to start.

The narrator specifically explains that the boy acted like children tend to do, lacking knowledge or even awareness of the courtly rules that provide the steward with the absolute power to control the dinner rituals and hence courtly society at large. In fact, the poet mirrors considerable sensitivity toward children who cannot wait for the food to be served: “daz si gerne enbîzen fruo” (70; they like to start eating right away) (as to the history of childhood in the Middle Ages, see Orme 2001; Classen, ed., 2005; Classen 2005). The reaction by the steward clearly indicates his lack of self-control, his volatile character, his violent aggression which does not even stop at a child, and his carelessness regarding other people and their needs in all his operations. There is no compassion in his heart, no love for children, and no understanding of a child’s basic needs. We might argue that toxic masculinity has taken over the steward, whom Heinrich blames for his merciless hitting of the boy: “als unerbermeclîchen sluoc” (103; when you it the child brutally).

Indeed, the steward hits the young prince so badly that he would have almost killed him, and this over a small piece of bread he had taken from the dinner table, a minuscule transgression of the courtly rules. It is no wonder that Heinrich then reacts so vehemently against the steward, although killing him in that incident also appears as extreme. This similarly indicates, we might argue, a lack of moderation and communicative skills on both sides. Heinrich explicitly criticizes the steward for his profound mistake: “nu wie getorstet ir geleben” (137; how dare you to keep living). The narrator uses a brutal language to describe the slaying of the steward who is drastically robbed of his humanity when Heinrich strikes him so terribly that his entire body swirls and twists “sam ein topf” (151; like a bowl). Although the courtly company responds with shouts and screams, “lûtgebrehte grôz” (158; great noise), Heinrich does not seem to demonstrate any emotions after his killing; all we learn is that he is taken to the emperor and charged for that murder. Ironically, however, Otto acts out the same role and

turns to violence: “jâ, sprach der keiser rîche, / hât im der sînen lîp benomen, / sô ist er uns ze früeje komen / von Swâben her in dîtze lant” (176–79; the mighty emperor said: “Well,” said the mighty emperor, “if he has killed that man, he has come here from Swabia too early”).

There is much wrong at Emperor Otto’s court since physical aggression is practiced openly and with vengeance, especially because the latter has subscribed to mean and dangerous language (threats) and carries out cruel acts against his subjects in case of even small infractions. In this situation, three powerful men collided, each one of them claiming his masculine authority, and each one of them willing to resort to murder; the most drastic expression of ‘toxic masculinity.’

Altogether, as we can conclude, in this situation two men clash against each other both struggling to maintain and demonstrate their masculinity, which results in the slaying of the steward. The term ‘murder,’ as the emperor subsequently characterizes Heinrich’s deed, at least indirectly (173), might be too harsh, but it certainly mirrors the factual outcome of their fighting. Formally, after all, the steward had some right to punish the child, yet, equally formally, Heinrich was correct in defending the prince with all his might. But in essence, Konrad presents here a typical fight between two men who both claim to be entitled to their public role at the imperial court.. Blood is shed, and the steward is dead. For the emperor, who is described as a volatile and brutal ruler, the slaying of the steward constituted a direct attack against his own person and authority (172–73; as to the often very negative view of Emperor Otto both in historical narratives and literary texts, see Neudeck 2003). Consequently, he wants to see Heinrich executed, but he has not counted on the protagonist’s resoluteness and bravery, which both rescue him from this terrible dilemma and threat to his life.

However, in the second episode, Heinrich operates just the same way, which then saves the emperor from a terrible situation, and perhaps even from being slain by the Italian traitors. Otto bursts out laughing when he recognizes that the same man whom he had wanted to see executed is the same one who protected him so valiantly outside of the city walls of Milan. As he has to realize, without this

inner character strength of rushing to the defense of any innocent victim, either the young Swabian prince or the emperor himself, Otto would not have had a chance against the attackers. Heinrich thus gains the highest respect for his action, although we cannot deny that the slaying of the steward was not fully justified.

Along with many previous scholars (see, for instance, Brandt 2000/2009), we can only agree that Konrad's verse narrative casts a rather negative light on the world of masculinity governed by aggression and violence. However, we would also ignore the positive aspects present in both episodes. After all, Heinrich was tasked to take good care of the young child, to protect him, and to teach him courtly mores. Thus the protagonist became deeply irritated when he saw his entrusted student so badly mistreated by the volatile steward and seriously wounded. What concept of justice dominates in this tale? To answer this question and to gain a better understanding of the role of masculinity as displayed here, let's return to the second episode, which constitutes a most unusual scene for which there is, as far as I can tell, no parallel in medieval or early modern literature.

Both his nakedness and the fact that Heinrich is taking a bath deserve closer analysis in anthropological terms (Classen 2008b). The critical issue, however, consists of his deep sense of justice and honor that do not allow treason to go unpunished. Irrespective of the fact that the emperor had threatened him with the death penalty if he ever were to see him in his presence, Heinrich ignores all that and rushes out to defend his lord. He is not even concerned with any physical danger to himself in that situation, and hence he fights with such a force, resoluteness, and energy that the Italians have to flee and leave the emperor alone.

Otto is thus strongly encouraged to reflect on Heinrich's masculinity, what it means for him specifically, and how he wants to handle or judge various types of masculine behavior at his court, whether it threatens or saves him. In particular, the steward brought his death upon himself because of his excessive usurpation of his public role and his toxic worldview. While we are invited to recognize that the emperor's own legal judgment in the first episode was unjustified, brutal, and simply wrong, the second episode underscores that he recognized

the supreme importance of Heinrich's masculine role in fighting that dangerous ambush. Otto thus takes on rather contradictory roles, at first rejecting and later welcoming back the protagonist, all this depending on the circumstances. In the first case, the killing of the steward appeared to be a direct threat against the emperor's reputation, so he tried to get Heinrich executed. But in the second case, the protagonist comes to his rescue, which proves to be a most welcome, actually a life-saving action which Otto fully approves of and praises highly, as to be expected.

By contrast, Heinrich operates consistently, always stepping up to the plate when he is called upon directly or indirectly to rescue a helpless victim. He is careless, brutal, decisive, resolute, but also tries with all his might to do what he considers the right thing to be, protecting those who depend on his assistance. The steward, by contrast, responds angrily and haughtily to the knight's severe charges that he had acted incorrectly, uncourtly, unjustly, and irreverently against the duke's son (115–17). Irrespective of the fact that the 'culprit' is only a child, the young prince holds a much higher rank than the steward, which Heinrich then takes as his valid excuse to punish the steward by slaying him. He reminds him that he hurt "den fürsten edelîch" (132; the noble prince), and he characterizes him as a "tugentlôser böesewicht" (136; evil person without any virtues). The steward defends his authority having punished the child with a reference to his public position as administrator or manager (120) and to his specific charge of keeping a tight control over rogues or pranksters, and all those who misbehave and disregard the concrete rules that he himself is tasked to uphold (121–23). But then he oversteps his authority by insulting Heinrich, dismissing him as someone whom he would not fear at all, comparing himself with a falcon and the opponent with a bunny (126–27). In fact, he dares the protagonist: "waz welt ir nû dar umbe tuon / daz ich den herzogen sluoc?" (128–29; what do you want to do about me having beaten the duke). In other words, he recognizes the child's high rank, but he dismisses it completely since he regards himself, as the court steward, as superior to the duke's son and also to Heinrich. In his case, then, toxic masculinity is fully at display. The consequence for him is that the latter slays him with a sturdy staff, striking him so vehemently that the body spins around, that the skull bursts open, and that the dead

man falls to the ground, spilling his brain and blood on the floor (146–56).

The encounter between these two men could not be more horrendous, with the steward acting out his egregious arrogance and haughtiness and Heinrich punishing him just brutally. The steward's evil character in this narrative finds many other examples in courtly and other literature (Haupt 1971; but as to the different role of the court steward Keie in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, see Classen 1988). However, only here does he suffer death for his extreme insistence that even children must observe his own and very strict rules, for his attitude that a duke's son does not matter to him, and for his pronouncement that he would openly disrespect the worthy knight Heinrich although he is the appointed teacher and guardian of the noble child.

Yet, even the protagonist would then have almost faced the same problem since Emperor Otto does not recognize the opponent's right and tries to crush his masculinity since he treats his action as a direct attack against his own person. Much later, when Heinrich rushes out of his tent against the enemies to rescue him from the dangerous situation, all naked and armed only with the shield and sword, does Otto realize that the role of the male hero has to be viewed through various lenses. He alone cannot properly judge the protagonist because he views him at first only as an obstreperous knight who had unjustly 'murdered' his steward. While Heinrich emerges as a consistent and noble character, neither the steward nor the emperor strikes us as respectable and dignified.

We clearly recognize hence the intermingling of different male roles, political functions, personal tasks, and inner strength or virtues. Killing the steward might be regarded as an excessive and condemnable act of violence, but the circumstances cast the action in a rather complex light. The second episode develops differently, but only then does Otto comprehend that Heinrich is a worthy and powerful knight who comes to anyone's rescue whenever he is truly needed, irrespective of any dangers that might threaten him. The emperor's rash and mean decision-making was public knowledge: "was mitalle ein übel man" (9; altogether, he was an evil man), and Heinrich was fully aware of the critical consequences once he had killed the steward

and once Otto had pronounced his judgment against Heinrich (245–55). All his efforts to gain the emperor's grace and forgiveness, to appeal to him to examine the situation carefully and thus to acknowledge his own innocence despite the fact that he killed the steward out of revenge for his evil deeds, are in vain and he faces his death. This forces him to attack the emperor, certainly a demonstration of his extraordinary boldness and courage. It takes the rest of the narrative for Otto to recognize that and to give Heinrich the full credit that he truly deserves. Altogether, *Heinrich von Kempten* is characterized by the interaction of various leading male characters, constantly determined by the outburst of violence. The poet wants to project the protagonist as an ideal knight, but even Heinrich demonstrates some lack of self-control.

Final Comments, with a Reference to Konrad's *Partonopier und Meliur*

Konrad obviously operated with the issue of masculinity also in other works, especially his lengthy courtly romance *Partonopier und Meliur* (ca. 1277; for a digitized version, see <https://archive.org/details/konradsvonwrzbu00bartgoog/page/n24/mode/2up>; based on the edition by Bartsch 1871). For the present purpose, it would go beyond the limits of this study to engage with this major work in detail once again, especially since it has already been discussed numerous times (see, e.g., Rikl 1996; Plotke 2023; Roch 2024). What matters for us is only the way of how the poet projects the male character who appears to be rather immature at the beginning and is extremely subject, on the one hand, to his mother's and a bishop's authority, and on the other, to his invisible mistress, Meliur, which explains why he loses all his orientation and also identity once she has condemned and expelled him.

Through magical power, the Byzantine princess has lured Partonopier to her court, but she remains invisible to him, which appears to be uncanny and the result of demonic powers to the queen and the cleric. So, they finally convince him to use similarly magical lamps to expose his beloved, but once he has made her appear in physical terms, he has broken the taboo she had imposed on him, so she rejects him and sends him away. The poor man becomes completely downfallen and retires from the world, hiding in the wilderness, having thus lost all his senses of masculinity. It takes the entire lengthy

romance for Partonopier to recover his identity and hence also his masculinity, and eventually he succeeds in regaining his strength and identity enough to win the final tournament that secures Meliur's hand in marriage for him.

Konrad did not craft a *Bildungsroman* as Wolfram von Eschenbach did with his *Parzival*, but *Partonopier und Meliur* still proves to be an excellent literary enterprise to explore the meaning of masculinity that is very weak and even shaky at the beginning, that then collapses entirely, and needs to be rebuilt over time, and this especially with the help of Meliur's sister Irkane (Classen 2004). We could probably gain many more insights into the gender discourse both in Konrad's Middle High German version and in his French source, the anonymous Partonopeus de Blois. We can also expect to gain more insights into the gender discourse and the role of masculinity in Konrad's verse romance, *Engelhard*.

Conclusion

While the focus of this study rested on Konrad von Würzburg's *Heinrich von Kempten*, we could realize more broadly how much medieval poets explored the issue of masculinity in all its complexities and problematic nature, depending on the specific circumstances. Heinrich strikes us as worthy, honorable, and brave, but he was also highly irritable and harsh, at least against the steward. By contrast, in the second episode, all this translated into praiseworthy resoluteness and bravery when those virtues were needed the most. In *Partonopier und Meliur*, by contrast, the protagonist is lacking in his masculinity and needs a long time to grow up and to establish his masculinity because women – his mother and then his beloved, Meliur – have destroyed it. There was not one single role model for men in the Middle Ages, as Konrad suggested, with much of this issue depending on the external and internal circumstances, as we could also observe in his romance *Engelhard* in which two friends cooperate closely and ultimately succeed to achieve happiness and a fulfilled life through their mutual assistance especially in most critical cases where their existence and masculinity are at stake.

Heinrich von Kempten is certainly projected as a worthy and honorable knight, particularly at the end of the verse narrative. However, he was also challenged in his masculinity and demonstrated

that this gender role was easily in danger of exploding or imploding. Killing the steward was certainly a terrible act, whereas threatening the emperor with death proved to be the only possible solution in that case. Most importantly, Heinrich at the end rescues the emperor although he was a danger to him. For Heinrich, his male virtues superseded any possible fear, so he rises tremendously in Otto's esteem. Considering Partonopier, however, we encounter an astoundingly weak male character who needs to grow for a long time before he can establish his social position and identity sufficiently enough to marry Meliur. With these critical insights in hand, we can hope to gain a better understanding of other male characters in medieval literature.

To be sure, Konrad von Würzburg deserves our credit for demonstrating a considerable sensitivity regarding the problematic nature of masculinity that could easily clash with too high social norm expectations and destroy the protagonist. The protagonist Heinrich in the first verse novella displays both aggressive brutality in slaying the steward and amazing bravery in rescuing the emperor; he is a man determined both by a certain degree of toxicity and a noble character disregarding the risks for his own life.

Already Marie de France indicated in her *Lais* (ca. 1190) how much masculinity was constructed and a result of social debates, hence could be identified as the result of a rather unstable and even fragile discourse. In her "Eliduc," for instance, the main character knows well how to operate in practical terms, especially as a warrior, but when he faces a dilemma in his love life, he basically collapses and is rescued only when his wife steps in and makes a radical decision that provides him freedom to pursue his new love. Once we turn our attention to many of the Arthurian romances and also late medieval prose novels (see, for instance, the anonymous *Fortunatus*, 1509), we can realize the usefulness of the theoretical notion of masculinity against which the courtly heroes and other male figures tend to be measured and more often than not then fail. Of course, we could then turn to the presentation of women in medieval literature and expect to find similar results concerning the constructiveness of individual identity. While the father, Fortunatus, faces enormous dangers throughout his life, and this although he had gained a magical purse and hence

infinite wealth, his sons prove to be failures and become victims of their inner character weaknesses. Christopher Liebttag Müller (2023, 228) rightly pointed out that this topic represents an important desideratum, underscoring the deep extent to which also in medieval literature the concept of masculinity was the result of extensive negotiations.

To return to our first literary example, it is worth noting that in this masterpiece of novelistic writing in the Middle Ages (short verse narrative, a *mære*), in *Heinrich von Kempten*, no female characters appear, whereas individual males compete against each other, which repeatedly reveal the dangerous consequences of extreme manifestations of (toxic) masculinity. The present study hopes to have illustrated more clearly than before how Konrad von Würzburg was at the forefront of exploring this critical issue and exposing numerous ideological, sociological, and psychological aspects in the formation of male identity in late thirteenth-century German society.

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