

COURTLY LOVE, THE LOVE OF COURTLINESS,
AND THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

*Courtly Love, the Love
of Courtliness, and
the History of Sexuality*

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not reveal what the penis means to the women nor does he suggest they have any particular reaction when they see it. He does, however, say that Parzival could not escape being caressed, presumably by his mother and her attendants, when he was found to have *manlīchiu lit* “limbs appropriate to a man.” Presumably these are the same limbs the size of which nearly costs Herzeloyde her life in childbirth.¹ Extraordinary size at birth or extraordinarily rapid growth in infancy are often understood in Middle High German (MHG) narrative as signs that a male infant will grow up into a hero of extraordinary strength.² Lest we fail to recognize the significance of the large limbs, the narrator looks into the future and informs us that this infant will indeed grow up to become a great fighter, one whose heart will be filled with *manlīch ellen* “valor appropriate to a man.” The entire passage is structured to make this point, moving deliberately from *sōlher lide*, the “large limbs” that almost kill the child’s mother, through *manlīchiu lit*, the “manly limbs” that motivate the women’s caresses, to *manlīch ellen*, the “manly valor” that the narrator promises for the future. The women caress the infant not because they see his penis but because they see his manly limbs and recognize the future hero. They caress the infant because he promises to realize a masculine gender ideal: the great fighter.

Recent translations encourage us to think otherwise. Although they render *viselīn* in a way that, though often coy, usually indicates clearly that the women are looking at a penis, they lead us astray two lines later with *manlīchiu lit*. According to Hatto, Parzival is caressed because he is “shaped like a man.”³ According to Spiewok, “da er so recht wie ein Mann gebaut war.”⁴ While not necessarily wrong, these translations are misleading. Most readers, having just been confronted with the infant’s penis, will be relieved to take “shaped like a man” as a more decorous way of referring to the same thing. Other translations leave less room for doubt. Mustard and Passage attribute the caresses to the fact that the infant “was possessed of the organ of a man,”⁵ Marchand to the fact that he “had a manly member.”⁶ But the *manlīchiu lit* are unmistakably plural—in all manuscripts as far as I can tell. Parzival is not found to have “a manly member” but “manly members,” “parts,” or “limbs.”⁷ This is crucial, since these words provide the only explanation for the women’s caresses. Translating them as “manly member” indicates that the women are responding to the penis when, in fact, they are reacting to the size of the newborn and the promise of adult heroism. It turns the passage from a prediction of heroic valor into a scene of infant sexual assault.⁸

Anyone able to translate Parzival into a modern language can tell that *manlīchiu lit* are plural. That able translators nevertheless see a singular member illustrates how difficult it is to think clearly about a scene like this

in a world where every high school student knows that the sword is a “phallic symbol” and where psychoanalytically oriented critics encourage us to think the same. Friedrich Kittler believes that “penis = sword” and that this is the scene in which Parzival receives “the phallus, which symbolically couples desire and power.”⁹ This way of thinking is so pervasive that mere philology cannot resist. Like the students and the critic, the translators begin to see sex everywhere. The translators’ pens go astray. The women’s hands go astray. But a careful reading of Wolfram’s text shows that the penis elicits no reaction from those present at Parzival’s birth, that the caresses are unrelated to the penis, and that the “manly limbs” are part of a carefully staged argument that links the infant’s size at birth to his heroic prowess as an adult.

Parzival’s penis is not an erotic object but a rhetorical flourish. Scenes of childbirth are not uncommon in medieval narrative, and they nearly always contain two elements: the announcement of the birth and the revelation of the child’s sex, usually by calling the child a son or daughter.¹⁰ Ten years after Kriemhild arrives in Xanten with Siegfried, *diu vil sch...ne vrouwe einen sun gewan* “the very beautiful lady bore a son” (715,3). When Parzival is born Wolfram says much the same. But, characteristically, Wolfram will not leave well enough alone. Not content merely to state the child’s sex, he feels he must draw our attention to the anatomical sign of maleness. It is one of the hallmarks of Wolfram’s style that it encompasses not only the exalted and abstract but also the concrete and down-to-earth. It is also characteristic of Wolfram to challenge his audience and make things difficult for them. Just a few lines after he mentions the penis, he tells us that Parzival’s mother nursed her child herself.

There are two things to be learned from this brief history that are important for the inquiries that follow. First, we must control our tendency to assume that, especially around questions of sex and sexuality, we already know the answers. In our post-Freudian, sex-saturated world, we have learned to see sex everywhere: “Sex,” Foucault remarks with disdain, “the explanation for everything.”¹⁶ But there is no reason to think the courtly culture of the high Middle Ages shared our attitude. If we are to discover their attitudes, we must respect the silences of medieval texts and resist the temptation to fill those silences with modern meanings. If Wolfram is silent about the erotic significance Parzival’s penis, it is possible he really did not think it had such a significance. Why should it? It is an infant penis, after all. Second, we will want to attend very carefully to the ways the body is invested with meaning. For Wolfram the penis is a sign of maleness, the large limbs a harbinger of adult heroism. The women attendants at the scene of Parzival’s birth seem to be of the same opinion. In a study like this,

that can bring sexual pleasure to women—or, more precisely, as something without which a man cannot provide any pleasure to a woman. Wolfram seems to distinguish between occasions when the penis figures as the object of women's erotic interest and occasions when it does not. Where erotic interest is involved, the penis is not seen; it is named indirectly and treated humorously. At Parzival's birth, however, the penis is named explicitly, it is visible to the characters involved, and it is taken seriously. This difference in treatment suggests that the infant penis is not of interest to women in the same way the adult penis is. I should think this might come as a relief rather than as a surprise.

And yet, it is difficult, for some of us at least, to read about Parzival's penis and not hear "overtones of sexuality."¹² One hundred years after Freud we know what the penis means. But it is precisely this sort of knowingness that will get us into trouble. It causes us to eroticize the scene of Parzival's birth because we know penises mean sex. It causes otherwise scrupulous scholars to mistranslate lines because they know that penises provoke caresses. In our confident knowingness we ignore other reasons for the penis to be present: it is Wolfram's characteristically vivid version of the traditional declaration of sex. We ignore the explicit cause of the caresses: the women respond to the promise of a great hero, which is the principal point of the passage. And we ignore the evidence of those scenes in which Wolfram does treat penises as objects of women's erotic interest. In short, we do not attend to the different contexts in which the body is given different meanings. Responding to Leo Steinberg's book, *the Sexuality of Christ*, Caroline Walker Bynum cautions us against assuming that medieval readers and viewers eroticized the body as we do.

2

The Sexual Identity of Courtly Lovers

The category of sex does not exist a priori, before all society... It does not concern being but relationships,...although the two aspects are always confused when they are discussed.

MONIQUE WITTIG, "The Category of Sex"

Medieval bodies were different from modern ones. While the modern king gets by with a single body, the medieval king had two, one of them private and human, the other political and transcendent—at least according to the well-known analysis of Ernst Kantorowicz. We assume the modern king and queen had two bodies, but the medieval royal couple shared the same body—at least according to the one-sex model that Thomas Laqueur believes obtained until well after the Middle Ages. Nowadays the body of Jesus is widely believed to be male, but the late medieval Christ seems to have had female attributes as well—at least according to Caroline Walker Bynum. We might have thought that, being partly female, the body of Christ would therefore be less male. Wrong again: the body of Christ is so flooded with testosterone that even as an infant, even when sitting for his Renaissance portrait, he cannot keep from getting an erection—at least according to Leo Steinberg.

I want to look at another body, the courtly body, to find out what it is about certain bodies that causes courtly lovers to fall in love. Courtly bodies have not attracted much scholarly attention, at least in comparison with those of medieval theology or medicine or those that seem marginalized, transgressive, or queer. The body of courtly love is different from these: it is secular and vernacular and was idealized, at least in literary texts, at the

Causa efficiens

WHAT SORT OF BODIES
ARE INVOLVED?

The city thus accepted the market's impulse to expand but never surrendered its intention to control it. When new products appeared, the city allotted them a particular spot or legalized spontaneous enlargement after the fact so as to better circumscribe it. Parzival's penis makes its first public appearance shortly after 1200, near the end of the second book of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. According to Wolfram, Parzival's mother, Herzeloide,

... *eins kindelins gelac,
eins suns, der sölher lide was
daz si vil kfme dran genas. . . .
dô diu künigin sich versan
und ir kindel wider zir gewan,
si und ander frouwen
begunden in allenthalben schouwen,
zwischen beinn sîn visellîn.
er muose vil getriutet sîn,
do er hete manlichiu lit.
er wart mit swerten sît ein smit,
vil fwiwers er von helmen sluoc:
sîn herze manlich ellen truoc.*
(112,6–8, 21–30)

... was delivered of a baby,
a son, who had such [large] limbs
that she just barely survived. . . .
When the queen came to herself
and took back her child,
she and the other ladies
looked him over everywhere
and saw the little penis between his legs.
He couldn't escape being caressed a great deal
when he was found to have manly limbs.
Later he became a smith with swords,
and often struck fire from helmets:
his heart was filled with manly valor.

Parzival's mother and her attendants look the infant over everywhere and, among other things, see his penis. Wolfram does not reveal what the penis means to the women nor does he suggest they have any particular reaction when they see it. He does, however, say that Parzival could not escape being caressed, presumably by his mother and her attendants, when he was found to have *manlichiu lit* "limbs appropriate to a man." Presumably these are the same limbs the size of which nearly costs Herzeloide her life in childbirth.¹ Extraordinary size at birth or extraordinarily rapid growth in infancy are often understood in Middle High German (MHG) narrative as signs that a male infant will grow up into a hero of extraordinary strength.² Lest we fail to recognize the significance of the large limbs, the narrator looks into the future and informs us that this infant will indeed grow up to become a great fighter, one whose heart will be filled with *manlich ellen* "valor appropriate to a man." The entire passage is structured to make this point, moving deliberately from *sölher lide*, the "large limbs" that almost kill the child's mother, through from the north of the city, others for "his" customers: "connoisseurs," people in the know, shippers and growers to whom he sells "with a certain pride." Some merchants

4

The Danger of Heterosexuality

Before we were banished from Eden and the curse was uttered, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman," the homosexual did not exist; nor, properly speaking, did the heterosexual.

JAMES BALDWIN, *Preservation of Innocence*

Medievalists know that if they claim to have found homosexuals in the Middle Ages they will provoke cries of outrage and nothing else they say will be heard. So they avoid the term. Thus Allen Frantzen, on the very first page of *Before the Closet*, declares categorically: "I call this a book about 'same-sex love' because the obvious choice, 'homosexuality,' is, for periods before the modern era, inaccurate. 'Homosexuality' and 'homosexuals' were not recognized concepts in the Middle Ages."¹ Apparently the same is not true of "heterosexuality" and "heterosexuals." Frantzen does not hesitate, throughout his volume, to oppose "same-sex relations" to "heterosexual relations."² The result is a Middle Ages that would make Peter Damian jump for joy, one from which all the homosexuals have been banished, and only heterosexuals remain. This should give one pause. That scholars can write about a Middle Ages in which homosexuality is impossible while heterosexuality is inevitable illustrates the extent to which, even in their minds, heterosexuality remains the unquestioned norm. Thus, although some of what follows will sound like the familiar arguments for historicizing homosexuality only in a different mode, it seems necessary to make these arguments nevertheless. It seems necessary to insist that heterosexuality too has a history.³ This is the first chapter of three that are devoted to the efficient cause of courtly love: what is it that impels a courtly