

## Critique of courtliness in Konrad von Würzburg's *Heinrich von Kempten*

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**Abstract:** *Heinrich von Kempten*, the short narrative in rhyming couplets by Konrad von Würzburg, tells the story of the conflict and reconciliation between the title protagonist and Emperor Otto. Violence and the ways of expressing it play a central role in this text, as has been noted by previous scholars. However, the representation and function of violence in this work has not yet been properly understood. I will argue that this narrative poem should be read against the background of anti-courtly literature which criticizes manners and praises heroic actions. This offers new insights into the narrative, the relationship to its source (Godfrey von Viterbo's *Pantheon*) and the possible interest behind Konrad's patron, Berthold of Tiersberg. From this perspective, *Heinrich von Kempten* develops an ambiguous representation of court, which highlights its negative features, referring to a long standing tradition of critique of courtliness without explicitly condemning all courtly behavior as such. **Keywords:** Konrad von Würzburg, Heinrich von Kempten, Courtliness, Violence.

### INTRODUCTION

*Heinrich von Kempten* is a short narrative in rhyming couplets (*Versnovelle*) composed by Konrad von Würzburg, probably around 1270.<sup>1</sup> It tells the story of the conflict and reconciliation between emperor Otto<sup>2</sup> and one of his vassals, Heinrich von Kempten. The basic plot is attested for the first time in *Pantheon* by Godfrey of Viterbo (1187), which might be Konrad's source.<sup>3</sup> *Heinrich von Kempten* is as a story about violence and the ways of expressing and channelling it. In this article, I will argue that the text must be read against the background of the intellectual and literary tradition of critic of courtliness, which had existed since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Courtliness in *Heinrich von Kempten*, far from being seen as a way of reducing or restraining violence, is regarded as superficial, treacherous and aggressive. In opposition to it, the text defends a praiseworthy, heroic, pragmatic and lawful use of violence.

In the first part of the article I will summarize *Heinrich von Kempten's* narrative plot. Subsequently, I will review past critical research on the text before addressing the history of courtliness and its critics, based mostly on Stephen

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<sup>1</sup> Konrad von Würzburg, "Heinrich von Kempten," *Kleinere Dichtungen*, ed. Edward Schröder, vol. 1 (Berlin 1924) 41-68. Important scholarship and materials on the text and the author: Edward Schröder, *Studien zu Konrad von Würzburg* (Göttingen 1912); André Schnyder, *Konrad von Würzburg, Kaiser Otto und Heinrich von Kempten: Abbildung der gesamten Überlieferung und Materialien zur Stoffgeschichte* (Göppingen 1989); Rüdiger Brandt, *Konrad von Würzburg. Kleinere epische Werke* (Berlin 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The narrative blends the characters of Otto I and Otto II, but generally the Otto mentioned in v. 1 is considered to be Otto II (cf. Horst Brunner, "Konrad von Würzburg," *Verfasserlexikon* 5 (1985) 272-304, here 293-94). On the emperors Otto I and II and the place of *Heinrich von Kempten* in the literature around these historical figure, see Otto Neudeck, *Erzählen von Kaiser Otto: zur Fiktionalisierung von Geschichte in mittelhochdeutscher Literatur* (Cologne 2003). Many manuscripts name the text after Otto, not after Heinrich, and the relative weight of both characters within the narrative has given rise to some discussion in Lutz Röhrich, "Kaiser Otto oder Heinrich von Kempten? Eine Studie zu Konrad von Würzburg," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 32 (1950) 151-54 and Rosemary Wallbank, "Emperor Otto and Heinrich von Kempten," *Studies in Medieval Literature and Languages*, ed. David Blamires et al. (Manchester 1973) 353-62.

<sup>3</sup> Gotifredi Viterbiensis, "Pantheon," *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, ed. Georg Waitz, vol. 22 (Hannover 1872) 107-305.

Jaeger's research on the subject. Finally, I will analyze the text in detail, paying attention to its anti-courtly tendencies. The goal is to be able to understand the anti-courtly trends in *Heinrich von Kempten* and how they are part of a literary, cultural and ideological tradition.

#### THE TEXT

Heinrich von Kempten is attested in seven manuscripts, including one fragment. Most are miscellaneous manuscripts of *Mären*, but some reveal a stronger historiographic interest.<sup>4</sup> Hanns Fischer classifies it as a *Märe*, due to its secular nature, but does not consider it part of any specific subgenre. It shares this feature with other chronic-based historical short narratives such as *Alexander und Anteloie* and *Schwanritter*.<sup>5</sup>

The text begins with a rather negative description of Kaiser Otto (v. 9, *übel man*). He is characterized as impulsive and resentful. When he swears by his beard to kill someone, everyone knows he will not back down. The first part of the story takes place in a banquet organized by the emperor. Heinrich von Kempten, one of his vassals, comes to the celebration with a *protégé*, the Duke of Swabia's son, still a boy. After mass, the meal is served and everyone waits for the emperor to arrive in order to start the banquet. However, problems arise when Heinrich's young companion breaks off a morsel of bread and eats it before Otto enters the room. Seeing this, the steward hits him with a staff to punish his lack of etiquette. Heinrich confronts the steward and demands an apology. The steward defends his actions and Heinrich proceeds to draw his sword and kill him with a blow to the head.

When the emperor enters the room, he sees the slaughtered steward and is filled with anger. The knight demands forgiveness, but instead the emperor swears by his beard to avenge the steward's death. In this situation Heinrich reacts swiftly by dragging the emperor by the beard across the table and threatening to kill him unless he pardons him. The emperor agrees to withdraw his oath, but warns Heinrich to never appear before him again. Heinrich then retires to Kempten. This is usually considered to be the end of the first part of the story.

Several years after this incident, the emperor is at war against rebellious Italian cities in Apulia and requires as much manpower as he can get. The abbot of Kempten compels Heinrich to go with him into war and threatens to deprive him of his fief if he refuses. After discussing the matter, Heinrich agrees to go, taking every precaution not to meet the emperor or even to let him know he is there. One day, however, while taking a bath, he sees a group of citizens treacherously attempting to kill Otto. Heinrich then gets out of the bathtub, picks up a shield and a sword and dashes naked to defend the emperor. He kills many of the attackers,

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<sup>4</sup> The best available resource to study the testimonies is [www.handschriftencensus.de](http://www.handschriftencensus.de). Four of the testimonies are valuable, big miscellaneous manuscripts of short narrative in verse: Heidelberg, Universitätsbibl., Cpg. 341; Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibl., Cod. 2885; Innsbruck, Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Cod. FB 32001; Cologne-Genf, Bibl. Bodmeriana, Cod. Bodm. 72. The other two, however, include the story among longer epic texts with an important historical component: Heidelberg, Universitätsbibl., Cpg 395 includes Stricker's *Karl der Grosse* and Ulrich's von der Türlin *Arabel*; Wien, Österr. Nationalbibl., Cod. 10100A features Schöndoch's *Königin von Frankreich*.

<sup>5</sup> Hanns Fischer, *Studien zur Deutschen Märendichtung* (Tübingen 1968) 100.

saves the emperor and returns to continue his interrupted bath. The emperor didn't recognize his savior, and asks his retinue to name him. The vassals are reluctant at first, but finally confess the identity of the naked hero. The emperor then decides to forgive Heinrich's previous offenses, but not without first playing a joke on him. He calls Heinrich into his presence and pretends to be furious for several minutes, before laughing and forgiving Heinrich's offense. The poem concludes with some moralizing lines on the importance of chivalry and courage.

#### STATE OF RESEARCH

The text has been read from different perspectives. Some have focused on diverse literary problems, like the style and the use of humor.<sup>6</sup> However, the most important trend in scholarly literature deals with the representation of violence, power, social order, and how they relate to each other. Fischer and Völker were pioneers in acknowledging the importance of violence in *Heinrich von Kempten*.<sup>7</sup> According to these authors, the text displays contradictions of feudal society ("*Widersprüche der feudalen Gesellschaft*"), namely the latent anarchy of fiefdom, the dialectics of violence in feudal society and the opposition of city and feudality (*latente Anarchie des Lehensystems, Dialektik der Gewalt in der feudalen Gesellschaft, Gegensatz von Stadt und Feudalität*). They conclude the text should be read against the background of the conflict between the citizens of Strasbourg and the bishop (the so-called "*Bellum Waltherianum*"), as a statement of support for the latter. Their approach was criticized by Ursula Peters, who points out that their thesis can hardly be supported by the text.<sup>8</sup> I consider that the depiction of the Italian cities can be understood as a response to the specific historical context of the *Bellum Waltherianum*, but that the text as a whole deals with completely different issues. Peters, for her part, highlights the importance of law and lawbreaking.<sup>9</sup> As will be explained later, this is not actually Konrad's innovation on the subject, as it was the central element of the story in Godfrey's *Pantheon*.

Dobozy and Brall focus on the twofold structure of the story.<sup>10</sup> In the first part, the principles of order and authority are destroyed and in the second part, they get

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6 Inge Leipold, *Die Auftraggeber und Gönner Konrads von Würzburg* (Göppingen 1976) 21; André Schnyder, "Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zum 'Heinrich von Kempten' Konrads von Würzburg", *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft* 5 (1988); Rosemary Turner-Wallbank, "Tradition und Innovation in Konrads von Würzburg 'Heinrich von Kempten'", *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft* 89 (1988); Daniela Heitzmann, "Blick - Affekt - Handlung. Die männlichen Blicke in Heinrich von Kempten Konrads von Würzburg", *Frauenblicke, Männerblicke, Frauenzimmer* (St. Ingbert 2002); Werner Hoffmann, "*Wan manheit unde ritterschaft / diu zwei diu tiurent sere*. Ein semantisches Problem im 'Heinrich von Kempten'." *Archiv* 240 (2003).

7 Hubertus Fischer and Paul-Gerhart Völker, "Konrad von Würzburg. 'Heinrich von Kempten': Individuum und Feudale Anarchie," *Literatur Im Feudalismus*, ed. Dieter Richter (Stuttgart 1975).

8 Ursula Peters. *Literatur in der Stadt: Studien zu den sozialen Voraussetzungen und kulturellen Organisationsformen städtischer Literatur im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen 1983) 130–132.

9 Ibid. 132–133.

10 Maria Dobozy, "Der alte und der Neue Bund in Konrads von Würzburg 'Heinrich von Kempten'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 107 (1988); Helmut Brall. "Geraufter Bart und nackter Retter. Verletzung und Heilung des Autoritätsprinzip in Konrads von Würzburg 'Heinrich von Kempten'," *Fs. Herbert Kolb zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Klaus Matzel and Hans-Gert Roloff (Frankfurt 1989).

rebuilt. Dobozy sees this structure as reflecting the biblical passage from Old to New Testament, an interpretation that can hardly be sustained by the text. Brall uses the concepts of “authority principle” (*Autoritätsprinzip*) and “self-given power” (*Eigenmacht*) to analyze the dynamic of the story. The first part depicts how the different powers collide while trying to prevail, while the second part shows how to reconcile the “self-given power” with the need for social cooperation. However insightful this study might be, it remains a general interpretation of the text, which lacks reference to its actual cultural background and purpose.

In recent years Kellner's articles brought attention back to the problem of violence in *Heinrich von Kempten*.<sup>11</sup> Her most important innovation was addressing violence in relationship to courtliness. Kellner's interpretation is based upon Haferland's very influential work *Höfische Interaktion* from 1988, which she quotes extensively.<sup>12</sup> Kellner notes that Otto's court is ruled by arbitrary choices and anger-filled impulses. This is against the ethics of courtliness, which encourages the restraint of impulses. In this context, law cannot be maintained and exercised. Kellner interprets the second half of the text as showing how the unrestrained ('naked') violence which causes conflict in the first part can be used to protect, instead of to endanger, the feudal order, because “*sein [Heinrich's] Antrieb [ist] jetzt nicht mehr der körperliche Affekt des Zornes, sondern das abstraktere Prinzip der triuwe gegen Kaiser und Reich*” (“Heinrich's motivation is not anger any more, but the abstract principle of loyalty to the emperor and the empire”).<sup>13</sup> She concludes that the first half of the text shows how the archaic forms of violence endanger the courtly order, and that the second part demonstrates how violence is necessary for the continuity of the feudal order. According to this scholar, the text explores the ambiguity of violence in medieval society. Zacke supports Kellner's main theses and highlights that the emperor's unfair and violent inclinations affect everyone at court: “*Dadurch, dass sowohl der Kaiser als auch sein Stellvertreter sich von Anfang an den Normen des höfischen Festes widersetzen, sind das Auftreten von Konflikten und deren blutige Lösung unemgänglich*” (“As the emperor and his subordinates oppose the norms of courtly festivities from the beginning, the arising of conflict and their bloody resolutions are unavoidable”).<sup>14</sup>

All of the above quoted studies draw attention to the important subjects of the text: law, violence, and honor. Their general interpretation of violence as ambiguous (endangering and necessary) is correct, but they fail to fully interpret

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11 Beate Kellner, “Der Ritter und die Nackte Gewalt. Rollenentwürfe in Konrads von Würzburg ‘Heinrich von Kempten’,” *Literarische Leben. Rollenentwürfe in der Literatur des Hoch- und Spätmittelalters. Fs. Volker Mertens zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Matthias Meyer et al. (Tübingen 2002); Beate Kellner, “Zur Kodierung von Gewalt in der Mittelalterlichen Literatur am Beispiel von Konrads von Würzburg ‘Heinrich von Kempten’,” *Wahrnehmen und Handeln. Perspektiven einer Literaturanthropologie* (Bielefeld 2004).

12 Harald Haferland. *Höfische Interaktion: Interpretationen zur höfischen Epik und Didaktik um 1200* (Munich 1989).

13 Kellner, *Der Ritter* (n. 11 above).

14 Birgit Zacke. “Die Gelegenheit beim Schopfe packen. Über Ursachen und Lösungen von Konflikten in Konrads von Würzburg ‘Heinrich von Kempten’,” *Weltbilder des mittelalterlichen Menschen*, ed. Hans-Dieter Heimann (Berlin 2007) 199.

some key scenes and to locate the text's ideological background. They don't draw the logical conclusion from Heinrich's lack of courtliness: that the text celebrates an uncourtly model of behavior. In the following I will try to correct the shortcomings of these previous interpretations and offer a new one.

#### COURTLINESS AND VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

To understand how violence, courtliness and law are handled in *Heinrich von Kempten*, it is necessary to first explain some basic characteristics of courtly culture as it developed in the High Middle Ages. Jaeger, resorting to Norbert Elias' theories, traces its origins in the cathedral schools of the 10<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Otto I and his brother Brun, archbishop of Cologne.<sup>15</sup> The figure of the courtier emerged progressively out of this education, the experience of court life and the reappropriation of Ancient Roman ideas of *urbanitas*. The courtier is characterized by refined behavior and restraint of impulses. In the course of the 12<sup>th</sup> century a combination of the courtier and the noble warrior was born: the courtly knight. Crouch, partially criticizing Jaeger, shows that warrior elites possessed ideals of proper behavior and restraint before the courtly period and the establishment of chivalric codes of conduct.<sup>16</sup> This heroic ideal, seen in an exemplary manner in the figure of the *preudomme*, predates courtliness and amalgamates with it in the course of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Chivalric literature became one of the ways of transmitting the ideal of courtliness in France, Germany and most of Europe. However, the amalgamation of courtly and heroic culture never became absolute, and the figures of the courtier and the warrior could be in opposition to each other in many circumstances. In fact, the heroic ideal of conduct was used as an element in the critic of courtliness. Jaeger mentions examples in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, where the hero, Starcatherus, embodies the ancient warrior virtues as opposed to contemporary decadent refinement.<sup>17</sup> The critics of courtliness "sought to arouse their [the warrior's] fighting spirit when it had gone slack, to provoke 'useful anger' in the knighthood and to sting them out of torpor and into action [...] by showing them the shallowness of courtesy and the greatness of ancient, heroic ways."<sup>18</sup>

The critics of courtliness during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, mainly clerics, were against the vanity of manners and fashion and despised the intrigue and lies they saw as inherent to court life. Many of them also had political or personal reasons to criticize the court. The anti-courtly discourse was widespread, and even texts praising courtesy criticized certain aspects, creating ambiguous representations of the court. The depiction in the *Nibelungenlied* is paradigmatic: on the one hand, courtly culture is praised and the main characters, like Siegfried, display

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia 1985). It is an ironic coincidence that Otto I, the initiator of this educational reform, is probably an inspiration for the character in *Heinrich von Kempten*, who is portrayed as an irascible and unfair monarch.

<sup>16</sup> David Crouch, "Chivalry and Courtliness: Colliding Constructs," *Soldiers, Nobles and Gentlemen: Essays in Honour of Maurice Keen*, ed. Peter Cross and Christopher Tyerman (Rochester 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Jaeger, *Origins* (n. 15 above) 187–189.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 193.

exemplary courtly behavior. On the other hand, many passages offer a different view, in which the refinement and pleasure of the court is seen as typical of cowards and frivolous personalities, contrary to praiseworthy warrior conduct prone to violence.<sup>19</sup> Even emblematic courtly texts like *Tristan* by Godfrid von Strassburg show an ambivalent standing towards the court.<sup>20</sup> Tristan is an ideal courtier, and the narration of his education and refinement constitute an important part of the text. However, life at court is not positively depicted. The court is a place full of envious people and intrigue, where the lovers are in constant peril.

#### COURTLINESS AND VIOLENCE IN *HEINRICH VON KEMPTEN*

*Heinrich von Kempten* opposes two kinds of behavior that I will call “courtly” and “heroic”, represented in the steward and in Heinrich von Kempten, respectively. Courtly behavior is depicted as frivolous and superficial; it uses violence irresponsibly, and stands in the way of proper justice. Heroic behavior, prone to outbursts of violence, is superior, as it defends law and honor. Heinrich never acts as a courtier, he is guided by classical warrior traits: the readiness for violent action and a high sense of honor and lawfulness. This dichotomy is not innovative; rather, it is a central part of the story transmitted for the first time by Godfrey from *Viterbo* and reappropriated by Konrad von Würzburg.

The first part of the story, both in Godfrey and in Konrad, develops the conflict between the heroic protagonist and one of the highest representatives of the court: the steward. The steward is described as easily irascible in both sources.<sup>21</sup> This is a typical trait in the depiction of people of high rank within the court. In many medieval texts, the individuals less prone to restraint and virtue prosper in this context, because they know how to behave externally in a courtly manner.<sup>22</sup> In other words, these despicable characters at the center of the court are not an anomaly in the system, but an inherent part of it. The court encourages them to achieve progress through treason and adulation. The steward in *Heinrich von Kempten* is yet another example of this kind of character. He respects etiquette and is willing to punish anyone who commits the slightest transgression. Heinrich, on the other hand, is unreflective in his use of violence and doesn't conduct himself according to courtly etiquette, but instead according to heroic and feudal principles. When the boy is hit by someone from a lower class, Heinrich reacts violently, because hitting his *protégé* is an affront against his own honor. As the

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 190–193; Joachim Bumke, *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter* (Munich 1986) 593.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Jaeger, “Gottfried's ‘Tristan’ as Courtier Romance,” *Nu Lôn Ich Iu Der Gâbe: Fs. Francis G. Gentry*, ed. Ernst Ralf Hintz (Göppingen 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Godfrey: “*More suo dapifer vitio variabilis irae*”(v. 11, “His character was dominated by the vice of sudden anger”). Konrad: “*der site sîn was sô gewant / daz er in muote ein cleine dinc*” (v. 81–82, “His personality was so, that he got angry at small things”).

<sup>22</sup> The case of Kei in Arthurian romance is particularly clear in this regard. Kei is the representation of the worst kind of courtier, the one who boasts, slanders and is secretly a coward, but nevertheless achieves the highest positions in the court. *Der Renner*, a Middle High German didactic work by Hugo von Trimberg, offers lengthy passages of court critic and laments that the worst kind of men prosper at court: “*Ein dinc ich ofte germerket hân: / Daz manigen herren ein falschaft man / vil lieber ist, der smeichen kan, / denne einer der guotes und èren in gan.*” (v. 743–46, “Something I have often realized: Many lords prefer a liar who knows how to flatter than someone who shows kindness and honor.”)

steward doesn't apologize and resorts to his authority within the court, Heinrich kills him, showing that court hierarchies mean little to him. When the emperor intervenes, Heinrich demands a trial, according to feudal custom, but when Otto rejects it, Heinrich acts heroically again and attacks the emperor.

In this first part, the flawed world of the court, ruled by particularly irascible characters, is confronted with Heinrich's equally irascible heroic behavior and violence escalates out of that clash. In this story, courtliness, primarily understood as the respect of external etiquette, starts an increasing spiral of violence. Courtliness is not seen as an effective way of restraining violence: on the contrary, the strict and superfluous rules of behavior offer new occasions for conflict and the outburst of violence.

Especially important for the interpretation of the whole text is the correct understanding of the scene in which the steward hits the noble boy. Here lies one of the main problems of previous interpretations of the text: most critics understand the hitting of the boy as an uncourtly behavior. The text does not support that interpretation. The steward is defending a way of understanding courtliness centered on external behavior. His action is not characterized as “*unhövisch*” (uncourtly), only as “*vnerpärmichleichen*” (v. 103, “unmerciful”). It is not out of courtesy that the boy should be excused, but out of an understanding of innocence and forgiveness that has nothing to do with courtliness. It is important to bear in mind that while the idea of restraint as part of courtliness is attested in medieval sources, it was not an universally accepted idea. Medieval critics of courtesy do not mention that aspect at all and consider the court to be exclusively the realm of external refinement and moral decay. *Heinrich von Kempten* proposes that this external and superficial court behavior can actually generate violence instead of reducing it.

It is also relevant for the correct understanding of this passage to consider that the use of violence was widely acknowledged in the Middle Ages as a valid means of educating young men and women. Orme and Parsons refer to sources on the chastising of children as part of their education.<sup>23</sup> The legitimacy or convenience of beating was subject to debate, but nevertheless common among the aristocracy as a way of imparting not only education but also general discipline and behavior rules.<sup>24</sup> In this episode, the cause of Heinrich's anger is not the physical punishment itself, but the disregard for proper hierarchies and the humiliation he suffers. The beaten child comes from a noble family and the steward punishing him has no hierarchical authority over him. The child's relatives or his personal instructor might have chastised him in private, but the steward dishonors him and his family by hitting him in public.<sup>25</sup> However, according to a different

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23 Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066–1530* (London 1984) 32–34; Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven 2001) 84–85; Ben Parsons, “The Way of the Rod: The Functions of Beating in Late Medieval Pedagogy,” *Modern Philology* 113,1 (2015).

24 According to Orme, *Medieval Children* (n. 23 above) 84: “In the case of the young, it was acceptable for parents, employers, and teachers to punish them physically, and most educationists and moralists approved the practice when it was done for good reasons and not to excess”.

25 Orme, *From Childhood* (n. 23 above) 34 points out an interesting detail: “The master in charge of the noble youths in the [English] royal household in 1471–73, though empowered to discipline

understanding of social relationships, the steward is in charge of teaching proper behavior. Therefore, the text presents the clash of two different ideas of hierarchy: the feudal, with its different ranks passed on by birth and a strong sense of honor and offense, and the courtly, based on manners and rank within the court. The text obviously advocates for the first of these.

This analysis reveals that, in *Heinrich von Kempten*, the court collides with the traditional feudal and heroic codes of behavior, and these latter are seen as superior. Heinrich is always guided by these heroic principles. In the first part, he is willing to attack the emperor to defend his honor and his life. In the second part, he acts exactly as rashly and violently to defend the emperor, which is his duty at war. The nakedness in the second part needs to be understood as a symbol of heroic behavior opposed to courtly superficiality. Heinrich doesn't care about meaningless issues like clothing when something important is at stake. The symbolism is especially appropriate, as expensive and elaborate clothing have always been the main focus of the critics of courtliness. The naked warrior is a way of depicting the anti-courtly hero, the complete opposite of the elegant courtier.

The reconciliation between Heinrich and the emperor takes place when Otto recognizes the value of Heinrich's heroic conduct. That is what he means when he says that the same person who attacked him at court is the only one who could save him (v.666-674). Only he who uses violence abruptly, guided by abstract ideas of honor and justice, can dare to fight naked for a just cause.

#### ANTI-COURTLY VALUES

This anti-courtly trend in *Heinrich von Kempten* can be better understood when considering its context and tradition. The basic plot derives from an episode in *Pantheon* by Godfrey of Viterbo.<sup>26</sup> Godfrey was a historian and a traveller in the 12<sup>th</sup> century who served as court chaplain for emperors Friedrich I and Heinrich VI. Both monarchs fostered an active court where many Latin texts were written. Godfrey was a participant of the expanding courtly culture, but a critical one. Like many other clerics, he criticizes the court not from outside, but from within, out of his own experience.<sup>27</sup> In his dedication to Heinrich VI of the *Speculum regum*, Godfrey criticizes the emerging courtly literature: "the fables of Choridon and Melibeus".<sup>28</sup> In the prologue to *Pantheon*, he contrasts the calm life in the

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them, did so privately in their chambers, according to the status of such gentlemen". Although the testimony comes from England in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the general principle behind it can be expanded for many different medieval contexts. The authority of the master as an educator can collide with the hierarchical organization of society when he is to instruct noble children.

26 There is not much scholarly research on Godfrey or his works, and that which exists is hard to find. On the author: Loren Weber, "The Historical Importance of Godfrey of Viterbo" *Viator* 25 (1994); Maria Dorninger, *Gottfried von Viterbo. Ein Autor in der Umgebung der Frühen Staufer* (Stuttgart 1997). On *Pantheon*: Friederike Boockmann, *Studien zum Pantheon des Gottfried von Viterbo* (PhD diss., U. Munich, 1992); Weber, *Godfrey of Viterbo's Pantheon: Origin, Evolution and Later Transmission* (PhD diss., U. Cal., 1993).

27 It was common in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that many of the most eager critics of the court were members of important courts of the time. The most famous example is John of Salisbury, the writer of one of the first and most important anti-courtly texts, *Policraticus*.

28 Jaeger, *Origins* (n. 15 above) 229.



monastery, which is more apt for writing and spiritual activities, with the busy life in the court, with its bundle of occupations. It is impressive, he admits, that he was able to write a book in that context.<sup>29</sup>

The depiction of the court in the episode of *Pantheon* corresponds to the ambiguous opinion one would expect from a man like Godfrey, a cleric at court. He portrays the court as a place where traditional laws and values can be subverted in the name of frivolous and superficial conduct; where a steward can pretend to be superior than a young nobleman. However, that is not the main focus of the text. Godfrey draws special attention to the legal aspects of the narrative. After being released by the knight, the emperor acknowledges his guilt for failing to provide a fair trial. For his injustice, he admits, he has been punished, not only by Heinrich's hand, but also by Jesus' ("Iudicio sisti legum ratione petisti;/ Dum tibi non licuit, tetigit me dextera Christi,/ Non tua, set Domini verbera digna lui." v. 236,1-3).

All the mayor issues analyzed by Kellner and Peters in *Heinrich von Kempten* are already present in *Pantheon*. Coming from Godfrey, the anecdote must be read as an ambiguous stand towards courtly culture. In court, even the most irascible individuals can achieve high positions and spur violent acts. Of course, restraint is not truly an issue in the text, as the knight lacks restraint as much as the steward. The difference between the two characters is that the knight acts in pursuit of ideals of heroic and lawful behavior while the stewards only cares about superficial conduct.

Konrad's patron mentioned in *Heinrich von Kempten*, Berthold of Tiersberg, provost at Strasburg's cathedral, is, like Godfrey, a powerful cleric.<sup>30</sup> The Thierberg family was, as far as can be ascertained by the available documentation, an influential family in the region, with strong ties to the ecclesiastical authorities. Even though the sources are scarce, we know Berthold was an influential person in Basel, one who made a successful and fast career in the church. Berthold might have had many different interests in the story of Heinrich von Kempten and emperor Otto, many of which elude us. However, it is possible to see the anti-courtly discourse present throughout the whole text as one of its main appeals. Someone like Berthold, a member of the church implicated in worldly affairs, was surely exposed to this kind of anti-courtly discourse and can be expected to have enjoyed a text like *Heinrich von Kempten*.

#### AMBIGUITY

It should be clear by now that *Heinrich von Kempten* depicts anti-courtly values, which were part of the story from its first appearance in *Pantheon* and probably one of the main reasons why Berthold of Tiersberg was interested in the story. However, it cannot simply be characterized as an anti-courtly text. It would be more appropriate to say that it celebrates heroic values while showing an ambiguous perspective on court behavior and mentality. A detailed analysis of some text passages will help clarify this interpretation.

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<sup>29</sup> Bumke, *Höfische Kultur* (n. 15 above) 460–461.

<sup>30</sup> Leipold, *Die Auftraggeber* (n. 6 above) 21–31.

The text mentions that Heinrich is the “*zuhtmeister*” of the boy from Swaben and “*in trewlichen zoch*” (v. 100-101, “he raised him loyally”). The adverb “*trewlichen*” is very ambiguous. It surely has a positive connotation, but the exact meaning of the education he imparts is unclear. It could refer to some kind of courtly education, like Tristan's or Parzival's (at Gurnemanz), but given Heinrich's heroic and uncourtly traits, that would be unlikely. Probably, Heinrich teaches the boy the same kind of behavior that characterizes himself: honor, lawfulness and the proper use of violence. The boy's uncourtly behavior at the banquet might be seen as a result of this kind of education. *Trewlich* seems to be a very good lexical choice to name the kind of conduct that guides Heinrich and is certainly different from courtly behavior.

An interesting passage outlining the opposition of courtly and heroic behavior comes from the steward's mouth. He says to Heinrich: “*ich fürchte euch also kleine / als der Habich tut das Huhn*” (v. 126-127, “I fear you as little / as the goshawk fears the chicken”). The steward assimilates himself to a courtly bird (goshawk) used to hunt and Heinrich to a simple farm animal (chicken). He reminds Heinrich he has courtly authority, while Heinrich does not. The steward feels confident in his position within the court without realizing that Heinrich adheres to a different kind of hierarchy and is willing to act violently and heroically to impose himself and defend his honor.

The most problematic passage for the interpretation offered in this article occurs when Heinrich accuses the steward of having “*zerbrochen iwer ritterliche zuht*” (v. 111, “broken your chivalric education”). The word “*zuht*” immediately refers to the values and education of the courtly culture. “*ritterlich*” refers to chivalric world, so this expression seems to combine the warrior and the courtier in the way the figure of the knight did during the High Middle Ages. However, this might not be as evident as it seems. In the *Mittelhochdeutsches Begriffdatenbank* the phrases “*ritterliche zuht*” or “*ritterliche zuhte*” appear only seven times.<sup>31</sup> Only in two of them they are listed among courtly virtues or as a characterization of courtly behavior (once in Reinfried von Braunschweig, 4360 and twice in *Virginal* 340,5 and 653,2). In the others, it is more related to combat and fighting behavior, including one testimony by Konrad von Würzburg (*Tojanierkrieg* 35584; *Nibelungenlied* Hs. B 369,3 and correspondent lines in other manuscripts, *Jüngere Titarel* 5767,2). “*Ritterliche zuht*” is not a common concept in Middle High German textuality and, according to this evidence, the expression remains ambiguous. To overcome this ambiguity, this passage should be read together with the previous one, where the steward defends his actions as courtly and characterizes the boy's action as “*unzühtic*”(v. 123). In this case “*zuht*” refers unambiguously to courtly manners and education. The steward assumes the responsibility and the authority to discipline anyone who misbehaves at court by not showing “*zuht*” (v. 120-123). In his response, Heinrich reuses and redefines the word *zuht*, accusing the steward of not respecting the “*ritterlich zuht*”. He means a kind of education (*zuht*), which is characterized by being proper of warriors (“*ritterlich*”). With the addition of this new adjective, Heinrich refers to

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<sup>31</sup> *Mittelhochdeutsches Begriffdatenbank* at <http://mhdadb.sbg.ac.at/>

the heroic behavior. There is a clash between the courtly education, where the steward has authority over young men, and the heroic education, where birth nobility has precedence. In this passage, the text reimplements the main conflict between courtliness and heroism by presenting two different understandings of *zuht* by two different characters.

Finally, I would like to address a scene which shows that not all typical courtly behavior is criticized in the text. The final episode, the reconciliation, happens in a rather unexpected manner. The emperor lets the whole court know he is playing a joke on Heinrich before forgiving him. When Heinrich is called in his presence, the emperor pretends to be furious, and only after Heinrich tries to beg for mercy, does Otto reveal that he has actually already forgiven him. This might seem to a modern reader to be a rather improper conduct from an emperor in such a serious matter. It certainly contributes to the text's humour, but it also reveals typical courtly behaviour. *Facetia*, *hilaritas*, *iocundia* and similar terms referred commonly to the wit, sarcasm and refined jests which showed courtly education and the humorous atmosphere of the court. As Jaeger says: "Irony and wit were the rule at court" and it is a way of showing the power of the sovereign.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Heinrich von Kempten, the joke highlights the reconciliation, making both participants share in the relief and comradery after the joke.

This last episode is not the only place in the text where comedy plays an important role. Humor can be seen as a way of celebrating violence. Some of the most humorous moments of the text are also the most violent ones: when Heinrich kills the steward and when Heinrich fights naked. In the second case, the ridiculous situation is enough to provoke laughter. In the first case, the situation is not humorous *per se*, but the description is, stating that the butler's head opened like an egg and his skull was swinging like a pot (vv. 146-153).

Humor is linked to the outbursts of violence that the text celebrates. The heroic violence is portrayed in a light, comic perspective. This procedure reduces the shocking effect of violent acts. In a comedic framing, Heinrich's bloody behavior is less likely to be regarded with disgust or aversion and more prone to producing an agreeing grin. Humor also dehumanizes the victims of violence, making them less sympathetic, as it does with the butler, comparing his broken skull to a pot. Laughter is meant to make the victims of violence less sympathetic and glorify the perpetrators, to show the outburst of violence as something to be celebrated.<sup>33</sup>

All these ambiguous passages show that this narrative poem can not simply be understood as an anti-courtly work. Anti-courtly discourse reverberates throughout it and configures the narrative action. However, the critique of courtliness is not explicitly directed against all forms of courtliness, but rather against certain ways of employing, and interpreting, courtly standards.

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<sup>32</sup> Jaeger, *Origins* (n. 15 above) 165.

<sup>33</sup> These effects have been widely studied in contemporary media and psychology: Albert Bandura, "Selective Activation and Disengagement of Moral Control," *Journal of Social Issues* 46, 1 (1990); James Potter and Ron Warren, "Humor as Camouflage of Televised Violence," *Journal of Communication* 48 (1998).

#### CONCLUSION

As has been shown, *Heinrich von Kempten* retells a plot designed as a critic of courtliness and does it referring to a wide variety of anti-courtly motives. This fits perfectly with the probable intentions of his patron, Berthold von Tiersberg. However, the text cannot be merely seen as an anti-courtly narrative, but as an ambiguous representation of court, which highlights its negative features. The court inspired admiration and criticism at the same time, and *Heinrich von Kempten* leans towards criticism.

One important issue goes beyond the scope of this article, but should be mentioned nonetheless. *Heinrich von Kempten* is not the only Middle High German text of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century filled with anti-courtly motives and intentions. The famous “classical” Middle High German texts from around 1200 presented the court with ambiguity and complexity, but tended towards a positive evaluation of courtly values and behavior. The 13<sup>th</sup> century literature developed an opposite trend. Two genres feature an especially acute stand against courtliness: the *Schwank* and the *Dietrichsepik*. A great number of *Schwänke* have as a subject matter an ironic view of courtliness, for example: *Die halbe Birne*, *Der Sperber* and *Der nackte Knecht*. On the other hand, the *Dietrichsepik* opposes heroic characters against courtly conventions. This is done paradigmatically in *Eckenlied*, where the love service is depicted as a ridiculous convention, causing meaningless violence.

The above-mentioned examples would require detailed analysis, as was undertaken in this text for *Heinrich von Kempten*, but that exceeds the scope of this article. They are named here just to show that *Heinrich von Kempten* is not isolated in referring to the tradition of critics of courtliness. It must be seen as a representative of the complex and ambiguous stand of the 13<sup>th</sup> century towards courtliness.