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German Studies Association Conference Session 107: Fury: Aspects of Medieval German Literature AND Session 125: Encountering the East in Medieval German Literature. German Studies Association.

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Two sessions on Medieval German Literature (GSA 2003)

Together, these two well-attended sessions presented new research to a growing number of Mediaevisten at the GSA. In their treatment of emotions and cultural identity, the six presenters provided fresh perspectives on the vexing question of medieval subjectivity and the extent to which it may have differed from modern experience. <p> The first panel focused on the representation of "fury" in medieval texts, not only as found in heroic epics and courtly romance, but also as part of contemporary medical discourse. Stephen Mark Carey led off the session by examining rage as a sublimated expression of sexual desire in Wolfram von Eschenbach's <cite>Parzival</cite> and the <cite>Nibelungenlied</cite>. Blood was often the visible symbol that bound desire and rage, as seen in the knight's frequent donning of his lady's garments during the joust, which he then returned, marked by the blood of his battles, so that his lady might wear it as a token of his service. In this context, the blood that spurts from Siegfried's fingernails during his struggle with Bruenhild in Gunther's chambers, soiling the queen's garments and bedsheets, is an indication of the Siegfried's unchecked sexual desire for the Icelandic queen. Similarly, Parzival clenches his fist in rage and spurts blood from his fingernails onto the coat of Repanse de Schoye when he first enters the Grail Castle, revealing a sexual subcontext to his actions at Munsalvaesche. <p> While Marian Polhill also treated the <cite>Nibelungenlied</cite> in her paper, her analysis focused primarily on rage and passion as defined in two late medieval medical tracts, Konrad von Megenberg's <cite>Buch der Natur</cite> from ca. 1348, and the <cite>Tierbuch</cite> of ca. 1478 by Hans Minner, a pharmacist's administrator in Zurich. These works are typical for contemporary medical discourse in attributing the emotions to humoral, planetary, or demonic influence. Since their sources are also known, Polhill was able to trace the alterations undertaken by Konrad and Minner in compiling their handbooks. Using the example of the sparrow, whose hot nature produces passion, Polhill demonstrated that Konrad gives a Christian reinterpretation to the Aristotelian natural history of his source materials, while Minner consistently reinterprets in favor of Galenic humoral theory. Uniting both medical tracts with the <cite>Nibelungenlied</cite> is the emphasis on "mÃ¢ze," measured temperance and balance in all activities. <p> Bill Layher's interpretation of degenerate heroism in the thirteenth-century <p> <cite>Rosengarten</cite> examined how rage subverts the "mÃ¢ze" traditionally associated with Dietrich von Bern, the model warrior of German heroic epic. When challenged by Siegfried to a battle, Dietrich at first declines, mindful of Siegfried's horned skin. Through a ploy by his vassal Hildebrand, however, Dietrich becomes so enraged that he begins to breathe fire, softening Siegfried's natural armor and driving him from the field. Pointing to further evidence of Dietrich's fire breathing in other Germanic traditions, Layher convincingly argued that this trait reveals a darker side of the warrior. As both hero and dragon-like monster, Dietrich embodies the dialectic at work in all heroic epic:

Even as the hero's prowess protects society from external threats, his frequently uncontrollable passions threaten the social order from within. <p> In its analyses of contemporary responses to a perceived Islamic threat, the panel on "Encountering the East" demonstrated that the Middle Ages are indeed often, in the words of Barbara Tuchman, a distant mirror. In his opening contribution, Jerold Frakes examined the political implications of Middle High German Crusader Lyric. Whereas previous scholarship has primarily analyzed "Kreuzlieder" in the context of secular or religious Minne, Frakes gave numerous examples in which crusade lyric had a clear propagandistic function in the ideological conflict between Christianity and Islam. Where there are positive representations of Muslims, whether in lyric or in epic such as <cite>Parzival</cite>'s Feirifiz, the nobility of these individuals serves only to mark them as candidates for conversion, constructing nobility and honor as inherently Christian qualities. However, Frakes also noted the research of Ursula Schulze, which reveals that crusade lyric is not necessarily always pro-crusade. A closer analysis is necessary in all cases to determine a work's deeper political agenda. <p> Samuel Willcocks's treatment of Konrad's <cite>Rolandslied</cite> focused on the logistics of communication within the work and the author's claims for veracity. Willcocks identified four primary tropes of communication–the written message, the seal, the envoy, and the angelic messenger, which varied according to their reliability. Not surprisingly, the epic implies that Muslims lack the most powerful guarantor of truth and reliable information, the angelic messenger. In general, Konrad portrays the Muslims' means of communication as deficient, which leads to a lack of both military and religious understanding. At the same time, Konrad himself assures the reader of the veracity of his tale by invoking divine authority. <p> In the session's final paper, Glenn Ehrstine explored the bivalent representation of the Turkish sultan found in <cite>Des Turken Vasnachtspil</cite>, performed in Nuremberg soon after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. While the sultan is subjected to physical threats and obscene scatological diatribe by ambassadors of the pope, emperor, and electoral princes, he simultaneously articulates the complaints of Nuremberg merchants and tradesmen against the greed of the nobility and the lawlessness of the empire. This bivalence is a result of the sultan's status as "other": Standing outside of local political and religious hierarchies, the sultan has license to address political gravamina, yet that same foreignness places him beyond normative social taboos concerning bodily and sexual decorum, allowing his vilification through the customary carnivalesque violation of such norms. <p> In both sessions, the papers were followed by insightful commentary and questions. Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand noted that, after long being a matter of clichÃ© and speculation, the emotions of the Middle Ages are now the attention of serious research, such as Barbara Rosenwein's <cite>Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages</cite>. Moreover, in their exploration of fury, the papers of the first session demonstrated that the civilizing process detailed by Norbert Elias was not always linear. Rasma Lazda-Cahers found the papers of the second sessions evocative of Homi Bhabha's enriched liminal space. <p> Together, the two panels demonstrated that YMAGINA (Young Medievalist Germanists in North America) has firmly established itself as a creative presence at the annual German Studies Association Conference. YMAGINA has now sponsored sessions at the conference for three years running, and the GSA is becoming a strong second venue for American Mediaevistik alongside the congresses of the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. This was further evidenced by session 34, "Aggression, Aggression Controls, and Civilization," with presentations by Jean Godsall-Myers, Martin H. Jones, and Albrecht Classen and commentary by Will Hasty. <p> For a complete listing of all sessions at the 2003 German Studies Association Conference, please visit `http://www.g-s-a.org`. <p>