

Article

The Meaning of Literature and Literature as Meaning—A Productive Challenge of Modern Times from the Middle Ages

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Abstract: The marriage of literature and science might not be possible strictly speaking, but a marriage of humanities with philosophy, psychology, religion, ethics, ecology, and social studies, for instance, might well work, as a close analysis of some medieval narratives will illustrate. This paper intends to demonstrate once again what the humanities could truly mean, insofar as the discussion will not only lay bare textual elements or philological concerns, but it will also indicate how much relevant literature helps us to address crucial questions of religious, ethical, social, moral, and philosophical kinds, building powerful bridges between the past and the present. In order to test this premise even in extreme situations, here a number of medieval texts will be introduced and analyzed as to their timeless message and hence their extremely important function of creating meaning for readers/listeners both from the Middle Ages and today.

Keywords: meaning of the humanities; meaning of literature today; the Middle Ages; Enlightenment; *Gesta Romanorum*; Boccaccio; Lessing; toleration and tolerance; Kaufringer; ethics and law

1. Introduction: The Relevance of Literature

This paper revisits the ancient question regarding the relevance of literature, and this at a time when economic and political pressure, as well as the competition from the natural sciences, make it increasingly difficult to uphold the values and ideals of the humanities as expressed, for instance, by literary texts. The tiresome and pointless criticism is always directed at academic subject matters that do not immediately lead to a professional career after graduation. The humanities badly but unjustifiably suffer from this acrimonious challenge because they deal with literature, visual and audio expressions, and examine human life from a holistic perspective. Moreover, the humanities are engaged with the cultural expressions of human life and try to understand them as meaningful and relevant representations of the human existence. All that is critically important for everyone, even though it does not automatically translate into monetary or material profit. However, no money can ever provide happiness by itself if the individual does not have meaning in his/her life and does not understand somehow why s/he exists in the first place, as already Boethius taught us in 525 C.E. in his famous and timeless treatise *De consolazione philosophiae* [1–3], and as countless other intellectuals have pondered throughout the ages [4–7].

Contributions to our journal have already addressed many aspects generally considered “humanistic”, but the more specifically literary perspectives seem to have been somewhat lost out of sight and need to be repositioned one more time because the term “humanities” has occasionally been employed in a very generalizing or abstract fashion. Of course, that has meant the establishment of better connections to the sciences and has also opened many intriguing and most fruitful perspectives regarding the value of human life and culture through a variety of interpretive lenses, but we also need focused studies that identify specifically what we mean by the humanities in a literary context,

the core area of research in that discipline. I do not intend to preach to the converted; instead the following investigations serve the purpose of bringing back into the center of our attention what a literary text, that is, what its scholarly examination, can do for the probing of the human in the “humanities” and how this ultimately connects our discipline with all others within the academy. Very recently, Dieter Teicher formulated this significant thesis that might help us in gaining a more solid grip on the meaning of literature within the gamut of scholarly activities:

Die Literaturwissenschaft ist keine reine Wissenschaft. Die Literaturwissenschaft leistet eine reflektierte, methodisch abgesicherte Analyse und Auseinandersetzung mit der kulturellen Text-Tradition der jeweils eigenen oder fremder Sprachgemeinschaften. Diese Auseinandersetzung begreift eine Vermittlung der Traditionsgehalte mit ein und erweitert das historische Wissen zu einem Reflexionsmedium der jeweiligen Gegenwart des Interpretieren [8–14].

(Literary scholarship is not a pure science. Literary scholarship carries out a reflective, methodologically sound analysis and engagement with the cultural text tradition of one’s own or a foreign community of speakers respectively. This engagement includes a communication of the traditional values and expands the historical knowledge to a medium of reflection for the respective present time of the interpreter.)

Here I will revisit a number of texts selected from Western literature, primarily from the Middle Ages and the early modern age, in order to illustrate how much a poem, a verse narrative, a romance, or a heroic epic allows us, as human beings, to come to grips with our own existence in a startling but refreshing way, especially since a literary text serves as a kind of epistemological mirror addressing truly fundamental issues. “Literary” can mean many different aspects, but in the pre-modern context we can be certain that there were no strict barriers between fictional and factual texts, between didactic-religious and erotic-spiritual texts. Historical accounts and herbals have been as much integrated into the corpus of relevant texts for medieval and early modern literary scholarship as have been travelogues and sermons. The present selection reflects my own expertise, and is only intended as an illustration of the approach and methodology pursued in this article, so the conclusions should ultimately be applicable to every other area of literary history in East and West, past and present, wherever the same open premises regarding the notion of “literature” are maintained. Once we have been able to agree on the basic principles that I want to develop here, we will have excellent benchmarks to discuss the relevance and meaning of the humanities on a more global level [15]. As to be expected, those in the literary field will probably regard these reflections as self-evident, though the evidence adduced might still be eye-opening. However, since the purpose here consists of addressing fundamental philosophical, ethical, and perhaps even moral issues as formulated in literary texts, leaving aesthetic aspects aside for pragmatic purposes only, this paper is intended as a contribution to the global discussion of the meaning of human values at large as reflected through literature. This is a topic that constantly requires new reviews and evaluations, since our cultural map is shifting and requires regular adjustments, as the ongoing history of reception indicates. After all, every generation, every new group of readers/scholars respond to individual texts differently, and yet, as I will try to illustrate, certain universal messages come through everywhere and all the time. We know also that we can regularly observe the emergence of new literary manifestations, but the concern with meaning in human lives never changes, and the quest to make sense out of our existence continues. Literary history, in this context, might be, by analogy, something like the Amazonas rainforest, an incredible repository of plants/texts from past and present that harbors an infinite amount of information and data of enormous relevance for our future when new challenges will require innovative or truly ancient responses.

In fact, we can easily gain good criteria to define valuable, that is, high quality literature (in contrast to trivial literature), by asking the simple question of what a specific text can inform us about the human existence throughout time in a meaningful way, through probing issues, challenging

us, presenting conflicts, and offering pathways toward a balanced and fulfilling existence beyond a simplistic binary opposition, which tends to collapse into kitsch. I am not concerned with banal narratives that provide excitement or entertainment without any significant impact on our own lives. Those are certainly relevant as well and serve a specific purpose, but literature that can stand up to critical examination throughout time and continues to speak to us represents the core of the humanities. Literature has much to do with ethics, and learning how to read it critically proves to be an extremely effective tool in transforming the new generation into ethically responsible and reflective individuals, as Peter Brooks and a group of collaborators have recently pointed out to us. Their concern pertains to the present situation in which political manipulation, ideological contortions, blatant falsehood, and propaganda are on the rise globally, including in Western democracies, of course. Hence, a recourse to fundamentally important literary texts from the Middle Ages might offer intriguingly new avenues, as I will explain below, in sharpening our ethical standards [16]. With respect to the broad definition of literature, however, this does not mean that we have to accept only ethical or philosophical criteria, since there are also strong aesthetic ones that have to be considered, but for the purpose of the present paper I will limit myself to the issue of whether a text produces meaning in whatever context.

The sciences are not competitors, but complementary actors to the humanities (and perhaps *vice versa* as well), and both natural, material facts and literary reflections simply make up the corresponding sides of the same coin, that is, us as people in our existence [17–20]. As a group of scholars/scientists now rightly underscores: “We recognize that science is able to monitor, measure and to some extent predict the biogeophysics of global change. However, its analytical power stops short of investigating the main driver of planetary change—the human factor. What humans believe and value, how we organize ourselves, and what we invest to achieve our goals are factors that lie largely outside scientific calculation” [21]. Human rights, human suffering, human desires, the growth of the human spirit, the interaction between humans and the natural environment, human communication, faith, tolerance, the exploration of our world and beyond, dreams and ideals, hope and wishes—all those aspects belong to the domain of literature, whether within the fictional or the non-fictional framework [22,23]. There are countless experiences in human life that do not find easy, if any, answers to death, love, God, and joy, but by means of the literary works, among many other media, we can approximate them and find an expression for the ineffable, or apophatic—in the mystical context, above all—which certainly has a deep impact on us people all over the world and throughout time. Medicine and the humanities have much in common [24–27], as do magic/alchemy and literature [28]. By the same token, environmental humanities and literature now go hand in hand [29].

This article will only address some selected topics as contained in crucial texts and examine how the opinions formulated by the poets of earlier times continue to shape our own existence today. In other words, the questions that I want to examine here pertain to the “human” dimension in the literary discourse. However, here I would not want to be misunderstood as to define literature by its ethical content; instead, it represents, if it meets quality standards, a forum for a discourse on relevant topics in human life [30–32].

2. Humanities and the Modern-Day University

Even though universities all over the world are apparently predicated on the idea that there must be departments dealing with the sciences and departments dedicated to the humanities, this bifurcation was not always the case, and might not last forever, either. Moreover, the humanities as a discipline have not always been part of the university system as we know it today. In fact, mostly under the leadership of early nineteenth-century German scholars, philology and later literary scholarship emerged, constituting today a major building block of most respectable universities [33,34]. However, this very structure is at risk at present because of external pressures that result from the ongoing efforts by outside forces to cut them off from public funding. Input and output must be balanced, and this transforms, according to some critics, the essential task of the university which will take us

away from (too) abstract research and scholarship and transform the institution into a job training center. Of course, university students must be qualified enough to find jobs after they have graduated. But unfortunately, that is no longer specifically the case, if it has ever been so. Many academic disciplines represent, in the classical German expression, “*brotlose Künste*”, that is, arts that do not yield bread—*i.e.*, income—and already since the Middle Ages comments have been made with regard to this problem: advanced, academic education does not necessarily lead to a concrete job, which many people in the public tend to criticize and object to [35]. But the university as an institution simply does not serve as a training school, though practical aspects, hands-on engagement by students, and concrete application of theoretical concepts are certainly also part of the study program at institutions of higher learning.

In the face of an ever-growing corporatization of the university in the present time, it becomes increasingly necessary to reflect upon the true nature of this institution, if we want to protect it in one way or the other from global decline [36–40]. The glut of relevant studies defending the Liberal Arts and Humanities at the universities is testimony enough to underscore the urgency of the matter, although there is the danger that these authors really preach to the converted [41]. Sadly, on neither side of the Atlantic have universities been spared the brutal battering of money-driven ideologies, and the situation at universities on other continents is no different. The pitch of complaints and lamentations is getting feverish, and there is the growing danger that administrators, even those who are heading humanities departments and colleges, begin to look more where the money lies than what truly constitutes the humanities, or literature in my context.

Of course, that is their essential task, to watch out for the financial wellbeing of an academic unit, but the rationale for having a humanities department is not really satisfied by economic criteria. Carrying metaphorical owls to Athens, we might simply state that our task in the humanities is to research and teach human-oriented issues and to discuss relevant materials that provide identity and meaning to our students and other audiences. Numbers of students paying tuition are very important, no doubt, but the humanities exist because our greatest need as people is to find out what we are as human individuals, in our value system, our basic concerns, and hence with respect to our purposes and goals in life.

We live in tough times, but earlier decades and centuries were not much rosier, even if they had to contend with somewhat different challenges. Even though we can agree with Roland Greene that “nostalgia for an imagined past has little value as we negotiate in our complicated moment”, the concern about the shrinking job market and hence the loss of reputation of the professorate, especially in the humanities, has gained much more urgency in the present time [42–44]. Moreover, our entire cultural background, history, and foundation are at a risk if our field is no longer appreciated and embraced by the public, hence by the governments [45,46]. After all, we must find out who we are and why we exist. Literature is, of course, no panacea, but it provides a panoply of models that allow us to reflect on ourselves over and over again; it challenges our own positions within this world *vis-à-vis* other people, cultures, religions, ethics, and worldviews; and it provides a textual medium for the analysis of the basic values that determine our existence.

3. The Meaning of the Past for the Present and the Future

In a previous contribution to this journal I examined the broader question and answered it mostly by looking at a selection of medieval texts that continue to speak to us today [47,48]. Subsequently, in another paper published elsewhere, I examined two major texts from the German Middle Ages to illustrate how much they can illuminate basic human concerns: the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) and Hartmann von Aue’s verse narrative, “Der arme Heinrich” (ca. 1190–1200) [49]. But this is not satisfying enough because it still sounds like preaching to the choir in a very narrow context and might not convince critics from the outside. We need to make further attempts at building a case for literature today, in 2016, at a time when technology threatens to bypass human intellect and cultural awareness, turning us into recipients of commands issued by machines, and not the other way around. Moreover,

in the face of a highly alarming trend in recent decades to resort to violence, both involving and affecting individuals and whole groups, the critical questions, which literature truly tries to answer, become most urgent: who we are, why we exist, and what really matters in this life here on earth.

Of course, literature does not represent a magical tool with which to answer life's questions, but it is certainly a catalyst for critical thinking, for exercising our brain, for imagining alternative models of human existence, and for reflecting on the fundamental discrepancies in our lives, especially between the physical and spiritual dimensions [50]. Even though, for instance, the Icelandic *Njáls Saga* (late 13th century) is determined by a seemingly countless series of bloody violence, the protagonist is constantly concerned with establishing settlements and to find peaceful solutions. His own death at the end, as tragic as it might be, serves as a clear signal that the violent forces here in this world must not triumph and that alternative avenues in human life must be sought [51–54]. This epic poem therefore provides an excellent platform to discuss the timeless question of how the vicious cycle of violence can be interrupted and replaced with peaceful measures that allow the individual to contribute in a constructive manner to the growth of human society. Many other examples could be adduced, such as the Old Spanish *El Poema de Mío Cid*, or the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, where violence is not really contained—far from it—but where it is deeply questioned and where alternatives are indirectly suggested, especially in line with the follow-up epic poem, *Diu Klage*.

The basic building blocks available to us do not change and continue to demand our attention and reactions. The language in which those texts have been composed does not matter, since poetry, for instance, is universal, constantly and everywhere expanding human awareness and sensibilities. Intriguingly, the range of topics addressed by poets throughout time has not changed much, since the central concerns of literature proves to be us ourselves. The human being is a highly complex entity that is, however, determined by just a handful of deep issues, although those then intertwine and combine with each other in a most confusing and baffling manner. Let us list some of the major topics as they rise to the surface in all human affairs throughout time: fear, hatred, love, anxiety, God, death, and happiness. Other important values in human life are friendship, hope, and spirituality; none of them to be measured in terms of money, but all of them so important because without them life would not be worth living. The rest consists of combinations of those with an infinite number of external factors, such as nature, climate, money, jobs, communication, transportation, foodstuffs, etc. [55].

We can summarize the two extreme poles in our existence with the help of two dialectic terms: meaning or absence of meaning. There is certainly a lot of disagreement about what constitutes meaning, and when the point might be reached where we have established or lost that meaning—although never undermining the overarching concept. However, we cannot fathom “meaning” through material terms, since being fed, being sexually satisfied, feeling comfortable, etc. all belong to the body, and not to the mind. We can abstract this complex issue even further and talk only about “happiness”, which requires much in spiritual and little in material terms, as all great spiritual leaders and intellectuals throughout time have already taught us, whether we think of Jesus or Buddha, of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, Boethius, Augustine, or Hildegard of Bingen [56–58].

A well-organized social system can ensure that all of its members are content, receive decent housing, healthcare, and hold a job, but this does not create happiness; instead it produces (deadly) calmness and makes possible governmental control. Many utopian novels have presented such scenarios, which quickly turn into dystopias because a crucial element of human life is then missing, which again can best be termed as “meaning”, “freedom”, or “creativity” (George Orwell, 1984) [59]. This finds its most poignant, though not exclusive, expression in music, the arts, and literature [60].

4. The Meaning and Relevance of Literature

While literature used to enjoy a high status in society, it is now severely challenged by mass production and hence the commercialization of literary entertainment. In this regard I am not concerned with the new media in which more and more literature is published, but with the actual quality of literary statements and their meaningfulness [61–65]. Some critics have argued that the

availability of the electronic book and the Kindle reader, for instance, contribute significantly to the global decline of literature as a high mark of the humanities, but the very opposite also might be the case [66–69]. We are here not concerned with the medium through which literature is disseminated, but with the content of literary texts and their relevance for us today, irrespective of their date of origin and the mode of publication. And yet, there is a flood of profound and far-reaching efforts by scholars all over the world to defend literature, identifying it as the foundation of all education, of human dignity, freedom, friendship, and love, irrespective of the media through which it is disseminated, including orality [70–72].

In order to avoid generalities once again, and to address the issue as directly as possible, here I suggest simply looking at a number of significant examples wherein the critical engagement allows the reader/listener to gain considerable profit for his or her life. There are, of course, many classics, such as Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (ca. 1305–1230), Christine de Pizan's ballads and romances (1364–1430), William Shakespeare's plays (1564–1616), or Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust* (1806) that contain many reflections on human life, and no one would doubt their value for all times. But the danger with such canonical texts is that they quickly become stale and are soon contained behind a metaphorical glass pane that distances them uncannily from real life. That glass wall must regularly be shattered in order to bring those texts back to life. The approaches to such texts tend, however, to make this difficult because they are treated as iconic masterpieces worthy of universal and timeless admiration. The opposite approach would be much more appropriate, that is, raising first the critical questions that concern us as individuals and as a collective, and then looking for possible models in literature. If "canonical" texts no can longer revolutionize or radicalize their audience, then they transmogrify into anachronistic museum pieces only to be remembered as objects behind glass, instead of texts that force us to engage with them actively and hence to change our own lives. At the same time, as to the relevance of any literary text today, there is no reason whatsoever to draw historical lines and to jettison older works, for instance, just because they were produced in Antiquity or the Middle Ages. Presentism in reading literature could result in nothing but mirroring one's own existence, without gaining a new foothold. The relevant question for the present approach rests rather in whether a poem or an epic saga, a romance or a play, a novel or lyrics of modern rap songs can appeal to us, carries meaning, and can be read and discussed fruitfully, apart from being aesthetically pleasing or not.

5. New Directions

At first I want to probe this approach and critical stance by examining several major texts that continue to be of greatest importance to the present and also the future world because they easily extend into postmodernity with their profoundly innovative approaches [73]. As I want to demonstrate, the issues addressed there force us to reflect upon our own existence and to mirror the current conditions in each individual narrative source. We could easily engage with texts that treat topics such as love, the quest for God, or the experience with death. They all entail the quest for meaning and are certainly timeless, but perhaps for that reason also less convincing for those who might question the validity of literature and the humanities in today's harsh economic climate. To do justice to my concerns here, I will try to address two crucial issues that are of extreme importance to the postmodern world and which might yet find significant answers in older texts [74,75].

6. Tolerance and Harmony

To begin with, one of the crucial questions today is the continued concern for tolerance and harmony, especially at a time when religious violence is growing at an alarming rate, not only among the various major or minor religions, but also within each faith group. Anti-Semitism, unfortunately, is still alive and well in many corners; the hatred between Sunnis and Shiites is currently assuming dangerous proportions, and the tensions between Orthodox and Liberal Jews are certainly palpable and egregious. The Christians and Hindus are not necessarily much better off, and we could easily

extend that list with many other examples. Fortunately, the opposite can also be found around the world, with many faithful people maintaining an open heart and embracing even the foreign and unfaithful. However, we have to deal with the hateful and violent aspects and must come to terms with them most urgently for our own survival.

This question regarding tolerance has huge undertones, especially in the present moment (April 2016) because millions of people are on the move fleeing from violence, repression, rape, subjugation, mass murder, *etc.*, and this commonly as a result of religious persecutions, economic hardships, and military threats. At the same time, they run into newly erected border fences, hostility, fear, and rejection. Again we are required to examine the relationship among the three world religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, in order to improve the human condition. Nothing is new about it, alas, and we simply return to where we once used to be, only to re-enter the same cycle of reflections because of ever-new cycles of violence. Let us look first at one particular example that dates from the middle of the thirteenth century, and has since experienced an incredibly long reception process lasting at least to the end of the eighteenth century, suggesting that its message might continue to hold sway and could provide meaning, even and also for us today.

6.1. *Gesta Romanorum*

In one of the most popular compilations of medieval narratives, the *Gesta Romanorum* (end of the thirteenth or early fourteenth century, composed either in England or in Germany) [76–81], we come across a remarkable tale (“Tale LXXXIX”) that enjoyed an astounding appeal to writers throughout subsequent centuries. At first sight it seems to be a rather mundane narrative, with not much depth to it, since it deals with a man who has three sons to whom he bequeaths from his deathbed his inheritance (to the first-born), his treasury (to the second-born), and a most valuable ring (to the third-born). Unfortunately, as it turns out after the knight has passed away, he seems to have given virtually identical rings to the first two sons as well, who now all bicker about who holds the true ring. The reasons for this fight are not clearly spelled out, but we can assume that only the one who holds the true ring would be the ultimate heir to the father’s property. All three then agree to the first-born’s suggestion to put their rings to a test, and have sick people brought in for that purpose. The first two rings do not show any effect on them, “but the last cured all their infirmities” ([77], p. 215).

As is the almost universal norm, the short tale is then followed by an epimythium, that is, a brief moral interpretation, which we can cite here in full: “the knight is Christ: the three sons are the Jews, Saracens, and Christians. The most valuable ring is faith, which is the property only of the younger, that is, of the Christians” ([77], p. 215). There does not seem to be much in this text that would support the idea of tolerance. But we observe, at least, that the three sons talk to each other and willingly submit themselves to the test, which was actually suggested by the first-born, hence the oldest one, or the Jew. The outcome is entirely in favor of the Christian, but there is no conflict amongst the sons as a consequence of this test.

Maybe surprisingly, throughout the late Middle Ages, numerous philosophers and theologians composed dialog treatises that reflect more or less the same situation, whether we think of Peter Abelard, Raymond Llull, Marsiglio of Padua, or Nicholas of Cusa [82,83]. Thus the question raised here in the *Gesta Romanorum* adds to the chorus of intellectuals and writers from that entire time period who tried hard to figure out the relationship between Christianity and other religions. They did not pursue tolerance, but we can certainly attribute to them a sense of toleration, an important precursor to tolerance itself [84].

6.2. *Giovanni Boccaccio*

Ca. 50 years after the first appearance of the *Gesta*, the famous Italian Renaissance author Giovanni Boccaccio published his by now world-famous *Decameron* (ca. 1351), in which we encounter more or less the same story, but considerably expanded, adding an important new twist to the account [85,86]. The storyteller sets out from the start with her ethical and philosophical message, alerting her listeners

that her account will demonstrate “that stupidity often drags people out of happiness into the greatest misery, while good sense saves the wise man from the greatest dangers and puts him in complete security” ([86], p. 59). Her interest rests primarily in teaching a lesson on wisdom, which the Jew in her story demonstrates most impressively. In contrast to the early version in the *Gesta*, here the different religious roles are clearly marked, with the Sultan Saladin being a Muslim and Melchisedech being a Jew. No Christian figures here, but Christianity matters just as much as the two other religions. While in the *Gesta* the purpose consisted of finding out the truth about the one and only ring, here the narrative builds a different case which is much more realistic than in the Latin source. The Sultan is in desperate need of money for his ongoing war campaigns against the Crusaders, so he turns to this Jew living in Alexandria from whom he is considering extorting a huge sum of money. However, he hesitates to employ naked violence and conceives of a pretext to convince the money lender to be at his service. In fact, he invites and welcomes him in a friendly fashion, characterizes him a “[w]orthy man” whom the people call “wise” ([86], p. 60). Ironically, Saladin really thinks only of money, but he pretends to be driven by religious curiosity to find out which of the three Laws—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—constitutes the true religion.

Significantly, as the narrator notes herself, Melchisedech is wise and clever enough to realize the trap which the Sultan has set for him, so he turns to storytelling, which constitutes a highly intricate strategy by Boccaccio because he himself is the storyteller, extradiegetically, whereas Filomena makes up the metadiegetical storyteller, and Melchisedech proves to be the intradiegetical storyteller [87]. In Boccaccio’s narrative, the origin of the ring goes far back to a father who owns this amazingly precious ring which he makes into an heirloom. He grants it to his most beloved son: “he commanded that whichever of his sons should be found in possession of the ring, which he would leave to him, should be looked upon as his heir, and that all his other children should reverence and honour this son as the greatest among them” ([86], p. 60).

This rule is closely observed over many generations until one day the situation becomes problematic for the father since all of his three sons are worthy and honorable. In fact, he loves them all equally, so instead of choosing one of them as his favorite, he has an artist make two exact copies, so that he can secretly hand over an “authentic” ring to each one of them. After the father’s death, all three sons come forward and claim to be the true and only heir, which, surprisingly, no one can decide for them. Melchisedech then concludes with the remarkable comment: “so the question as to which was the father’s real heir remained unsettled and is not settled yet” ([86], p. 61). This outcome he then applies to the three world religions and concludes that the question posed by the Sultan actually cannot be answered since the debate has not yet been settled.

Saladin immediately realizes the Jew’s wisdom and hence decides to reveal the real motive behind his question, and both then cooperate to the satisfaction of both, the Jew lending all the money his lord needs, and the latter repaying him subsequently to the fullest extent. Moreover, and which might be regarded as one of the most important consequences: “Saladin gave him very great gifts and always looked upon him as a friend and kept the Jew near his person great and honourable state” ([86], p. 61). Indeed, here we observe a remarkable case of friendship across the religious divide, and this in a major fourteenth-century text that continues to appeal to us today because of its simple and utterly true message that religion should not be used as a criterion for distinguishing people and that individuals can strike up a friendship even if they are separated by their faith [88].

Boccaccio’s extensive influence over the following centuries can hardly be underestimated, obviously because he was not only a great storyteller, but especially because he conveyed fundamental, timeless messages beautifully packaged into a literary framework that easily invites all kinds of audiences to unravel and reflect upon them [89,90]. As we have learned from trauma studies, for instance, narrations are superbly qualified as therapeutic methods especially in such troublesome cases [91]. Racism and intolerance can be similarly combated by means of storytelling, as Boccaccio already indicated with his example, even if problematic as some modern scholars have viewed it from their perspective [92–95].

7. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*

About 300 years later, the famous German playwright, theologian, author, and philologist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing adapted Boccaccio's tale again and translated it into his powerful drama, *Nathan der Weise*, Nathan the Wise (1779) [96]. The plot outline is more or less the same, but Lessing fleshed out the original story considerably, adding a whole new layer both to the ring parable and to the outer framework, informing us, for instance, in great detail about the family background of Nathan and the Sultan Saladin [97]. His play contributes significantly to our examination of the fundamental questions regarding the meaning of life because despite having been composed in the late eighteenth century, it reflects the medieval tradition and offers a message for the future, that is, the 21st century.

Although Nathan suffered terribly in the past when Christians committed a pogrom against the Jews and burned down his house, killing everyone, including his wife and seven sons, he subsequently adopted a Christian girl, Recha, whose parents had died, and raised her as his own daughter, building a bridge to the other religious culture out of his free volition, without abandoning his Jewish faith. A monk had brought that girl to him, and when the two men talk about the horrors of the past, with Nathan reflecting particularly on his personal devastation and slow recovery of his heart and mind, the other man cannot help but call the Jew the best possible Christian in the world ([98], p. 597).

In the course of the play it soon turns out that Recha is the sister of the Templar knight who had rescued her from a fire, and that the Templar himself is the Sultan's nephew, revealing all the main protagonists to be directly connected through family bonds. Nathan is the only one who stands somewhat outside, but he adopted Recha and now brings together brother and sister under the protection of the Sultan. The Templar had fallen in love with Recha, but Nathan is careful enough to probe his family background first, thus at the end avoiding the problem of involuntary incest.

Most crucially, however, Lessing returned to the ring parable because Saladin is lacking funds to run his government and his wars and hopes to get a loan from Nathan. As in Boccaccio's story, the Sultan resorts to a deceptive question to trap the rich merchant/banker, asking him to explain which one would be the true religion. Nathan relates, to answer this challenging inquiry, the story of a man living somewhere in the Orient who owned the ring which did not only shine forth through its material wealth, but made it possible for the one wearing it to be loved by people ([98], p. 556). The owner regarded that ring with the greatest respect and never took it off his finger. He stipulated in his last will that only the son whom he loved the most would inherit the ring, regardless of his social status and rank within the family.

Over generations, this rule is closely observed to the satisfaction of everyone, until one man has three sons whom he loves equally, not able to make any distinction. He even promised the one ring to each of them, and shortly before his death, in his dire dilemma, he had a goldsmith make exact copies so he could hand over one ring to each of the sons. He then died, and soon enough the three sons began to fight over who would be entitled to ruling over the family. But no one could distinguish among those rings, thus already providing the core of the necessary answer. Even though Saladin insists that it would certainly be possible to distinguish among the three religions, Nathan counters that every religion is based on a historical account, which the faithful simply have to believe, since it comes down to them through their families. Nathan insists that he himself would have to believe his own father more than anyone else, so tradition simply requires from each devout person to follow the religion of his own family tradition ([98], p. 558).

Although the three sons in this parable then seek help from a judge, they are told that they would have to bring in the father as the decisive witness, which is, of course, impossible because he is already dead ([98], p. 558). Although this lawsuit seems moot and frivolous, since it is absurd to ask a judge to solve riddles, the judge suddenly remembers the true ring's particular property, pointing out that in the course of time the true ring would reveal its unique characteristic:

But hold—you tell me that the real ring
 Enjoys the hidden power to make the wearer
 Of God and man beloved; let that decide [98].

Love is the key concept determining the authenticity of the ring, and hence of religion. The judge even suspects that the original ring might have been lost and that the father, out of love for all of his sons, simply had copies made so that each one of them should plainly believe to be entitled to his own faith. Moreover, the subsequent message then proves to be timeless and more relevant today than ever before:

'Tis possible the father chose no longer
 To tolerate the one ring's tyranny;
 And certainly, as he much loved you all,
 And loved you all alike, it could not please him
 By favouring one to be of two the oppressor.
 Let each feel honoured by this free affection.
 Unwarped of prejudice; let each endeavour
 To vie with both his brothers in displaying
 The virtue of his ring; assist its might
 With gentleness, benevolence, forbearance,
 With inward resignation to the godhead,
 And if the virtues of the ring continue
 To show themselves among your children's children,
 After a thousand thousand years, appear
 Before this judgment-seat—a greater one
 Than I shall sit upon it, and decide.
 So spake the modest judge ([98], p. 559).

The representatives of these three religions should thus no longer fight each other, but instead compete in their efforts to demonstrate love, gentleness, forbearance, *etc.*, hence displaying virtues irrespective of the specific commands in any of the holy books.

The Sultan is so deeply impressed, in fact moved by the teachings of this little parable that he entirely forgets his original intentions and humbles himself by declaring that he is certainly not yet the judge who would rule after thousand years about the only true religion:

Nathan, my dearest Nathan, 'tis not yet
 The judge's thousand thousand years are past,
 His judgment-seat's not mine. Go, go, but love me ([98], p. 560).

In the original German text, Lessing uses a slightly different term in this section, since Saladin only requests friendship from Nathan, declaring openly that he has no further inquiry with the Jew. Nathan, however, then approaches the Sultan offering him a huge credit, veiled behind the request to deposit a large sum of money with the Sultan for security.

We do not need to go much further into the details of Lessing's play, which represents one of the most important "classical" texts in the history of German literature and which continues to be performed on countless stages in Germany today, appealing to perpetually new generations of readers/viewers [99]. The body of research on *Nathan the Wise* is expansive, and it would be presumptuous to claim new insights regarding the central message of this famous play. However, for our purpose, we can refer both to Lessing's play, Boccaccio's *novella*, and the Latin exempla in the *Gesta Romanorum* as a literary chain of the most remarkable and meaningful literary texts in which one of the central conflicts in human life is critically viewed and approached from an amazingly non-orthodox, undogmatic perspective, and this within a deeply Christian world from the Middle Ages to the age of the Enlightenment [100–103].

The true idea expressed in all three texts—here disregarding a number of more marginal sources—is not difficult to unearth, but it is still hidden within a literary framework which makes the swallowing of the “bitter pill” more palatable. The reader is invited each time to reflect with the author/narrator about the actual relationship between the three world religions and to overcome in that process hardened and unjustified prejudices. Despite their considerable differences, each text contributed in its own way to the growing process of toleration and then tolerance from the late thirteenth to the late eighteenth century.

8. Heinrich Kaufringer

From here I would like to turn to a very different example that allows us to grasp the very essence of literary discourse once again and hence its tremendous impact on human life, especially when those messages arrive from texts composed a long time ago. The issue that concerns us here pertains to the question regarding law, righteousness, justice, and the relationship between the human individual and God. Who can be one’s brother’s own judge? The authors of the four Gospels already struggled with this issue and formulated some striking answers which even today we would have a hard time accepting and integrating into our own ethical thinking (Matth. 7:1–5; James 4:11–12; Romans 14: 1–23; John 7:24; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 1 Peter 4:8, *etc.*). Again we could begin with a tale in the *Gesta Romanorum*, but instead I will investigate a much more elaborated narrative from the turn of the 14th century, composed by a Heinrich Kaufringer around 1400 in Landsberg am Lech [104–106]. The *Gesta* collection obviously served as a significant source for this poet, whose tale, in turn, became the influential source text for numerous poets in the 15th and 16th centuries [107]. His verse narratives, also called *mæren* in Middle High German, experienced some success and were, albeit rather indirectly, popular in the following centuries. Not surprisingly, some of those tales can still appeal to us, not only because of their elegant style skillful arrangement of the narrative plot, and the often fascinating and thought-provoking content, but also because they carry timeless meaning. I will discuss two of them here where the focus turns to the issue of human justice *versus* divine justice.

In the first narrative, which also initiates the collections of *mæren* in the two major manuscripts, Munich cgm 270 and Berlin mgf 564, a rather confused and disappointed hermit decides to leave his cell and find out more about the world because he believes that there he might discover God’s miracles, which do not seem to happen in his lonely retreat. Soon enough he is joined by a stranger whom the narrator identifies as an angel, although the hermit does not realize this. The two men stay in an inn the first night where they are treated most generously and hospitably, without being charged for their meal and room. However, early in the morning, shortly before their departure, the stranger sits down next to the host’s infant child, remarking how beautiful and delightful it looks, then he takes a pillow and suffocates the baby.

Naturally, the hermit is completely abhorred and feels helpless, but the stranger continues to accompany him, and, after having spent another night as the guest of a second very friendly and welcoming innkeeper, he steals the latter’s most valuable chalice. Again, the hermit is deeply shocked and voices protest and anger. But the angel only tells him: ““You foolish man, if you want to explore the world, you will have to witness much greater wonders than those that I have done so far . . . ”” ([105], p. 3). The third night, they are not as lucky as before and have to stay in a very dubious inn outside of the city gates, where they have to fend off ruffians and criminals, not finding a decent place to rest, and not receiving any food. Nevertheless, the innkeeper then charges them heftily for the stay, which greatly irritates the hermit, but his companion now takes a very different action, handing over the precious chalice as a payment, which confuses the hermit even further.

While the two bicker badly when the hermit accuses the other of being a devil, they reach a bridge leading to a city. At that moment a man comes rushing up to them from behind, and when he has entered the bridge, the angel grabs him and tosses him into the river, thus drowning him. This tops it off, of course, and the poor hermit is totally frustrated and horrified, not able to handle these murderous and criminal acts any longer. However, to his great surprise, the companion then

finally reveals his true identity and explains the truth behind his seemingly horrible actions. He has been sent by God to provide the hermit with some lessons about God's true nature. The first murder served to rescue the innkeeper's and his wife's souls since they had been granted God's grace when he gave them that child late in life although she had been infertile. But then the two had started to spoil the child and had become greedy in order to pile all their money on this child, turning away from God. The second innkeeper had been guilty of having accepted this chalice as payment for treason, but now, since the angel has taken it away from him, his soul is pure again. The third innkeeper is already rotten on the inside, being an evil person, purely materialistic and lacking in any form of piety, is destined for hell at any rate. The angel gave him that chalice so that he could at least enjoy some material wealth here on earth before his dreaded death.

The second murder happened because the man had just repented his sins and wanted to confess to a priest in the city. Yet, the angel could foresee that he would not be strong enough to uphold this resolve and would fall back into his previous sinfulness: "His soul is now in God's realm and will stay there forever" ([105], p. 6). Before he disappears, he conveys his final message to the hermit: "return to your cell because all the wonders that God does happen only for good purposes. No longer question anything and follow my teaching" ([105], p. 6).

For our sense of justice and law today, this verse narrative might be at best described as irritating and frustrating, puzzling and completely unbelievable. However, this account does not reflect, as Marga Stede argues, a crisis of the late Middle Ages [108]; instead it examines the differences between human and divine perspectives [109]. Even though the concept of theodicy appears to be of relevance here, as Michaela Willers has argued ([51], p. 226) the real issue rests on a deeper level, namely in the question of how human beings can fully understand this world through their inferior epistemological lenses. The hermit clearly wants to find out more about the world and the miracles worked by God; however, instead of being delighted and spiritually uplifted, he faces confusion, is deeply upset, and has to realize at the end that he cannot fully understand divine justice. Nevertheless, he ultimately accepts that there is a different level of justice, a law that operates on a level that remains inaccessible to ordinary people.

The narrative proves to be deeply religious, but it carries a profound message for everyone after all. As the individual cases confirm, external appearance and internal values do not necessarily coincide, and in this sense Kaufringer specifically opposed the medieval concept of *kalokagathia*, that is, the idea that a beautiful body reflects a beautiful soul. The angel had to appear to destroy that illusion and to teach the hermit that God's working takes place in a way that humans cannot fully understand. Ultimately, then, the story conveys the message that we ought to be careful in our judgment of others and accept that justice could easily rest somewhere else. Moreover, as the narrative demonstrates, as unrealistic as it sounds, full justice is not necessarily within human grasp. Laws are made by and for people, and judgments are meted out by human judges. However, our lives are determined by many other factors, and apparent evil might often not be true evil. Kaufringer suggests, of course, to keep God constantly in mind and to accept that our world in its material dimensions is couched in a much larger world which our critical minds cannot easily fathom.

We find additional confirmation in another highly puzzling narrative by Kaufringer, "The Innocent Murderess" ([105], no. 14), which automatically engenders a range of discussions because murder and innocence cannot go hand in hand. In this story a countess is about to marry a king, but a knight has evil intentions and is told by his servant that she would sleep with any man. The evening before the wedding, the knight arrives at the castle of the bride, pretending to be the king. Although she hesitates to let him in for a long time, she finally gives in and so loses her virginity to the wrong man. The knight, half asleep, later involuntarily betrays his true identity, and once she has realized the crime committed against her, she waits until he is fully asleep to take a knife and cut off his head. However, his body is too heavy for her to dispose of, so she asks one of her guardsmen for help. That evil character is prepared to help, but only once she has allowed him to sleep with her as well. When they subsequently lift the corpse up to the edge of the cistern, she grabs the guardsman and throws him into the water,

drowning him. Once the wedding night has arrived, she tricks her husband regarding her missing virginity by having her most trusted chambermaid replace her during the night, without the king noticing the difference. But then the maid refuses to leave the bedroom since she wants to be queen herself. In her desperation, the countess sets fire to the bedroom, rescues her husband, but locks the door behind her and has the maid burn to death. A fourth murder happened the day before when the countess's brother returns from a visit to the king's castle. The group encounters the evil knight's servant with the horses, waiting for his master, who never comes back, of course. They suspect him of theft and immediately execute him by hanging.

Thirty-two years then pass, and finally the queen has to confess to her husband her evil deeds long ago because she feels either so much guilt or grief over the horrendous events. But the king does not react angrily, instead he embraces her calmly and says: "I want to live with you forever as your loyal servant because you have suffered much on my behalf, no doubt about it" ([105], p. 80). In a way, he forgives her and regards her decades of suffering as enough penance. The narrator then adds his comment, also defending the heroine because she "never did anything evil and yet fell into great sorrow" ([105], p. 80). For him, the lady did not commit a real crime, did not impose guilt upon herself, and did not pursue her actions with an evil intent. Those who had stolen her honor, as the narrator emphasized, had to pay a high, but certainly justified, price for their crimes. Even though this position would not hold up in any court, either medieval or modern, Kaufringer concludes: "All of them suffered the right penalty" ([105], p. 80).

For both medieval and modern legal experts this would be extremely problematic, but the poet continues further, hailing the death of those bad and disloyal characters: "Truly, I am pleased; it seems good and proper when disloyalty strikes its own author, as happened to those four people" ([105], p. 80). He insists that the lady did not pursue cunning and had to suffer greatly. If she had not taken action into her own hands, she would have easily died and, as is implied here, as a woman would not have had a chance against male attacks. God even "granted her His mercy" ([105], p. 80). Further: "She would have died from her suffering if God had not assisted her repeatedly. He does so to all who fall into danger from no fault of their own" ([105], p. 80).

For the poet, disloyalty appears to be a severe problem in his society, especially when the culprits cannot be persecuted by regular legal means. Hence, God intervenes and helps the righteous, even if they have to kill, which for the poet represents not murder, but justified punishment. Certainly, from a strictly legal, *i.e.*, human perspective, this would not be acceptable by anyone, but from a spiritual and religious perspective, the situation might appear quite differently. Of course, here we cannot ultimately decide whether the countess is innocent or not; after all, she is explicitly called a "murderess". Nevertheless, this epithet is then qualified with the adjective "innocent", which cannot actually be acceptable in the legal world. In fact, she herself goes through more than thirty years of guilty feelings, but the narrative, at least in its epimythium, the moral and ethical explanation at the end, underscores the lady's innocence. This issue cannot be fully solved here, but the text is certainly not a legal document. To be clear, Kaufringer never claims to have particular expertise in any of his narratives, although he harshly criticizes the councilors in cities in tale no. 31 for their laziness and egoism to the detriment of the law or justice.

The countess has undoubtedly committed murder, as she admits at the end. She is fully aware throughout her life that she has performed horrible deeds, but she is also aware that she killed those people out of self-defense and because she knew that she would not have a chance to defend herself in court if she tried to explain to her husband why she was no longer a virgin, and why she also slept with the guardsman. Forcing the maid out of her marital bed and creating a scene would have woken her husband who would have dismissed both women as whores not worthy of being married to him. The countess therefore finds herself in an impossible dilemma and so resorts to resolute actions which provide the basic material for Kaufringer's tale.

Again, this does not have much to do with a perceived crisis of late medieval German or European society, but with a terrible aporia for this poor woman caught between a rock and a hard place. Each of

the two men and the maid put her into an emergency from which there is no good escape, which leads Kaufringer to lend his support to her, even from a moral-religious perspective [110]. There is no doubt at all that both here and in the first narrative we are confronted with deep doubts, irritation, and provocation, especially because it seems impossible, at least in light of the narrator's design and comment, simply to condemn the lady. She commits murder three times but the circumstances force us to rethink the conditions and to examine much more carefully and humanly what her real crime might have been.

Curiously, the narrative also depicts an ideal form of marriage, with the husband granting his wife the full support that she needs, even in this horrible situation in which she had been forced to murder on behalf of her own honor and that of the king [111]. Willers formulates this in the following way: "It is God Himself who alleviates the burden of murder and adultery from the queen by coming to her aid as a 'just person' in her suffering" ([109], p. 199, my translation). As realistic and pragmatic Kaufringer otherwise often proves to be in his tales, both in "The Hermit and the Angel" and in "The Innocent Murderess" he aims for a higher goal, demonstrating how much the divine sphere actually intervenes in human life and that there can be many circumstances in worldly affairs where the traditional norms and rules, laws and precepts are no longer of any value because God in His justice judges very differently.

There is no easy way out of the aporias presented here, but that simply cannot be the purpose of a literary text. Kaufringer does not introduce hardcore realistic legal cases, outlining how to decide them as an ordinary judge would or should do. Instead, he projects particular conditions and situations in which even the best human mind might be forced to abandon its own judgment and allow the higher power to determine the course of events. This is the great advantage of literary texts in which the fictional framework permits the exploration of utopian, dream situations, alternative conditions, *etc.* Particularly because of the profoundly problematic nature of these two tales—Kaufringer continues to probe related cases in the rest of his narratives—readers find themselves in a difficult, perhaps unsolvable framework of human life where only divine intervention can ultimately solve the case.

9. Pre-Modern Literature and Post-Modern Concerns

From here we could easily expand our discussion of Kaufringer's *mæren* or of countless other contemporary and later works, both in the West and in the East. The key component, however, as it has surfaced through our discussion, proves to be the essential quest for all humans throughout time to decide on critical issues regarding justice, morality, and ethics. A strictly legal procedure would have caused enormous suffering and further injustice for the countess-turned-queen after having committed those murders, hence the appropriateness of the dialectical title of the second story, the "Innocent Murderess". The countess is a murderess, and yet she is not. She loses her honor and rescues it again. She is seriously attacked and abused by various people below her in social rank, and yet she knows well how to defend herself in an impressive, though, strictly speaking, criminal fashion.

The purpose cannot be here to reach an ultimate conclusion, because literary texts that aim for such a goal are always in danger of disappearing into triviality. Life is not black and white; instead the color grey dominates, which makes it extremely difficult for us all when we have to make a decision. From Boccaccio, Lessing, Kaufringer, and others we could easily turn to the plethora of other texts in world literature. The various voices that sound throughout the centuries are loud and clear, urging us to accept that we are nothing but human beings. The literary discourse profiles this clearly and alerts us constantly in a myriad of different fashions to examine the true nature of our existence under many different circumstances.

It would be helpful, perhaps, if we could draw from numerical equations or chemical formulas to explain such phenomena as love, passion, hope, fear, spirituality, hatred, and so forth. This is, however, not possible; instead we need to draw from literature in order to do justice to a major part of ourselves, that is, our humanity. Fortunately, much new research in neighboring fields, such as psychology, anthropology, neuroscience, or political science, have begun to address similar issues [112–115], but the

literary examples, especially from the Middle Ages, continue to serve exceedingly well to investigate what the meaning of human life, at least to some extent, was considered to be and how those answers presented in the pre-modern world then carried over into the modern and postmodern eras [73]. However, I have focused here mostly on medieval texts because of their seeming alterity, whereas in reality they simply represent a different, at times even better lens, for our microscopes focused on this curious creature, ourselves.

Literature has not only always been a source of enjoyment and entertainment, but also, more significantly, of religious and political inspiration, calling for engagement, reform, and revolution [116]. Humanities scholars working with literary texts are charged with uncovering, almost like geologists, the various meanings of narratives and poems to help the present generation comprehend where we have come from, where we are today, and where we might go in the future. I would like to point out also once again the renewed interest in ecocritical aspects concerning literature. In the examples discussed here, however, the two central issues raised over and over again are toleration/tolerance and justice and divine involvement in human affairs. Both areas are of extreme importance today, and we can certainly learn much about ourselves by turning our attention to past reflections in literary works.

10. Conclusions

It would be absurd to assume that our approach is intended to idealize and glorify a fictional past which might never have existed in that way. Neither the Middle Ages nor the 21st century were or are perfect times. The barbarity and violence committed in the last century, above all, seem to have been much worse than what has ever happened in world history, even if we stack up the horrors of the many pogroms, the effects of the Spanish Inquisition, and the ghastly witch craze from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. There is no progressive, linear development in human existence. Instead, we accumulate a hodgepodge of experiences and knowledge, of visions and wisdom throughout time, and much of that is archived, so to speak, in the literature from each generation. The examples presented here are certainly not perfect in themselves, and we could criticize much what the various poets had to say, but the discourse which their narratives relates continues to trigger most relevant responses both then and today. We have, of course, to find our own answers to modern problems, but the root of most of them go back to earlier periods and cultures, which are, to re-emphasize it, capsulated in the literary testimonies. Neither the anonymous author of the *Gesta Romanorum* nor Boccaccio or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would be perfect in their answers to the universal question how to handle issues of intolerance and religious conflict. Kaufringer's *maeren* cannot be read as simple recipe narratives for all human problems. But, as we could observe, they all provided a critical platform to investigate the concerns at stake, to outline a variety of possible responses, and to suggest reasonable and acceptable strategies to handle those problems constructively, and hopefully also in a peaceful fashion.

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43. See also his blog post "The Social Role of the Critic." Available online: <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/social-role-critic> (accessed on 19 April 2016). There he strongly urges us as literary critics to look for the values contained in the literary texts and hence to help the readers to gain meaning through their activity: "Our readers want us not simply to talk to each other in the customary, risk-averse manner of many professional scholars, but to create these forms of value around literature. Literary criticism means doing that."
44. See also Wendall V. Harris. *Literary Meaning: Reclaiming the Study of Literature*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.
45. For full support of the liberal arts, hence, of the humanities, see the discussion of this topic from an administrative perspective. "The 2016 Inside Higher Ed Survey of Chief Academic Officers." Available online: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/2016-inside-higher-ed-survey-chief-academic-officers?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=2bec496f31-DNU20160122&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-2bec496f31-198580417 (accessed on 19 April 2016).
46. "The Proof Liberal Arts Colleges Need?" Available online: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/01/22/study-traces-characteristics-undergraduate-education-key-measures-success-life?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=2bec496f31-DNU20160122&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-2bec496f31-198580417 (accessed on 19 April 2016).
47. Albrecht Classen. "The Role of the Humanities Past and Present: Future Perspectives Based on Ancient Ideas: Reflections by a Medievalist." *Alfinge: Revista de Filología* 24 (2012): 9–30.
48. Albrecht Classen. "The Challenges of the Humanities, Past, Present, and Future: Why the Middle Ages Mean So Much For Us Today and Tomorrow." *Humanities* 3 (2014): 1–18. [CrossRef]
49. Albrecht Classen. "Medieval Studies within German Studies: The Nibelungenlied and Hartmann von Aue's Der arme Heinrich)." In *Taking Stock of German Studies in the United States: The New Millennium*. Edited by Rachel Halverston and Carol Anne Costabile Heming. Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture. Rochester: Camden House, 2015, pp. 52–67.
50. Joshua Landy. *How to Do Things with Fictions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
51. *Njáls Saga*. Trans. with intro. and notes by Robert Cook. In *World of the Sagas*. London: Penguin, 2001, p. ix. Here I will quote from this excellent translation.

52. For the historical-critical edition, see below. Cf. also *Njáls Saga*. Trans. from the Old Icelandic with into. and notes by Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander. New York: New York University Press, 1955.
53. Vésteinn Ólason. "Njáls saga." (sic). In *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. Edited by Phillip Pulsiano. New York and London: Garland, 1993, pp. 432–34.
54. See also Lars Lönnroth. *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1976.
55. Since 2004 I have made many efforts to bring together groups of scholars from many different disciplines to address central topics in the life of pre-modern people. Those then resulted in collected volumes, most of them published by Walter de Gruyter in Berlin. Some of the topics were "childhood" (2005), "women's voices" (2007), "old age" (2007), "sexuality" (2008), etc. For a complete list, see Available online: http://aclassen.faculty.arizona.edu/fundamentals_2 (accessed on 19 April 2016).
56. Albrecht Classen. "Happiness in the Middle Ages? Hartmann von Aue and Marie de France." *Neohelicon* XXV (1998): 247–74.
57. Albrecht Classen. "Mystical Visions and Spiritual Health: Medieval Mysticism as A Platform for the Exploration of Human Spirituality and Happiness: The Transcendence of the Body in the Quest for the Godhead—A Message for Us Today? " *Studies in Spirituality* 25 (2015): 117–38.
58. For broader issues concerning happiness, see Nicholas White. *A Brief History of Happiness*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.
59. Nineteen Eighty-Four. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four (accessed on 19 April 2016).
60. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant (accessed on 5 January 2016).
61. *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*. Edited by Rüdiger Ahrens and Laurenz Volkmann. Anglistische Forschungen, 241. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996.
62. Mark William Roche. *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.
63. Russell A. Berman. *Fiction Sets You Free: Literature, Liberty, and Western Culture*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007.
64. Frederick Luis Aldama. *Why the Humanities Matter: A Commonsense Approach*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.
65. Cristina Vischer Bruns. *Why Literature?: The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
66. See now the contributions to Bestseller—gestern und heute/Bestsellers—Yesterday and Today: Ein Blick vom Rand zum Zentrum der Literaturwissenschaft/A Look from the Margin to the Center of Literary Studies. Edited by Albrecht Classen and Eva Parra Membrives. Popular Fiction Studies, 4. Tübingen: Narr, 2016.
67. *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces and Genres*. Edited by Jörgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015.
68. Florian Hartling. *Der digitale Autor: Autorschaft im Zeitalter des Internets*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015.
69. For a broad overview of the history of the book, see now the contributions to Leslie Howsam. *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. The number of studies dealing with the new electronic media is legion.
70. Nuccio Ordine. *Von der Nützlichkeit des Unnützen: Warum Philosophie und Literatur lebenswichtig sind*. Translated by Martina Kempter. Berlin: Ullstein, 2014, First published 2013. This literary manifesto provides an excellent and universal discussion of the true importance of literature.
71. My short article can only add individual aspects and emphasize matters slightly different. There is no disagreement with Ordine's arguments here, but I will try to develop more concrete strategies in light of a different set of texts. See my articles: "Early Outreaches from Medieval Christendom to the Muslim East: Wolfram von Eschenbach, Ramon Llull and Nicholas of Cusa Explore Options to Communicate with Representatives of Arabic Islam: Tolerance Already in the Middle Ages? " *Studia Neophilologica* 84 (2012): 1–15.
72. Albrecht Classen. "Toleration and Tolerance in the Middle Ages: Medieval Perspectives for Our Future." *The Living Pulpit* 24 (2015): 9–14.

73. Freimut Löser. Postmodernes Mittelalter? (Un)arten des Erzählens und ihre Theorie(n). In *Theorien der Literatur: Grundlagen und Perspektiven V*. Edited by Günter Butzer and Hubert Zapf. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2011, pp. 253–86.
74. *Medieval Answers to Modern Problems*. Albrecht Classen, ed. San Diego: Cognella, University Readers, 2012, rev. ed, 2013.
75. Albrecht Classen. "Spiritual and Existential Meanings of the Word: Strategies and Function of Reading in the Middle Ages. With Special Emphasis on Hartmann von Aue's Gregorius." *Seminar* 32 (1996): 221–39. [CrossRef]
76. For an online version of the Latin text, see "Gesta Romanorum—The Deeds of the Romans." Available online: <http://www.slu.edu/colleges/AS/languages/classical/latin/tchmat/readers/gr/gr1.html> (accessed on 19 April 2016).
77. (Based on the Innsbruck manuscript from 1342: *Die Gesta Romanorum: Nach der Innsbrucker Handschrift vom Jahre 1342*. Wilhelm Dick, ed. Erlangen and Leipzig: A Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung. Nachfolger, 1890.) For the English translation, see *Gesta Romanorum: Or Entertaining Moral Stories*. Translated from the Latin by Charles Swan. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1905, First published 1876. Available online: http://archive.org/stream/gestaromanorum01hoopgoog/gestaromanorum01hoopgoog_djvu.txt (accessed on 19 April 2016).
78. Until today, the critical Edition Hermann Oesterley, ed. *Gesta Romanorum*. Berlin: Weidmann, 1872, Reprinted Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1980 remains seminal.
79. See also *Gesta Romanorum: "exempla" europeos del siglo XIV*. Edited by Ventura de la Torre. Akal/Clásicos latinos medievales y renacentistas, 16. Madrid: Ediciones akal, 2004. which is based on Oesterly's edition.
80. See also Brigitte Weiske. *Gesta Romanorum*. Fortuna vitrea, 3. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992. who provides an in-depth analysis of the structure, the source material, the manuscript dissemination, etc.
81. cf. also the excellent survey by Udo Wawrzyniak. *Gesta Romanorum*. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens: Handwörterbuch zur Historischen und Vergleichenden Erzählforschung*. Edited by Rolf Wilhelm Brednich. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987, Vol. 5, cols. pp. 1201–12.
82. Hans-Werner Goetz. *Die Wahrnehmung Anderer Religionen und Christlich-Abendländisches Selbstverständnis im Frühen und Hohen Mittelalter (5.-12. Jahrhundert)*. 2 vols. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013.
83. For the subsequent centuries, see Cary J. Nederman. *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration, c. 1100–c. 1550*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.
84. Rainer Forst. "Toleration." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012. Available online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/toleration/> (accessed on 19 April 2016).
85. Giovanni Boccaccio. *Decameron* Edited by Vittore Branca. New ed. Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1965.
86. *Das Decameron*. Aus dem Italienischen Übersetzt, mit Einem Kommentar und Nachwort von Peter Brockmeier. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2012. Here I use the English translation by Richard Aldington. *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1970, First published 1930.
87. This phenomenon has already been discussed at length with respect to medieval German literature by the contributors to *Erzählungen in Erzählungen: Phänomene der Narration in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. Edited by Harald Haferland and Michael Mecklenburg. Forschungen zur Geschichte der älteren deutschen Literatur, 19. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1996.
88. For the great value of friendship, which was extensively discussed especially in the pre-modern world, see the contributions to *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*. Edited by Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 6. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.
89. Luisa Rubini Messerli. *Boccaccio Deutsch: Die Dekameron-Rezeption in der Deutschen Literatur (15.–17. Jahrhundert)*. 2 vols. Chloe, Beihefte zum Daphnis, 45. Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2012.
90. see also the contributions to *700 Jahre Boccaccio—Traditionslinien vom Trecento bis in die Moderne*. Edited by Christa Bertelsmeier-Kierst and Rainer Stillers. Kulturgeschichtliche Beiträge zum Mittelalter und der frühen Neuzeit, 7. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015.
91. Norbert W. Paul, Mita Banerjee, and Thomas Efferth. "Life Sciences—Life Writing: PTSD as a Transdisciplinary Entity between Biomedical Explanation and Lived Experience." *Humanities* 5 (2016): article 4. [CrossRef] See also the other contributions to this volume.

92. Peter Dinzelbacher. "Kritische Bemerkungen zur Geschichte der religiösen Toleranz und zur Tradition der Lessing'schen Ringparabel." *Numen* 55 (2008): 1–26. [CrossRef]
93. Gideon Stiening. "Toleranz zwischen Geist und Macht: Was Lessing von Voltaire lernte. In *Toleranzdiskurse in der Frühen Neuzeit*." Edited by Friedrich Vollhardt, Oliver Bach and Michael Multhammer. Frühe Neuzeit: Studien und Dokumente zur Deutschen Literatur und Kultur im Europäischen Kontext (FrN), 198. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, pp. 331–62.
94. Friedrich Vollhardt. "Gotthold Ephraim Lessing und die Toleranzdebatten der Frühen Neuzeit." In *Toleranzdiskurse in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Frühe Neuzeit: Studien und Dokumente zur Deutschen Literatur und Kultur im Europäischen Kontext (FrN), 198. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, pp. 381–415.
95. Michael Bohlander. "Political Islam and Non-Muslim Religions: A Lesson from *Lessing* for the Arab Transition." In *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. 2014, Volume 25, pp. 27–47. [CrossRef] The list of relevant studies on this particular text and this particular parable could be easily extended by the hundreds.
96. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. *Nathan der Weise*. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Werke 1778–1780. Edited by Klaus Bohnen and Arno Schilson. Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993.
97. For an excellent survey article. "Nathan der Weise." Available online: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_der>Weise (accessed on 19 April 2016).
98. The English translation comes from the Gutenberg Project. "Nathan the Wise: A Dramatic Poem in Five Acts by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing." Available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3820/3820-h/3820-h.htm> (accessed on 19 April 2016).
99. "Nathan der Weise." Available online: <https://www.deutsches-theater.de/programm/a-z/nathan-der-weise/> (accessed on 19 April 2016).
100. See Bohnen's and Schilson's commentary to Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* ([96], pp. 1102–289).
101. Cf. also Karl-Josef Kuschel. "Jud, Christ und Muselmann Vereinigt?": Lessings "Nathan der Weise". Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2004.
102. See also the contributions to *Nathan und seine Erben: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Toleranzgedankens in der Literatur: Festschrift für Martin Bollacher*. Edited by Oxana Zielke and Thorsten Meier. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005.
103. For the global perspective on the history of reception, see the contributions to *Redefining Modernism and Postmodernism*. Edited by Şebnem Toplu and Hubert Zapf. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010.
104. Albrecht Classen. "Was There a German 'Geoffrey Chaucer' in the Late Middle Ages? The Rediscovery of Heinrich Kaufringer's Verse Narratives as Literary Masterpieces." *Studia Neophilologica* 85 (2013): 57–72. [CrossRef]
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106. The historical-critical edition is: Heinrich Kaufringer. Werke. Edited by Paul Sappeler. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972, vol.1: Text.
107. Heinz-Wilhelm Haase. "Die Theodizeelegende vom Engel und dem Eremiten (Aa Th 759)." Ph.D. Thesis, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany, 1966.
108. Marga Stede. *Schreiben in der Krise: Die Texte des Heinrich Kaufringers*. Literatur-Imagination-Realität, 5. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993, pp. 270–71. She perceives the problem addressed by Kaufringer in the general loss of trust and loyalty. This, however, is only touched upon by the poet in this, his first story, and then really concerns itself with a very different topic.
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110. ([107], pp. 114–15). She emphasizes correctly that the king demonstrates his ability to differentiate between the objective deed and the subjective intention.
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113. *Illdisciplined Gender: Engaging Questions of Nature/Culture and Transgressive Encounters*. Edited by Jacob Bull and Margaretha Fahlgren. Crossroads of Knowledge, 2197–9634. Cham: Springer, 2016.
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115. From a literary-historical perspective, see, for instance, Steven D. Martinson. *Harmonious Tensions: The Writings of Friedrich Schiller*. Newark: University of Delaware Press. London: Associated University Presses, 1996.
116. See, for instance, the famous essay by Jean-Paul Sartre. *What Is Literature?* Translated from the French by Bernhard Frechtman. New York: Harper & Row, 1965, First published 1948.



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