



**The Defense of the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century:
Communication in the Literary Laboratory with a Focus on the Verse
Narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer**

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Abstract

Many times, even scholars in the Humanities do not know how to deal with literature because they work only in the field of language acquisition, linguistics, or other data-driven study areas. Not surprisingly, when the issue emerges how to explain and to defend the Humanities, the literary areas seem to be the first on the chopping block. On the one hand, we can certainly argue that there is a specific literary canon that provides the readers/students with a sense of cultural identity and history. On the other hand, it seems more significant and effective to consider literature from whatever period or written in whatever language as a kind of laboratory of human behavior. The fictional framework makes it possible to experiment with unique types of situations in human life, often in an extreme fashion, which facilitates, as any scientist working in a lab would confirm, the critical analysis without too many outside distractions. The present paper argues that we can learn much about human communication through the study of literary texts. This finds an excellent illustration in the works of the late medieval German poet Heinrich Kaufringer (ca. 1400), in whose verse narratives we encounter a plethora of various situations and conditions reflecting on ordinary cases in people's lives, with all the shortcomings and potentials pertaining to the human language and the social community.

Keywords: Literary Laboratory, Literary Texts, Medieval Literature, Communication.

Introduction: Challenges to the Humanities

It seems to be a common tendency among educational administrators and politicians to disregard, even to disdain, to discourage, and ultimately to dismiss anything smacking of pre-modern. If asked, however, what they might mean with pre-modern, we would get many different answers, ranging from pre-2000, pre-1945, pre-1900, to pre-1800, etc. When challenged to explain what they would want to see in the place of the pre-modern, that is, something from the post-modern world, confusion and disorientation might rule. Alas, presentism is in, pastism is out; history no longer matters; the current generation knows best anyway and can easily afford to ignore all that what previous generations had learned. Wisdom and experience are of little value, so it seems (but cf. now Classen 2022); economic productivity, trade-school study subjects, and grant-securing disciplines are top, as many corporate bureaucrats in charge of an academic institution seem to have claimed over time (for critical arguments against such a position, see the contributions to Jones, Kostick, and Oschema, ed.; see also the contributions to Classen, ed. 2020). Many historians have valiantly elaborated fundamental reasons for the value of their discipline (Hunt; Arnold).

Similarly, the public generally seems to assume that higher education should directly aim at preparing our students for their future careers, as if all answers for our problems today would rest in the technology of tomorrow, or at practical aspects only pertaining to the workforce of today and the immediate future. Granted, it is at times most urgent and necessary to handle the challenges of our world by looking for innovative and futuristic solutions, the

quintessential basis of all research. However, without the foundations of all that research, we cannot proceed effectively, not even in the natural sciences. In fact, for instance, as the recent development of new vaccines against COVID-19 has impressively demonstrated, by creating new knowledge based on more than hundred years of investigations, we can deal successfully with constantly emerging issues that threaten the survival of humankind. Whether we will be able to come to terms with the issue of global warming by means of technology and politics remains to be seen. Nevertheless, all this favors the modern sciences and medicine (STEM), whereas scholars and teachers in the humanities might wonder how they would fit into this larger schema of things, whether their work is still respected as an academic field of investigation, and whether society might continue to acknowledge humanistic values at all.

But could we really afford to abandon many of these ‘orchid’ disciplines and transform education into nothing but a corporate business, relying only on the concepts of cost and profitability? Aren’t there countless issues pressing on us, such as violence, war, gender conflicts, racism, agism, environmental problems, etc., for which there are scientifically no concrete answers to be expected. Instead, the soft sciences, i.e., the humanities, are called upon to engage us all in those social issues and to address them creatively and productively.

Obviously, as many scholars have already realized and expressed in many different venues and veins (e.g., Nussbaum), this corporate approach to education threatens to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater (phrase formulated already by Thomas Murner, 1512) and would only hurt human society in the long run and would undermine some of the fundamental values of our communities at large. One of many voices from throughout time emphasizing the profound value of the past for us today was the anonymous author of *The Thousand and One Nights* who emphasized in the introduction: “The lives of former generations are a lesson to posterity; that a man may review the remarkable events which have happened to others, and be admonished, and may consider the history of people of preceding ages, and of all that hath befallen them, and be restrained” (5). History thus means being “a lesson to those which follow” (5). Since this issue has already been addressed so many times – and criticized and opposed, of course – I do not intend to belabor it further here. Instead, this paper formulates an approach to literature which promises to create valuable bridges among the various disciplines and might convince the public more effectively about the great importance of literature per se.

Literature as a Platform for Communication

Medieval Literary Perspectives

To state the obvious, at least from my perspective, literature and the arts are simply important, if not critically relevant for everything we do inside and outside of academia, although their ‘practical’ value is often not easily visible or tangible. Of course, humanist scholars – including historians, anthropologists, psychologists, theologians, musicologists, etc. – are required to struggle constantly, and under much pressure by the public, to explain over and over again the profound significance of their research material and their teaching objectives. I do not intend here to carry ‘owls to Athens’ once again and to repeat what many other scholars have already convincingly illustrated in articles and monographs regarding the deep value of the humanities (see now, e.g., Edmondson). Instead, I want to emphasize one unique approach to the study of literature which has not yet been fully pursued, the concept of communication as it underlies all human interaction and as it can be discovered countless times as a central topic in fictional texts. Communication is complicated and difficult, but it is essential in everything we do; it does not come automatically; instead, it must be learned and developed in theoretical and practical terms, which invites the humanities most critically to the table (Sell 2011; Sell 2013).

Medieval literature, above all, is commonly characterized by the pivotal questions of how the protagonists can and should interact with each other in a communicative and constructive manner (Classen 2002). While human society depends decisively on the individuals’ ability to communicate effectively and successfully with each other, this ability needs to be acquired by each generation once again because we as human beings are apparently

not genetically endowed to engage with one another in a socially harmonious and mutually respectful manner. In *Erec*, for instance, originally composed by Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1150) and rendered into Middle High German by Hartmann von Aue (ca. 1170), the hero grows into a mature adult only after he has learned how to communicate with his wife and to acknowledge her as an equal partner. In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205), only when the protagonist has finally understood the concept of empathy and responsibility, expressed in the one question addressed to the Grail King Anfortas as to his well-being, can healing of society at large begin. And in the many different versions of Tristan, perhaps best formulated by Gottfried von Strassburg (ca. 1210), true love blooms only when the two partners comprehend how to communicate with each other intimately and meaningfully separate from the court. Once we begin to neglect these insights from the past, atomization of society sets in, since without commonly shared values and ideals, without unifying ethics and moral standards, no community can sustain itself over a long period of time.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on all societies here on earth have proven to be dramatic and more often than not rather deconstructive. In fact, there are ominous signs on the horizon indicating that many societies are currently on the brink of collapse, disintegration, and splitting apart, just as the world experienced it in the wake of the Black Death (1347-1351 and following). Curiously, however, a growing percentage of the world population no longer believes even in modern science and medicine and is increasingly opposed to any governmental regulations, which accelerates the threat of a global social collapse. That means that there are no references, no ideals, no values, no larger concepts left by which people could organize their lives in social terms.

Without wanting to sound alarmist, we can be certain that conflicts between people, between social groups, within marriage, among friends, within political parties etc. are a serious conflict everywhere. Divorce rates are increasing, and social cohesion is in a global decline. But neither science nor medicine, neither theology nor psychology seem to offer the desired panacea. Would the humanities then be an alternative? Indeed, optimistically speaking, studying literature, whether medieval or modern, offers itself in a most intriguing fashion to serve as an "Ethiklabor" (laboratory of ethics), as a platform for the exploration of communication, as a medium to investigate the meaning of community, compromise, coordination, and compassion.

Of course, no medieval poem or novel, no heroic epic or Shrovetide play can firmly promise to heal us modern people or to provide the keys for a solution to many of the present dilemmas we face in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the entire world of literature invites us through its fictional framework to explore the essential issues concerning us individually or collectively, providing a platform to examine fundamental human issues in imaginary terms.

Late Medieval Verse Narratives as Models of (Mis)Communication

As any scientist or medical research would confirm, to study any phenomenon or substance, we need a laboratory where we can examine the objects in isolation, in purer form, and in a controllable environment. But what is the most complex, most irrational, irregular, confusing, contradictory entity in this world? Certainly not a virus, a chemical compound, a stellar object, etc. Instead, it is the human being, in his/her historical, cultural, religious, ideological, and emotional conditions. There are, surprisingly perhaps, not too many fundamental issues that concern people throughout time and across the globe. Those are, in essence: the meaning of life, the meaning of death, God or spirituality, love, happiness, honor and dignity, and the relevance of human existence itself. Most of the conflicts involving peoples and entire societies circle around one of those issues, or a combination thereof.

While medieval courtly romances primarily address concerns of aristocratic society, since the thirteenth century we witness the emergence of a variety of short verse narratives reflecting increasingly on the world of burghers and others. The French *fabliaux*, the Middle High German *mæren*, the Italian *novelle* (e.g., Boccaccio's *Decameron*, ca. 1350), and the Middle English tales (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1400) experienced an enormous

popularity because of their inherent comic nature, sexual allusions (even obscenity), provocative comments, and social criticism (e.g., Grubmüller). While the audience was regularly invited to laugh about misunderstandings, confusions, cunning, clever deception, many of the narratives tend to present critical perspectives regarding ordinary situations in human life (Classen 2018). Wherever we look, we discover a profound interest in exploring issues with (mis)communication, maintaining community, extending compassion, and coordination, both in private (marriage) and in public (urban or aristocratic society, at times also rural communities) (cf. Bruni).

The Examples by Heinrich Kaufringer

The late medieval German poet Heinrich Kaufringer, active in the vicinity of Augsburg around 1400, was at the forefront of exploring human conflicts, especially in marriage, but also in larger contexts (Kaufringer). In “Merchants in Disagreement” (no. 23), for instance, a large number of merchants band together to travel securely with their goods. But a small gang of robbers devises a devious plan to overcome them, using a highly misleading communicative strategies. Two of them approach the merchants aggressively and claim that four of them have not paid back their loans to a count who is waiting in the nearby forest. Even though a wise and older man warns the group not to listen to those charges and to support each other, quickly individual merchants refuse to stand up for others in their group. The robbers then grab the richest victims, tie them up, and lead them away. Soon, they return and argue that eight more of them have been culprits, so they apprehend those apparently wealthy enough for their purposes, which leaves the entire group completely helpless and fearful, and thus they all become objects of pillage and robbery. As the narrator emphasizes with this story, if they all had kept together and had not let those strangers intimidate them, if they had communicated better with each other and acknowledged the value of their community, the robbers would not have had a chance against them. Lack in collectivism and extreme insistence on individualism, even in time of danger, brought them all down and caused them complete misery.

In “The Quest for the Happily Married Couple” (no. 8), a husband is deeply frustrated with his wife’s frugality and finally abandons her to search for a perfectly married couple to satisfy his curiosity. Twice he believes to have achieved his goal, but then he has to realize that the external appearance of happiness was nothing but a screen to keep the public out of their secret failure. Once the protagonist has learned his lesson, he quickly returns to his wife and accepts her as she is, counting her small shortcomings as an irrelevant factor in face of her great honor and dignity. Of course, we do not learn much about their communication, but the outcome indicates that the two marriage partners begin to listen to each other, to talk to each other openly, and to acknowledge the respectively other’s concerns so as to make their mutual life comfortable and productive for both involved. As the story indicates, which amounts to a universal lesson, of course, seeking for ‘more’ happiness’ elsewhere than in one’s own life can easily lead to the realization of how much people put on masks to pretend that they are happy and successful, whereas in reality darkness and pain rest in the background.

In “The Innocent Murderess” (no. 14), a young countess, who is about to marry the king, is badly abused, if not raped, by a deceiver who pretends to be her fiancé, the night before her wedding. When she suddenly learns the truth, she kills him by decapitation. However, she has a hard time to get rid of the corpse and must ask her guard for help. The latter suddenly betrays his own loyalty, demands sexual favor from her in return for his help, so he rapes her as well. But the poor woman then manages to throw him into the well when they are about to dump the body of the dead knight into the water. Subsequently, during her wedding night, she asks her most loyal maid to substitute for her because she herself is no longer a virgin. The maid enjoys the sexual pleasure and even wants to take the place of her mistress as the new queen; this leaves no option for the countess but to set fire to the bedroom, rescuing only her husband and locking the door, which kills the maid. She is thus indeed an innocent murderess. Surprisingly, however, thirty years later, she finally has to confess her deeds to her husband, who realizes all the suffering that she had to go through, and he acknowledges the fact that she

had been victimized and never lost her honor, having been forced to commit those three murders. The couple demonstrates a deep sense of agreement and mutual respect, empathy and support for each other, which makes it possible for the husband to acknowledge all of his wife's long-term psychological suffering and to respect her deeds in the past, as criminal as they certainly had been, as actions to protect both of their honor and thus also their happiness.

In "The Peasant Who Was [Falsely] Accused" (no. 3), a wealthy but generous and honorable peasant faces serious attacks by the local priest and the judge because they are envious of his money and would like to use their authority to malign him as a sinner and thus to punish him, which would secure a lot of money for them. As it turns out, however, the peasant, as heretical as some of his statements might sound, can demonstrate to the bishop as the judge that his own words are true, that the two accusers pursue him with evil intentions and cannot be trusted, and that honor rests in living a life in accordance with the social values and ethics fundamental for their society. In "The Monk as Love Messenger" (no. 7), a woman successfully utilizes a naïve and innocent monk to communicate to her future lover who first has to learn about her desires through the monk's complaint about his 'evil' behavior toward that woman. She had only pretended to be harassed by the young man, and had increased her laments about his alleged harassment, which ultimately teaches the knight that she really means him and has given him instructions as to how to find her in her own house. Here we face a truly facetious reflection of communication and how it can be used in matters of love to deceive the world and to achieve personal happiness.

There are many more examples in Kaufringer's works which illustrate the central concerns from a variety of perspectives; each one confirming how much human relationships depend on communication and community, on compassion and collaboration. Mutual respect and tolerance can be sustained by means of open communication and commitment to the partner. Although Kaufringer's verse narratives are situated in a late medieval context, they convey universal messages about human interaction and illustrate possible ways to improve communication and hence social well-being. Of course, we could easily expand from here and examine many other examples from world literature throughout times, finding further evidence for the general thesis developed here. Our hypothesis, however, could be confirmed particularly well through the brief analysis of Kaufringer's tales since the focus there truly rests on fundamental issues in human life brought about by the various features of human communication or miscommunication.

Conclusion

Whether we draw from the French *fabliaux* or Boccaccio's *Decameron*, whether we consult Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or the *mæren* by Kaufringer, we discover everywhere ideal literary situations to examine fundamental concerns of human communication and to build community. Those are the central needs also for our own modern society, and by way of looking at them through the lens of late medieval literature we gain access to a fictional laboratory for the close study of human behavior, human conflicts, and human interactions. This approach does not suddenly catapult the humanities, or the study of literature at large back to the center of all academic studies, but it can certainly demonstrate the fundamental values of the humanities since the discussion of these topics essentially contributes to the growth of the individual into a mature and responsible member of our society, here reflected within a literary context.

Of course, the development of a vaccine against COVID-19 is an astounding feat in medical science, but the discovery of literary models of working or failed communication equally contributes to the critical growth of our young generation. Spiritual, intellectual, and cultural health is just as important, if not more, as medical, physical well-being. Learning to communicate with each other, to collaborate and to form a community, proves to be foundational for all societies, past and present. Medieval and early modern literature offers many lessons that we still need to listen to and learn today. Of course, the same would apply to ancient or modern literature, but since my expertise rests in the Middle Ages, I have pursued this perspective through this particular historical lens. Kaufringer's messages contained in his

varied tales represent fascinating, provocative statements about the problems and conflicts, promises and potentials of human communication. Once the individual has listened to the cases presented, has reflected upon the failures and their etiology, then the actual learning process can set in.

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Bio-note

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