Fear, Anger, and Power: Women in Medieval German Literature

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The Citadel

In the Middle Ages both fear and anger were considered feminine emotions and products of woman's weaker mind. Woman's inferiority was a given, and as R. Howard Bloch comments: "The discourse of misogyny runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature. Like allegory itself . . . antifeminism is both a genre and a topos. . . ." (1).[1] Descriptions of woman's lascivious, inconstant, jealous, and gossiping nature are found in countless writings ranging from Aristotle to Andreas Capellanus, from the Bible to philosophical treatises to fiction. Whereas anger in women is definitely a negative trait and catalogued as one of the seven deadly sins, fear is seen as an integral part of feminine nature and is not necessarily viewed as negative. Throughout medieval German literature both male and female characters fear and become angry. In this study I am primarily interested in the fear and anger of women. For two much maligned emotions, fear and anger can be quite empowering, as reflected in the texts I shall discuss. Between timid Enîte whose fear essentially saves the day in Hartmann's *Erêc* and Kriemhild, whose anger brings about the downfall of the Burgundians in the *Nibelungenlied*, there ranges a panoply of apprehensive and wrathful souls, often female, who reflect the strength in these emotions.

In his article "The Motive of Fear in German Literature,"[2] William Eckhorst claims that "although rife with terror and sorrow, the literary compositions of the Middle Ages, the epics, chapbooks, fairy tales, and folksongs, lack characters with chronic fear complexes" (148). On the one level Eckhorst is right, characters in medieval and late-medieval German literature are not afraid of much, at least on the outside. As Anne Scott and Cynthia Kosso point out in the introduction to the 2002 collection of articles, *Fear and its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, "That male protagonists in medieval romances should not, as a rule, show fear, and that female protagonists in these romances do show fear as a condition of their femininity is, of course, one of the commonplaces of this genre" (xxv). [3] In an article on Malory's *Lancelet* in the same compilation, Dorsey Armstrong contradicts this common view, observing that it is fear "not only [...] of loss of individual honor and reputation—or even a larger anxiety concerning the potential destruction of social order—that compels knights to perform feats of valor or prowess, but also [...] of loss of identity, not just as a particular knight, but as a *man* ..." (257).[4] This makes sense, for fear is a powerful motivator, as we shall see in the case of the women figures. In addition, fear manifested by figures in a narrative motivates the reading or listening audience to experience suspense, the inherent danger of the undertaking thus being signaled. Scott and Kosso stress that "fear [in the Middle Ages and Renaissance] was an emotion to be cultivated, harnessed, probed, explored, and exploited, not overcome or avoided" (xii). It follows that whether or not the fear can be termed chronic, someone was afraid in medieval German literature.

We do usually distinguish between two types of fear: the subjective fear of something that is often intangible and indefinable and the objective fear of something specific and concrete. In the introduction to a recent study on fear, Penny Roberts and William G. Naphy echo Jean Delumeau,[5] noting that "anxiety represents a general uncertainty about the future, whilst fear is more specific, immediate and focused, and, therefore, unassailable" (2).[6] In modern German the two types of fear are *Furcht* and *Angst*, and chronic fear complexes would definitely fall within the second category. In the Middle Ages, *vürhten (vürhtunge)* and *angest* are often used synonymously, perhaps because the distinction between the objective/concrete and the subjective/intangible as made by modern society did not exist in medieval times.

Peter Dinzelbacher reminds us in his study *Angst im Mittelalter. Teufels-, Todes- und Gotteserfahrung: Mentalitätsgeschichte und Ikonographie*[7], "daß eine Beurteilung des Beobachteten, was nun eine Real- und was eine Binnenangst [here he refers to the subjective, intangible fear] sei, vom Beobachter abhängig ist: für die meisten der mittelalterlichen Menschen bezog sich auch eine Furcht, die nahezu alle heutigen Europäer nicht als Realangst qualifizieren würden, wie vor dem Teufel, auf ein sehr konkretes und lebendiges Wesen" (9-10). Eckhorst then is applying the modern concept of *Angst* or anxiety to medieval literary figures, which does not work. What today might be characterized as an anxiety or neurosis would have been perceived as a real and physical threat in medieval times. Even the fear of loss of honor, reputation, and identity as a knight and man, according to Armstrong, motivates the knights in *Lancelet* and other narratives, and is a very real threat, for it forms the basis for the courtly cycle that "compels a never-ending performance of knighthood that insistently defines the masculine ..." (273). Without it there would be no courtly literature.

Although both the male and female characters of medieval German epic and romance are by and large a pretty fearless crew, the adventures they encounter can be quite hair-raising. Male protagonists in epics and romances may not show fear since this would go against the ideal of the knight. Fear in male figures often manifests itself in the exaggerated and obviously humorous stock figures of priests and husbands in the *Schwänke* (the first fears discovery by the second who in turn is afraid of his wife) and the occasional "bad guy" in romance and epic, often an "uncourtly" figure such as a dwarf or giant, who fears death and begs for mercy. Since male figures who aspire to the courtly definition of the knight cannot really show fear, although they may experience it, I suggest it falls to the female characters to trigger suspense and define danger by being afraid.

Luckily fear is an integral part of the feminine nature. According to Christine de Pizan, "... woman's nature is but sweet and mild, compassionate and fearful (paoureuse), timorous and humble, gentle, sweet, and generous, and pleasant, pious, meek in time of peace, afraid of war, etc." (66-67).[8] In her study of fear in Christine's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, Claire Nouvet points out that "fear is not one among the many characteristics of the feminine nature; it is one of its privileged traits" (297).[9] She further explains that the "thorn of fear unites woman to her feminine nature" and that "thanks to fear, woman remains within the confines of the feminine gender" (297), concluding that "fear functions as the sign of the feminine gender" (298). In addition to having an important function in the structure of a literary work, fear also defines femininity.

So what do women fear? In the epics and romances of medieval Germany women as well as men most fear loss. The women like the men, for the most part, do not fear physical danger. The loss of a husband, child, or reputation, however, could and often did mean the loss of livelihood, support, and even identity for the women of medieval fiction. Women gained identity through their husbands and value through their children. It was, therefore, a real and specific fear. The fear of loss of value and identity—disenfranchisement so to speak—was a constant presence in the life of medieval women.

Like the men, women do not fear bodily harm. They reserve their voices to signal fear for their men and children (often male children), thus underlining the intrinsic value of the male sex. Unlike their male counterparts, however, the women rarely have someone to signal fear for them. Female characters signal danger by showing fear, but not fear for themselves, except by extension. This is yet another silence imposed on women in medieval literature.

The women of the epics and romances use their own voices to speak for their men and their children. Enîte fears losing Erêc, Kriemhild fears losing Sigfried, Herzeloyde has lost Gahmuret and fears losing her son Parzeval, and the empress in *Keyser Octavian* fears losing her twin sons, to name just some women who fear loss in medieval German literature.

In Hartman's *Erêc* (c. 1200), Enîte is afraid for her husband, the eponymous hero of the romance. More specifically, she is afraid of losing him. Sentenced to silence by Erêc himself for a transgression for which he, not she, is ultimately responsible, Enîte again and again risks Erêc's wrath because *si vorhte in dâ verliesen mite* (3012, she was afraid of losing him), *ez ist mir ûf daz zil komen / daz mir benamen wirt benomen / der aller liebiste man / den ie wîp mêr gewan / es ensî daz ich in warne* (3974-78, "it has come to the point where I am going to be robbed of the most beloved man that ever a woman had, if I don't warn him").[10] Her fear of losing Erêc is greater than her fear of physical harm. In addition to ignoring Erêc's threat to kill her if she breaks the silence, she also faces down Duke Oringles who tries to coerce her into marriage—*geloubet, herre, / ich enahte ûf iuwer slege niht / und swaz mir von iu geschiht, / unde nemet ir mir den lîp,/ ich enwirde doch nimmer iuwer wîp* (6571-75, "believe me, my lord, your blows mean nothing to me nor whatever else you might do to me. Even if you were to take my life, I will never be your wife")—and throws herself on top of Erêc to protect him from the knight who has toppled him from his horse: *si spranc ûz dem zîle / und begunde sich vellen / über ir gesellen. / si sprach: neine, ritter guot, / gewünne dû ie ritters muot, / niht erslach mir mînen man!* (6943-45, "she jumped out of the hedge and threw herself on top of her companion. She said, 'No, brave knight, if you possess any knightly pride, do not kill my husband!'").

Enîte's fear of losing Erêc is concrete and represents a very real situation. Since women are in a sense defined by their husbands, the absence of a husband would have catastrophic proportions. Enîte is certainly defined by Erêc. A poor but beautiful girl, she is nothing until Erêc makes her his cause. It is no wonder that she throws herself over his body to save him. Fear of being abandoned or left behind is greater than any fear of physical pain.

In *Wolfdietrich* (13th century, anonymous), one of several epic narratives surrounding the figure of Dietrich von Bern, the consequences of losing a husband are made clear. When Queen Sidrag loses her husband King Ortnit to a dragon, she immediately loses her position and becomes dependant on her erstwhile servants: *Mein schenken und Trucksessen / Sind nun die Herren mein* (108v, "my cup bearer and my seneschal are now my lords"), who force her to spin *Wol beyde Seid und Faden* (108v, "both silk and cotton")[11] to earn her keep.

Women are also afraid of losing their children. The loss of a child stripped a woman of her value, and like the loss of a husband, robbed her of her identity. The slightly later romance, *Keyser Octavian* describes a woman's fear of losing her child. A generational romance, *Keyser Octavian,* is Wilhelm Salzmann's 1535 translation of the French prose romance *Florent et Lyon,* first published in Lyon in 1500. The French version in turn goes back to a chanson-de-geste from the late 13th or early 14th century.[12] It begins with the birth of twins to the Emperor and his wife. Due to the elaborate scheming of Octavian's mother, he begins to doubt that the twins are his. These doubts are reinforced, and the empress is banned along with her two sons. Having just lost her husband, she quickly becomes separated from first the one son, whom she presumes dead (he is found and raised by a well-to-do merchant in Paris), and then the remaining son.

Once separated from her husband and first son the Empress takes action. The fear of losing her remaining child is her sole motivation. Asleep in the woods, the Empress awakens just as her second child is being carried off by a lioness. Assuming that the lioness has already eaten the first child and is about to do the same to the second, she laments: *Ach ich arme vnnd gar verlaßne elende frauw / was sol ich nun anfahen / so ich mein zwey lieben Kindt also schendtlich verloren hab / Ach GOTT ich weiß / ich werde sie nimmermehr sehen / O Ewiger GOTT . . . .* (39) [13] ("Oh woe is me, poor and abandoned woman! What should I do now that I have lost my two children in such an awful manner. Oh Lord! I know I will never see them again. Almighty God"). The Empress then abandons her meek demeanor, jumps on her horse, and swears to God, *sie wölt nit auffhören zu reyten / biß das sie die Löuwin / die ihr ein solchen schaden hett gethan / gefunden / vnnd sich an ihr gerochen hette* (39, "she wasn't going to stop riding until she had taken revenge on that lioness who had done her such a bad turn"). This results in a considerable undertaking, because the lioness holding the child is grabbed up by a griffon, who transports the pair to an island in the sea. The lioness manages to kill the griffon and then suckles the child and keeps it warm on the island. Meanwhile the Empress meets some pilgrims who have seen the lioness with her child. They advise her not to follow the lioness anymore, but rather to have patience and trust that God will give her many more beautiful children. She, however, refuses, crying *Der trost hilfft nichts / ich muß zu meinem Kindt* (47), and adding, *vil lieber wil ich sterben / denn das ich mein Kindt solt also verderben lassen / vnd also durch ein Wild Thier lassen zerrissen werden / Auch were ich Vnbarmherztig vnnd vngetreuw / wenn ich mein Kind also verließ* (47-48, "your comfort doesn't help at all, I must go to my child. I would much rather die than let my child come to such an end being torn up by a wild animal. I would be an undeserving and disloyal mother if I abandoned my child in such a way"). As we have seen, the Empress is a determined woman. She doggedly follows the lioness who has abducted her child, fully intending to avenge her child's death. When she realizes that he is still alive, she continues her pursuit of the animal until she is able to rescue her child.

Here again, a woman first loses her husband—for all practical purposes—and then risks losing her remaining sons. Throughout the romance the Empress is referred to solely as the *Keyserin* or empress, or as Octavian's wife. In other words she has no name and no identity save that extended her through her husband. When she loses him she loses what little identity she had. When threatened with the loss of her children, she reacts valiantly to prevent it. The last reflection of her value is threatened and in protecting it she is holding on to her identity as well as her children. Fear gives both Enîte and the nameless empress the strength and courage to take action and save what is theirs: husband, children, and self.

Another by-product of woman's alleged weaker nature is anger, attributable to a lack of control over the emotions. In her study of anger in early modern England, Gwynne Kennedy writes, "A woman's anger is a sign of weakness that confirms her innate inferiority and her need to submit to male authority, as well as a response to a particular situation" (3-4).[14] Jennifer Willding, writing about the power of feminine anger in Marie de France's "Yonec" and "Giugemar," notes "frequent" anger and the "potency of the outbursts of Marie's characters and her apparent approval of them . . ." (123).[15] The remedy of choice for the angry ladies in Marie's two *lais* is adultery, of which according to Willding's study, Marie is openly approving (124). Willding states: "These ladies' anger is portrayed as a natural, human reaction to injustice and not the predictable ranting of the universal woman described in theological and other discourses of the time" (133). Examples of angry women are also found throughout medieval

German literature, in the *Schwänke* and in the *Minnesang*, in both epic and romance. Although always negative, anger often endows female characters with huge power.

In the *Schwänke*, for instance, one of the stock characters is a woman, usually a wife, who is quick to anger. In the *Minnesang* the singer often berates his lady for her unjust anger as in Heinrich von Morungen's 126,8 *Von den elben*, or 130, 9 *Sin hiez mir nie widersagen*. In romance and in epic there are also examples of angry women. In *Moriz von Craun*, for example, the lady becomes angry when Moriz, awaiting her reward, falls asleep. In all of these examples, anger is portrayed in a negative light, despite the power that the angered characters wield. The wife of the *Schwank* makes her husband's life miserable with her shrewishness. The angry *frouwe* in the *Minnesang* has complete power over the happiness of the singer whether rightly or not, and Moriz's angry *herrin*, despite losing in the end, certainly controls Moriz's enjoyment of life.

However, the angriest figure in medieval literature is Kriemhild. The entire *Nibelungenlied* from start to finish seems driven by feminine ire. Brünhild's anger at Sigfried's betrayal sparks the plot, leaving a wrathful Kriemhild to engineer the downfall of an entire clan. During Sigfried and Kriemhild's visit to Günter and Brünhild, the two wives quarrel about who should walk first into the church. Each thinks she should be the one, based on the rank of her husband. They quarrel bitterly and *die vrouwen wurden beide vil sere zornec gemuot* (826, "the women became very angry").[16] This anger lasts and grows until Brünhild, egged on by Hagen, agrees to the treachery of Sigfried's death. Her treachery is repaid in full for *sît getét our ir vrou Kriemhilt diu vil herzenlîchen leit* (1100, "later she herself would be plunged into grief by Lady Kriemhild"). Kriemhild's rage smolders for more than a decade before she is in a position to assuage her anger. She invites her brother and his clan to a celebration and engineers the slaughter of the entire company. *Ich bringez an ein ende*, she declares, and *dô hiez si ir bruoder nemen den lîp. man sluoc im ab daz houbet* (2369, "Finally I reach my goal—then she had them kill her brother, they loped off his head"). She herself executes Hagen, Siegfried's murderer. *Si zôh iz von der scheiden, daz kunde er niht erwern. dô dâhte sie den recken des lîbes wol behern. si huop ez mit ir handen, daz houpt si im ab sluoc* (2373, "she drew the sword from the scabbard. He couldn't do a thing about it. She wanted to take the warrior's life. She lifted it with her hands. She cut his head off"). Kriemhild pays for her anger with her own life, for Hildebrand himself lops her head off avenging Hagen's death.

The entire debacle, from Sigfried's death to the downfall of the Burgundians, is a direct result of Kriemhild's anger. The power that results from this anger is considerable. As Kennedy points out: "Unruly women and unruly anger jointly threaten male order and reason" (9). Willding's article on Marie de France underscores this as well, for whether or not Marie herself approved, her *lais* clearly show women taking the law into their own hands, so to speak. The decision of the wives in "Yonec" and "Guigemar" to assuage their anger in adultery surely reflects a upheaval of the *status quo*. No wonder men caution against feminine ire, and proverbs warn against angry women (21:19, 21:9, 25:24), anger can turn reason into anarchy and reduce order to chaos as seen in the *Nibelungenlied*.

Fear and anger, then, although thought to be a sign or product of woman's "weaker" nature, were sources of power in their own right. "Thus fear need not be seen simply as a negative force; it could also be dynamic, leading to positive action, such as a popular protest, as well as practical measures to deal with the object of fear" (3). Although studying fear rather than anger and the "strategies used to reduce or overcome it" (2), what Roberts and Naphy write holds true for anger as well. When a woman is threatened with the loss of a husband or children and by extension her own identity, her fear gives her the strength to perform marvelous feats to protect what is hers. When women are angry, they also wield great power. From the shrew of the *Schwank* to Kriemhild, the negative effects of powerful anger range from unpleasant to drastic. Since the power or strength caused by fear does not overtly threaten order or society, and that engendered by anger obviously does, the strength born of fear seems more readily accepted. In addition, fear traditionally silences women, whereas anger gives women voice. Therefore fear, considered integral in women and part of the catalogue of her virtues, would be catalogued as a positive feminine trait, where anger would not. Fearful women represent the natural order, angry women are irrational, dangerous, and upset the medieval societal norm. Feminine anger after all, threatens the very patriarchal order established by fear. Be that as it may, both the fearful and the angry women of literature are empowered by the strength of their emotions, and the deeds born of this power are certainly reflected all over medieval German literature.

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[1] "Medieval Misogyny," *Misogyny, Misandry, Misanthropy*, eds. R. Howard Bloch and Frances Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[2] *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 20 (1964): 147-63.

[3] *Fear and its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance,* eds. Anne Scott and Cynthia Kosso, *Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 6 (Furnhort, Belgium: Brepols, 2002) xi-xxxvii.

[4] "Malory's Lancelet and Knightly Identity," *Fear and its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, *Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,* 6, 255-73.

[5] *Angst im Abendland. Die Geschichte kollektiver Ängste im Europa des 14. bis 18. Jahrhunderts,* trans. Monika Hübner, Gabriele Konder, and Martina Roters-Burck, *Rowohlts Enzyklopädie—Kulturen und Ideen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985) 29. Original title *La Peur en Occident (XIVe-XVIIIe siècles). Une cité assiégée*. 1978.

[6] *Fear in Early Modern Society*, eds. Penny Roberts and William G. Naphy, Studies in Early Modern European History (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997).

[7] Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996.

[8] *Poems of Cupid, God of Love. Christine de Pizan's 'Epistre au dieu d'Amours' and 'Dit de la Rose'; Thomas Hoccleve's 'The Letter of Cupid'*, eds. T.S. Fenster and M.Carpenter Erler (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

[9] "Writing (in) Fear," *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida P, 1996): 279-305.

[10] Hartmann von Aue, *Erec,* ed. Albert Leitzmann (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1960).

Translations are my own.

[11] I use the version found in the printed *Heldenbuoch* (Frankfurt: Han/Feyerabend, 1560). Translations are my own.

[12] Xenja von Ertzdorff, “Chanson de geste und Prosa-Romane des 15./16. Jahrhunderts: ‘Kaiser Octavianus,’” *Wolfram Studien, XI: Chansons de geste in Deutschland*, ed. Joachim Heinzle, Peter L. Johnson, and Gisela Vollmann-Profe (Berlin: Schmidt, 1989): 227.

[13] *Die ‘Historie von dem Kaiser Octaviano’. Faksimile des Drucks Augsburg Matthäus Franck (ca. 1568)*, ed.Theresia Fridrichs-Müller, *jidische schtudies. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprache und Literatur der aschkenasischen Juden*, 2 (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1981).

[14] *Just Anger. Representing Women’s Anger in Early Modern England* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 2000).

[15] “The Power of Feminine Anger in Marie de France’s ‘Yonec’ and ‘Guigemar’” *Florilegium* 14 (1995-96): 123-35.

[16] *Das Nibelungen Lied*, ed. Helmut de Boor, Deutsche Klassiker des Mittelalters (Wiesbaden: F.A.Brockhaus, 1979). Translations are my own.