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MEDIEVAL HUMOUR? WOLFRAM'S *PARZIVAL* AND THE CONCEPT OF THE COMIC IN MIDDLE HIGH GERMAN ROMANCES

Modern Theory of Humour

Humour is a ubiquitous, well-established phenomenon of our times.[1] This makes it tempting to apply the concept of humour in its current everyday meaning to texts that were written well before the modern idea of humour was developed. In the following, I propose to argue that modern concepts of humour are not helpful when it comes to interpreting medieval texts, and that going back to ideas concerning the production and use of laughter established in classical rhetoric is better suited to identifying the significance of the obvious comic elements in medieval literature. Following a brief discussion of the development of modern Western concepts of humour, I will outline the importance that rhetoric attributes to laughter, wit, and ironic modes of speaking. Attention will then focus on one of the most prominent Middle High German romances, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, as a prime example of pre-modern poetic uses of laughter and the comic as distinct from humour.

The development of modern concepts of humour began in the sixteenth century, when humour detached itself from the medieval idea of the four temperaments and gradually came to signify 'peculiar forms of mental variation from the norm',[2] which were derided in comedy. Over the centuries, a threefold approach to the phenomenon evolved: while Thomas Hobbes understood humour as a feeling of superiority and Francis Hutcheson established the idea of incongruity as a source of humour, the 'release of pent-up nervous energy' formed the basis of a relief theory formulated by Herbert Spencer.[3] Today, a mixed approach combining elements of all three major theoretical strands is predominant; and often the theoretical complexity recedes when humour is understood simply as a source of 'amused laughter'[4] of any kind.

Parts of this article were presented as a paper at LMU Munich in May 2010. For a fuller elaboration of the research on which the following discussion is based and a comprehensive bibliography see Stefan Seeber, *Poetik des Lachens: Untersuchungen zum mittelhochdeutschen Roman um 1200*, MTU, 140 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

[1] 'Humour is a pervasive feature of human life. We find it everywhere' (Noël Carroll, 'Humour', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. by Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 344–65 (p. 344)).

[2] Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 91.

[3] See Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, Thinking in Action (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

[4] Carroll, 'Humour', p. 346. For a distinction between amused laughter and amusement which does not necessarily have to result in laughter, see Dolf Zillman and Joanne R. Cantor, 'A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth', in *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, ed. by Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (London: Wiley, 1976), pp. 93–116.

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Between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries, numerous different points of view emerged that were informed by a wide range of philosophies and aesthetic approaches in Europe.[5] The German approach to humour initially derived from the English tradition, but soon a distinctive idea of humour as *Weltanschauung* developed which diverged significantly from the English roots. One of the most influential humour theories of this kind was established by Jean Paul in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik*,[6] first published in 1804 and reprinted with major additions in 1813. Jean Paul has rightly been called the founding father of a German aesthetics of humour.[7] His impact on German Studies and especially on Wolfram scholarship is still tangible today, and it is therefore worth dwelling on his concept of humour[8] before proceeding to the special case of *Parzival* as a text displaying humour.

Jean Paul's 'Vorschule der Ästhetik' and Humour as 'Weltanschauung'

In Chapters VI to VIII of his work, Jean Paul develops a tripartite theory distinguishing between the ridiculous, the comic, and humour. Humour as a philosophy of life (*Weltanschauung*) encompasses ridicule and comedy; it forms the pinnacle of Jean Paul's aesthetic hierarchy of the three concepts. For Jean Paul, the ridiculous points to the mistake or inappropriate behaviour that provokes laughter based on superior insight. This laughter is without bitterness or hints of satirical derision, and is instead distinguished by harmless pleasure.[9] Comic perception is seen as an aestheticizing process (VI, § 30, p. 122) that raises the ridiculous elements to the next level of the tripartite hierarchy. At the highest level, when humour is at work, the focus shifts from the ridiculous object that attracts laughter and that can be aestheticized—humour is solely concerned with the beholder, not with the object. It is a 'completely internalized experi-

[5] See Erhard Schüttpelz, 'Humor', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. by Gert Ueding and others, 10 vols (Tübingen: Niemeyer; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992–2012), IV (1998), cols 86–98 (col. 87).

[6] Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik. Kleine Nachschule zur ästhetischen Vorschule*, ed. and comm. by Norbert Miller, afterword by Walter Höllerer (Munich: Hanser, 1974). I cite Jean Paul's text by giving chapter numbers, paragraphs, and page numbers in parentheses after quotations. Use of italicization follows Miller's edition. For an English translation see *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter's 'School for Aesthetics'*, trans. by Margaret R. Hale (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973).

[7] Wolfgang Preisendanz, 'Humor', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, 11 vols (Basel: Schwabe, 1971–), III (1974), cols 1232–34 (col. 1233).

[8] For a detailed analysis see Otto Mann, 'Die kulturgeschichtlichen Grundlagen des Jean Paulschen Humors', *DVjs*, 8 (1930), 660–79, and the introduction to the English edition: Margaret R. Hale, 'Introduction', in *Horn of Oberon*, pp. xvii–lx, esp. pp. xxvi–xxxv.

[9] See Jean Paul, *Vorschule*, VI, § 28, p. 114: 'Man erlaube mir der Kürze wegen, daß ich in der künftigen Untersuchung die drei Bestandteile des Lächerlichen als eines sinnlich angeschaueten unendlichen Unverstandes bloß so nenne, wie folgt: den Widerspruch, worin das Bestreben oder Sein des lächerlichen Wesens mit dem sinnlich angeschaueten Verhältnis steht, nenn' ich den *objektiven* Kontrast; dieses Verhältnis den *sinnlichen*; und den Widerspruch beider, den wir ihm durch das Leihen unserer Seele und Ansicht als den zweiten aufbürden, nenn' ich den *subjektiven* Kontrast.'

ence' of the humorist, who 'perceives within himself a split between the finite and the infinite'.[10] This is why humour destroys 'nicht das Einzelne, sondern das Endliche durch den Kontrast mit der Idee' (VII, § 31, p. 125).

This refers to three main conceptual principles of Jean Paul's approach: firstly the strong emphasis on the self, i.e. the identity of the individual; secondly the relationship of individual and eternity; and thirdly the concept of the sublime. Humour in the *Vorschule der Ästhetik* is characterized by the humorist's 'Humorous Subjectivity', which is the cause of a specific view of the world and its follies: 'Folglich setz' ich mich selber in diesen Zwiespalt [. . .] und zerteile mein Ich in den endlichen und unendlichen Faktor und lasse aus jenem diesen kommen. Da lacht der Mensch, denn er sagt: "Unmöglich! Es ist viel zu toll!" Gewiß!' (VII, § 34, p. 132). This constellation of a paradox is put in a nutshell in Jean Paul's comparison between a humorist and the 'Vogel Merops, welcher zwar dem Himmel den Schwanz zukehrt, aber doch in dieser Richtung in den Himmel auffliegt' (VII, § 33, p. 128). On the basis of this use of paradox, humour in Jean Paul's view is equivalent to the 'umgekehrte[s] Erhabene[s]' (VII, § 32, p. 125).[11] As the inverted sublime, it is endowed with annihilating powers that destroy established patterns and understandings of the world and replace them with uplifting and soul-warming laughter (VII, § 32, p. 128) that comes with a reconciliatory view of the world's folly.

This, in Jean Paul's view, distinguishes the humorous perspective from the medieval theological idea of the connection between finite and infinite factors.[12] In Jean Paul's opinion, humour is nothing less than a privileged relationship between the individual, the world, and eternity, permitting the humorist to perceive himself as a part of a world full of folly while at the same time looking at the world from a higher point of view.

Humour as 'Weltanschauung' in Wolfram's 'Parzival'

Jean Paul confined his concept to a Romantic idea of humour, and also called it 'das romantische Komische' (VII, § 31, p. 125). His idea explicitly refrains from including pre-modern texts. But this limitation did not discourage modern readers of Wolfram's *Parzival* from applying Jean Paul's ideas to the medieval romance. It is now widely accepted that Wolfram can be seen as a humorist avant la lettre, and that his *Parzival* can be read as a humorous text. First attempts of this kind were made as early as 1878 and 1879, when Christian Starck and Karl Kant undertook to elucidate the profile of Wolfram

[10] Hale, 'Introduction', pp. xxxii and xxxiii.

[11] On Jean Paul's concept of the sublime see Hale, 'Introduction', p. xxvii.

[12] See Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, VII, § 33, p. 120: 'Wenn der Mensch, wie die alte Theologie tat, aus der überirdischen Welt auf die irdische herunterschauet: so zieht diese klein und eitel dahin; wenn er mit der kleinen, wie der Humor thut, die unendliche ausmisset und verknüpft: so entsteht jenes Lachen, worin noch ein Schmerz und eine Größe ist.'

the humorist.[13] But it was not until Max Wehrli published his seminal article on 'Wolframs Humor' (1950) that this reading of *Parzival* became canonical; Wehrli's text is still considered a forward-looking approach to Wolfram's romance,[14] and its influence is far-reaching. This justifies a closer look at his interpretation, especially with regard to his methodology.

Wehrli's main concern is to connect Wolfram's writing with Jean Paul's concept of the tripartite hierarchy of the ridiculous, the comic, and humour, and to establish Wolfram as one of the earliest masters of poetic humour in European literature.[15] Wehrli's reading of Wolfram is based on an analysis of the 'Blutstropfenszene',[16] for which he postulates a humorous structure that embraces the inherent comic arrangements. This structure, in Wehrli's opinion, is expressed in the spiritual and emotive meaning of the text. It results in a humorous totality of narration that is grounded in the narrator's subjectivity and imbues the narrative style.[17]

The consequences are significant and far-reaching: If we accept Wehrli's reading of *Parzival*, Wolfram's subjectivity makes up for the notorious lack of coherence, and the author's genius connects the antagonistic elements of the text. This unifies a story that at first sight oscillates between the poles of comedy and transcendence, sanctity and the profane, the foolishness of the young boy and the hero as the chosen saviour.[18] It also permits contradictions to be reconciled—between the narrator and the narrated, between the various digressions, and between the diverging motivations of the characters' actions. In addition, it seemingly helps to give the end of the work—which indeed has some 'nasty sting[s]'[19] in its positive utopia—a comprehensive and placatory meaning in the form of a humorous master plan. This explains why Wehrli's interpretation has proved so influential since its first publication and why the idea of *Parzival* as a humorous romance retains such prominence.[20] In recent

[13] Christian Starck, *Die Darstellungsmittel des Wolframschen Humors* (Schwerin: Bärensprung, 1879); Karl Kant, *Scherz und Humor in Wolframs von Eschenbach Dichtungen* (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1878).

[14] According to Joachim Bumke, it is 'in die Zukunft weisend' (Joachim Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, 8th edn (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), p. v).

[15] Max Wehrli, 'Wolframs Humor' (1950), repr. in *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, ed. by Heinz Rupp, Wege der Forschung, 57 (Darmstadt: WBG, 1966), pp. 104–24 (p. 104).

[16] See Joachim Bumke, *Blutstropfen im Schnee: Über Wahrnehmung und Erkenntnis im 'Parzival' Wolframs von Eschenbach*, Hermeae, 94 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), esp. p. 4 with regard to the comic contrast between the Arthurian court and the cognitive process of Parzival.

[17] See Max Wehrli, 'Wolfram von Eschenbach: Erzählstil und Sinn seines *Parzival*', *Der Deutschunterricht*, 6 (1954), 17–40 (p. 26).

[18] Klaus Ridder, 'Narrheit und Heiligkeit: Komik im *Parzival* Wolframs von Eschenbach', *Wolfram-Studien*, 17 (2002), 136–56 (pp. 138–39).

[19] Annette Volfing, '"Welt ir nu hoeren fürbaz?" On the Function of the Loherangrin-Episode in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (P 824,1–826,30)', *Beiträge zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 126 (2004), 65–84 (p. 65).

[20] See e.g. Rainer Madsen, *Die Gestaltung des Humors in den Werken Wolframs von Eschenbach:*

years, however, a shift of focus has directed attention to the importance of laughter in the text, not only from a semantic point of view,[21] but also with regard to narrative patterns which the laughter might allude to. This opens the field for new questions—and for an approach to the topic that draws on rhetoric.[22]

A Different Approach: The Rhetoric of Laughter

Wehrli's interpretation satisfies the modern reader's need for coherence and for taming a complex text, but it entails difficulties which are both numerous and far-reaching. The humorous structure he posits cannot encompass all irony, mockery, and jest. The narrator's obscene interjections resist humorous interpretation, as does the obvious ridiculing of the baptism in Book XVI. The dramatic events that precede Parzival's accession to the grail throne also call into question the humorous, conciliatory, soft-focus lens of Wehrli's interpretation. I will return to these issues later and use Book XVI as an example to elucidate the poetics of laughter (rather than humour) in Wolfram's *Parzival*.

Before presenting my reading of the romance, I propose to outline the theoretical basis of this approach to the work. I intend to use the rhetorical theory of *ridiculum*, of comedy, and of laughter which had a high profile throughout the Middle Ages and was accessible in the Latin discourse on rhetoric as well as in poetical treatises.[23] In particular, the widely used *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, composed around 80 BC and until the Renaissance attributed to Cicero[24] provides an extensive theory of laughter and its use, as well as foregrounding phenomena such as *urbanitas* and irony. In addition, Cicero's *De oratore* (55 BC) and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (*c.* AD 95) served as sources of advice on how to induce and utilize laughter.

From its beginnings, the Latin theoretical tradition listed incongruity and

Untersuchungen zum 'Parzival' und 'Willehalm' (doctoral thesis, University of Bochum, 1970). For a detailed appreciation of Wehrli's influence see Seeber, *Poetik des Lachens*, pp. 132–35.

[21] For a semantics of laughter see Waltraud Fritsch-Rössler, 'Lachen und Schlagen: Reden als Kulturtechnik in Wolframs *Parzival*', in *Verstehen durch Vernunft: Festschrift für Werner Hoffmann*, ed. by Burkhardt Krause, Philologica Germanica, 19 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 1997), pp. 75–98, and Madsen, *Humor*. For an analysis concerned especially with comic narrative patterns see Sebastian Coxon, 'Der Ritter und die Fährmannstochter: Zum schwankhaften Erzählen in Wolframs *Parzival*', *Wolfram-Studien*, 17 (2002), 114–35.

[22] See Gert Ueding: 'Rhetorik des Lächerlichen', in *Semiotik, Rhetorik und Soziologie des Lachens: Vergleichende Studien zum Funktionswandel des Lachens vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Lothar Fietz and others (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996), pp. 21–36. Ralf-Henning Steinmetz, 'Komik in mittelalterlicher Literatur: Überlegungen zu einem methodischen Problem am Beispiel des *Helmbrecht*', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, n.s. 49 (1999), 255–73.

[23] See Steinmetz, 'Komik', p. 262. For a general overview see Joachim Suchomski, '*Delectatio*' *und 'Utilitas': Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur*, Bibliotheca Germanica, 18 (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1975).

[24] See James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1974).

superiority as causes of laughter—this makes the rhetoric of laughter (at least to a certain extent) a predecessor of a modern aesthetics of humour.[25] Derision of minor mistakes and flaws as well as of corporal deformities and ugliness is known to Cicero's *De oratore* as laughter induced by superiority.[26] Incongruity is captured in the concept of *dissimulatio*, which Cicero explains in part by referring to the incongruity between outer and inner appearance, or between the expectation and what is actually presented.[27] The idea that laughter may induce light relief is not common in classical rhetoric as the treatises focus less on the psyche of the listener than on the attentiveness that can be achieved by evoking laughter.

The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* gives a wide range of examples to elucidate what may be used to provoke laughter:

> Si defessi erunt audiendo, ab aliqua re quae risum movere possit ab apologo, fabula veri simili, imitatione depravata, inversione, ambiguo, suspicione, inrisione, stultitia, exsuperatione, collectione, litterarum mutatione, praeter expectationem, similitudine, novitate, historia, versu, ab alicuius interpellatione aut adrisione. (I. 10)
>
> If the hearers have been fatigued by listening, we shall open with something that may provoke laughter—a fable, a plausible fiction, a caricature, an ironical inversion of the meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo, banter, a naivety, an exaggeration, a recapitulation, a pun, an unexpected turn, a comparison, a novel tale, a historical anecdote, a verse, or a challenge or a smile of approbation directed at someone.[28]

This list draws on common rhetorical principles and makes it clear that the rhetorical theory of laughter is informed by the principles of general rhetoric and uses well-established techniques designed to make the audience laugh. Quintilian's *Institutio* in addition identifies various modes of provoking laughter which range from harmless or gallant wit to what Quintilian calls *salsum* (salted, sharp wit).[29] It is evident, then, that there is wide-ranging and far-reaching interest in the subject from the beginning of the rhetorical tradition, and that laughter is, from the start, accepted as one of the major means of influencing the audience.

Central to this rhetoric of laughter is the idea of *urbanitas*, which points to the sophistication that comes with life in the city (i.e. Rome). The concept

[25] D. J. Monro, 'Art. Humor', in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Donald M. Borchert and others, 2nd edn, 10 vols (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), IV (2006), 514–18 (p. 514).

[26] Cicero, *De oratore*, II, 237 and 239, trans. by E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, with an introduction by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 348, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1979), I, 374–75.

[27] For the differing ancient definitions of irony see Cicero, *De oratore*, II, 269 and 284, and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, IX. 2. 44–53, in *The Orator's Education*, IV: *Books 9–10*, ed. and trans. by Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library, 126 (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 58–65.

[28] [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, , trans. by Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library, 403 (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 18–21.

[29] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, IX. 3. 17–27.

of *urbanitas* as a Ciceronian[30] framework encompasses the persuasive and ethical functions of laughter: ethically, it requires the *vir bonus* as a performer, someone whose refinement is manifested outwardly in 'a sophisticated humor and a careful manner of speaking'.[31] While this conversational ideal does not necessarily entail humour and laughter,[32] the connection between *urbanitas* and *facetia* is nevertheless striking.[33] It shows the urbane rhetorician to be a witty and entertaining person who responds appropriately (i.e. according to *decorum*)[34] to the conversation and is of high ethical standing. This idea is handed down from antiquity to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,[35] defining courtly behaviour in general but also finding expression in the ideal of the *vir facetus*.[36] Accordingly, *urbanitas* and *facetia* (i.e. moderate jesting without agitating the listener) are prominent in medieval discourse. This makes them invaluable keys to an analysis that seeks to elucidate the function of laughter and comic elements in the texts of the time without involving the concepts of subjectivity and infinity that are so central to Romantic theories of humour.

The Importance of Laughter and Comedy in Wolfram's 'Parzival'

Before turning to the prominent finale that has been used to justify the humorous reading of *Parzival*,[37] I should like at least to touch upon some aspects which allow a more complete overall picture of the text to come into view. The point I wish to make is that Wolfram uses methods of the Latin *ridiculum*, comic aspects, and phenomena such as irony, *facetia*, and *urbanitas* deliberately and as part of an overall structure. His *Parzival* seeks interaction with the audience and relies on the purpose of persuasion as

[30] See Edwin S. Ramage, '*Urbanitas': Ancient Sophistication and Refinement* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), pp. 8–49, esp. p. 56 on Cicero's concept. Differences between Cicero and Quintilian are highlighted in id., 'Urbanitas: Cicero and Quintilian, a Contrast in Attitudes', *American Journal of Philology*, 84 (1963), 390–414 (p. 410).

[31] Ramage, *Ancient Sophistication*, p. 56.

[32] Ramage, 'Cicero and Quintilian', p. 404.

[33] Ibid., p. 396.

[34] Cf. I. Rutherford, 'Decorum I.', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. by Gert Ueding and others, 10 vols (Tübingen: Niemeyer; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992–2012), II (1994), cols 423–34, esp. col. 423 with regard to *decorum* as ethical, rhetorical, and aesthetic appropriateness.

[35] See Thomas Zotz, '*Urbanitas*: Zur Bedeutung und Funktion einer antiken Wertvorstellung innerhalb der höfischen Kultur des hohen Mittelalters', in '*Curialitas*': *Studien zu Grundfragen der höfisch-ritterlichen Kultur*, ed. by Josef Fleckenstein, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 100 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), pp. 392–451, and Georg Luck, '*Vir Facetus*: A Renaissance Ideal', *Studies in Philology*, 55 (1958), 107–11.

[36] See Gerd Dicke, '*Homo facetus*: Vom Mittelalter eines humanistischen Ideals', in *Humanismus in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit. XVIII. Anglo-German Colloquium Hofgeismar 2003*, ed. by Nicola McLelland and others (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2008), pp. 299–332.

[37] I quote the Middle High German text using Wolfram von Eschenbach, *'Parzival': Studienausgabe*, Mittelhochdeutscher Text nach der sechsten Ausgabe von Karl Lachmann, Übersetzung von Peter Knecht, Einführung zum Text von Bernd Schirok (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998) (abbreviated in the following as 'Pz').

a force to bind the listener to the narrative. Laughter is one of the tools Wolfram uses—among other, more serious tools.

That laughter is a highly significant gesture in the epic[38] is made clear by the prominence of Cunneware's 'prophetic laughter',[39] which does not indicate a somehow ridiculous occasion[40] but acts as a potent symbol and transcends the realm of comedy: laughter here replaces speech and takes over its semantic powers. This special importance of Cunneware's gesture testifies to the high value of laughter in the text and suggests that it is worth analysing laughter in Wolfram's romance in general, not only with regard to an implied humorous structure.

Four aspects of laughter in Wolfram's *Parzival* are central and need to be addressed.[41] They are: the social function of laughter, the use of irony, the importance of the narrator, and finally the influence all these aspects have on the listener or reader. The first point, the social function of laughter and derision, is both a fundamental and a highly prominent feature of the work. It is the basis for the structured use of *ridiculum* in the romance and conveys that the poetic use of laughter is socially relevant to the audience. For example, Parzival's father Gahmuret uses *facetia* to establish himself as a new political leader and king in the realm of his newly won wife Belacane: he plays to the gallery by standing up alone and pretending to be a humble supplicant rather than what he actually is: the most powerful person at court. In doing so, he makes use of *subabsurdum*,[42] the deliberate assumption of a fatuous stance. This stance can easily be seen through—as is shown by the laughter that his remark provokes (Pz 46. 14).

The social power of laughter is also present in derision of characters that cannot or refuse to stand up to it, for example in Kaylet's mockery of Hardiz, who is made the object of debasing laughter in the second book of the text (Pz 90. 7). On many occasions the narrator makes fun of the heroes, especially young Parzival and also Gawan the womanizer, who constantly blunders into trouble.[43] Wolfram thereby undermines the consistency of his own telling,

[38] For the classification of laughter as a gesture see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Die Logik der Gesten im europäischen Mittelalter*, trans. from French by Rolf Schubert and Bodo Schulze (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992), p. 258.

[39] Dennis H. Green, 'Advice and Narrative Action: Parzival, Herzeloyde and Gurnemanz', in *From Wolfram and Petrarch to Goethe and Grass: Studies in Literature in Honour of Leonard Forster*, ed. by Dennis H. Green and others, Saecula Spiritalia, 5 (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 1982), pp. 33–81 (p. 67).

[40] For a different opinion see Albrecht Classen, 'Keie in Wolframs von Eschenbach *Parzival*: "Agent Provocateur" oder Angeber?', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 87 (1988), 382–405 (p. 402). My view partly coincides with that of Fritsch-Rössler, 'Lachen und Schlagen', p. 84 and passim.

[41] See the similar approach of Steinmetz, 'Komik', to the *Meier Helmbrecht* epic.

[42] As outlined in Cicero, *De oratore*, II. 289, and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI. 3. 99.

[43] See Sonja Emmerling, *Geschlechterbeziehungen in den Gawan-Büchern des 'Parzival'*, Hermaea, n.s. 100 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003).

mocking almost every character, presenting them in an ambiguous light, and at least occasionally making them seem funny. This technique extends to his own persona since he presents himself as the unreliable narrator par excellence. The ridiculous aspect of the description thus becomes a major factor of the narration, for example when Parzival's foolishness becomes a landmark of his first steps in the courtly world. This structured use of the ridiculous gives it significance well beyond pure *delectatio*. The fun provided by the derision of single scenes, episodes, and traits of characters is not an end in itself but is used in a broader context to engage the listener or reader.

Irony (in the sense of rhetorical *dissimulatio*) makes up the second area of a structured poetic use of laughter. The ironic view of Minne that is offered in Book VIII is typical of Wolfram's general use of irony in his *Parzival*. When Gawan encounters Antikonie, the sister of his arch-enemy Vergulaht,[44] he is instantly captivated and sexually attracted to her. Antikonie is, by all standards, portrayed as a lady of easy virtue who responds to Gawan's most unambiguous offer in a strikingly affirmative way. The mocking undertone of their conversation makes it clear that their exchange is a joyous matter until it is interrupted by her brother's men, who sound the alarm. The would-be lovers flee into the castle's tower and fight off the king's troops using a chessboard and its pieces (Pz 408. 20–409. 11). This burlesque action is accompanied by conventionally courtly conversation and the narrator's sympathetic commentary, both of which emphasize the lady's honour and indisputable virtue. The ironic dissimulation uses the clash of profane facts and courtly pretensions which are captured in the equation of Minne-service and hunting, in the courtly vocabulary of description, and in the caricature of the enemy as an uncourtly king.[45] It is finally and most clearly exposed in the comparison of the courtly lady's looks with those of 'an spizze hasen' (Pz 409. 26), which functions as an eye-opener for even the most irony-resistant members of the audience.[46] The ridiculous and the ironic are thereby combined to produce comic effect and provoke laughter, holding up some of the most prominent features of courtly culture and behaviour of the time for scrutiny and ridicule.

In this and many others scenes (e.g. Parzival's unsuspecting misbehaviour at the beginning of his knightly career),[47] the narrator's commentary defines

[44] For a discussion of Vergulaht's inappropriate behaviour see Hans-Joachim Ziegeler: '"der herzoge Liddamus": Bemerkungen zum 8. Buch von Wolframs *Parzival*', in '*Texte zum Sprechen bringen*': *Philologie und Interpretation. Festschrift für Paul Sappler*, ed. by Christiane Ackermann and Ulrich Barton (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2009), pp. 107–17; for a discussion of Wolfram's irony see esp. p. 111.

[45] Rüdiger Schnell, 'Vogeljagd und Liebe im 8. Buch von Wolframs *Parzival*', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (*PBB*), 96 (1974), 246–69 (pp. 259 and 250).

[46] See Dennis H. Green, 'On Recognising Medieval Irony', in *The Uses of Criticism*, ed. by A. P. Foulkes, Literaturwissenschaftliche Texte: Theorie und Kritik, 3 (Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1976), pp. 11–55.

[47] See the extensive descriptions in Madsen, *Humor*, pp. 43–71.

the way the situations are to be understood. His asides, digressions, and occasionally misplaced remarks enrich the narrative by adding a complex array of perspectives to decisive situations. For example, when young Parzival attacks the sleeping beauty Jeschute to steal a kiss, her ring, and a brooch, it is the narrator who gives the situation an erotic undertone. He points out details that Parzival, inexperienced as he is, does not see, for example the 'minne wâfen' (Pz 130. 4) the lady is displaying, especially 'ein munt durchliuhtic rôt' (Pz 130. 5) which shows 'der minne hitze fiur' (Pz 130. 9). During a second encounter between Parzival and Jeschute, which the now grown-up hero uses to apologize, the narrator's stance remains unchanged. He again focuses on Jeschute's 'brüstelîn, als si gedraet solden sîn. diu stuonden blanc hôch sinewel' (Pz 258. 25–27) and her almost naked body. He undermines the sobriety of many other scenes, too, mocking countless serious passages, such as the famine in Pelrapeire, which he compares to his own empty cupboard that leaves him starving (Pz 185. 7).[48] In all cases, the narrator's interventions indicate that no part of the narration is neutral, and no object or character is sacrosanct. He mocks the Grail[49] as well as Parzival's marriage, and even combines Parzival's thoughtfulness in the 'Blutstropfenszene' with the description of the hero's enforcedly very unconventional style of fighting that introduces comic elements into the scene.[50]Again and again the narrator moves into the foreground and obstructs the view of the narrated plot.

Yet the narrator's assessment of the situation is almost invariably challenged at a later point in the narrative, or the laughter he provokes proves to be an inappropriate response to the scene—this induces a feeling of insecurity in the listener or reader, as the narrator obviously cannot be trusted. This is especially true when it comes to the poetic legitimization of his narration, which in other texts of the time is normally given by referring to sources and stating the will to entertain and provide a useful narrative. In *Parzival* the narrator does his very best to destroy the illusions that are associated with a work of fiction.[51] His sources tell him that Gawan had breakfast in the morning (Pz 431. 1–2), in the prologue the text itself is compared to a 'schellec hase' (Pz 1. 19) doubling the wits of 'tumben liuten' (Pz 1. 16), and occasionally the audience is called to account with respect to the truthfulness of the narration: 'sol ich des iemen

[48] See Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, p. 63. See Madsen, *Humor*, pp. 60–63, for a humorous interpretation of the scene.

[49] Walter Haug, '*Parzival* ohne Illusionen', *DVjs*, 64 (1990), 199–217 (p. 203).

[50] See Tomas Tomasek, 'Bemerkungen zur Komik und zum "Humor" bei Wolfram von Eschenbach', in *Komik und Sakralität: Aspekte einer ästhetischen Paradoxie in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. by Anja Grebe and Nikolaus Staubach, Tradition — Reform — Innovation, 9 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 94–103 (p. 97).

[51] On Wolfram's destructive tendencies see Thomas Rausch, 'Die Destruktion der Fiktion: Beobachtungen zu den poetologischen Passagen in Wolframs von Eschenbach *Parzival*', *ZfdPh*, 119 (2000), 46–74.

triegen, sô müezt ir mit mir liegen' (Pz 238. 11–12), the narrator tells the audience in the course of his portrayal of the Grail procession. This means that the readers and listeners are complicit with this occasionally obscene and often foolish jester and philanderer manqué who has complete control over the work and, on the other hand, again and again calls into doubt his own competence and ability to fulfil his duty. One may laugh about and indeed with Wolfram and his narrator, but one can never be sure where he will lead the audience.

Even this short look at important features of the narrative indicates that the ridiculous, the ironic, and the comic together with the laughter they provoke are not self-sufficient. In most cases they point to a deeper meaning, they unsettle the listener or reader, and they act as a catalyst that instigates a cognitive process. The comic structures, especially those refined uses of irony which demand attentiveness, convey the meaning of the text. Thus, the structured use of the ridiculous, the comic, and the ironic contributes to an overarching structure not of reconciliation, but of provocation.

Book XVI and the Non-Humorous Poetics of Laughter

Agony is the opening feature of the last book[52] of *Parzival*. The Grail King Anfortas, unable to bear the pain caused by inflammation in his loin, is longing for death (while the reader, of course, knows that help is on the way). At the end of Book XVI Anfortas stands next to his successor, laughing (Pz 815. 1–2) about the heathen Feirefiz's eagerness to get baptized because of his love for the Grailkeeper Repanse. This radical reversal from near-suicidal tragedy to burlesque comedy[53] has contributed centrally to the readings of the final part of the poem as humorous. Spirits are high, laughter seems to come easily, and nothing is taken too seriously; a main feature of Book XVI seems to be hilarity.[54]

Yet the 'parody of true baptism' at the centre of Book XVI is 'blasphemous',[55] and the serious matters hidden beneath the light coating of comedy must be addressed in order to properly assess the final part of the romance. The text shows no sign of contempt for Feirefiz's behaviour—even the otherwise outspoken narrator remains silent, although the baptism is a farce that neglects all Christian values and ideals. Feirefiz is indifferent to the religion he joins; the sacrament of baptism is functionalized as a means of

[52] See Michaela Schmitz, *Der Schluss des 'Parzival' Wolframs von Eschenbach: Kommentar zum 16. Buch* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012).

[53] Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, p. 121.

[54] Sebastian Coxon, 'Laughter and the Process of Civilization in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*', in *Un-Civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture. Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias*, ed. by Mary Fulbrook, German Monitor, 66 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 17–38 (p. 34).

[55] Neil Thomas, 'Wolfram von Eschenbach: Modes of Narrative Presentation', in *A Companion to Wolfram's 'Parzival'*, ed. by Will Hasty (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999), pp. 124–39 (p. 138).

opening Repanse's arms to Feirefiz, who is instantly able to see the Grail that was previously invisible to his heathen eyes (Pz 818. 20–23). This degrades baptism to a mere mechanism and turns hilarity into a farce that seems to debase the values and ideals promoted throughout the course of the text.

Behind the comic lies the sincerity of a textual composition that has voluntarily gone astray. Many assessments of the earlier narration are revised in this final chapter, not only in a comic way, but also by means of serious questioning. This is the case when Trevrizent talks to Parzival, who according to the hermit has 'ab got erzürnet [. . .] daz sîn endelôse Trinitat iwers willen werhaft worden ist' (Pz 798. 3–5). Trevrizent then abrogates all his earlier teachings as described in Book IX by saying: 'Ich louc durch ableitens list vome grâl, wiez umb in stüende' (Pz 798. 5–6). This seemingly inexplicable behaviour has provoked Joachim Bumke to argue that Trevrizent is 'im Zustand der Verwirrung'.[56]

Even though scholars have not succeeded in working out what the lie told by Trevrizent actually consists of,[57] the uncertainty which his abrogation evokes in the listener or reader is quite obvious. Other than Parzival, who is not interested in Trevrizent's advice but rather wants to get back to his wife (Pz 799. 1–12), we cannot help but add Trevrizent's cryptic statement to the list of unsettling items Book XVI confronts us with. Another significant entry on that list is the outlook offered by the work in its final paragraphs. The volatile Grail decides that asking questions has been counter-productive and forbids all further questioning (Pz 818. 24–819. 8). This decision sets the seal on Loherangrin's fate. He is going to fail in the outside world and will have to return to Munsalvaesche because of his wife's curiosity. While Trevrizent calls past actions into question and Feirefiz's behaviour destroys Munsalvaesche's present order, it is Loherangrin's fate that shows the future failings of the Grail family. The story ends by provoking questions that remain unanswered.

'Urbanitas' as the Key to the Pre-Modern Poetics of Laughter

In giving his narration this final twist, Wolfram does what Jean Paul in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik* calls the belittling of the Great, but he does so without providing a corresponding elevation of the Small (VII, § 32, pp. 125–26). There is no reconciliation, only open endings that expose the text's inconsistencies[58] and open *Parzival* up to the audience's scrutiny. If we define humour according to Jean Paul as the philosophical reflection on man's place in God's creation, based on the firm conviction that everything is as it

[56] Joachim Bumke, 'Parzival und Feirefiz — Priester Johannes — Loherangrin: Der offene Schluß des *Parzival* von Wolfram von Eschenbach', *DVjs*, 65 (1991), 236–64 (p. 240).

[57] Bernd Schirok, '"ich louc durch ableitens list": Zu Trevrizents Widerruf und den neutralen Engeln', *ZfdPh*, 106 (1987), 46–72 (p. 51 and passim).

[58] Walter Haug, 'Literaturwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft?', *DVjs*, 73 (1999), 69–93 (p. 90).

should be and part of a bigger picture in which the world's folly makes sense, *Parzival* only goes half the way. And if we understand humour, according to Jean Paul, to be the attitude of mind of someone who has reached a certain state of self-awareness (VII, § 34, p. 94), Wolfram's romance again stops short of fulfilling expecations by removing certainty without facilitating insight into the self. Wolfram calls fundamental beliefs into question without giving us answers to the questions he asks.

The decisive point of his art is that he does this in an entertaining and indeed funny way—we do not mind being misled while it happens and only realize later that the epic leaves us empty-handed. It is our task to find answers if we wish to make sense of *Parzival*. Interpretations of the text as humorous constitute one distinctively modern response to this challenge, but a definitive response which fails to grasp the most important point Wolfram makes: that sense is not within his work, but needs to be generated afresh by every listener or reader, without ever being definitive. It is characteristic of Wolfram's poetics that *Parzival* requires the audience to be actively involved: the narrative continually invites criticism and requires double-checking. This involvement brings about intellectual *utilitas*, and one part of this strategy is the systematic use of comic elements to produce *delectation*. Over the course of the narration, one soon realizes that every instance of laughter invites reflection on the topic that provoked it.

The basis for this structured use of laughter in *Parzival* is the rhetorical pattern situated in the tension between *delectatio* and *utilitas*. While Horace in his *Ars poetica* sees the combination of both *delectatio* and *utilitas* as ideal,[59] Wolfram subordinates *delectatio* to *utilitas* and uses it as one of the tools of his art among others. The framework for his concept is not humour, but rather the rhetorical idea of *urbanitas*. This is not to say that *urbanitas* is Wolfram's unquestioned ideal; there are considerable frictions, especially when it comes to the opaque narrator figure that undercuts the persuasive power of urbane comedy and induces new levels of scrutiny for all jokes, puns, and ironic comments. *Parzival* makes use of the persuasive idea of laughter, but subjects it to second thoughts. One never just laughs and gets on with it; instead one is forced to use *delectatio* as a catalyst for making up one's mind about the text. In doing so, the audience cannot rely on the narrator, who gives inconsistent advice—the main point of Wolfram's romance is that not only laughter but meaning itself is problematic, as no proper lesson can be drawn from the text.

Wolfram's concept of *utilitas* which is served by *delectatio* is quite distinct from the classical ideal: the text is concerned with guiding the listener or reader to think about the literary work. The making of sense is—at least

[59] Horace, *Ars poetica*, ll. 333–34, in *'Satires',' Epistles' and 'Ars poetica'*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library, 194 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 447.

partly—shifted to the audience.[60] As the tale does not lay claim to having a simple meaning, we are compelled to form our own view. This effect is reinforced by the use of the persuasive power of laughter and entertainment in the text, for in most instances when laughter occurs or jokes are cracked, we will find an abrogation, a denial, or a contrasting point afterwards. The comic elements of the poem function as cognitive triggers to induce further thinking. Every statement requires further investigation, and even the simplest forms of *delectatio* point to a deeper meaning which is not meant to be decoded, but serves rather as a basis for creative invention by the reader or listener: this transgression of the text's boundaries is what is new in Wolfram's *Parzival*.[61]

The characteristic use of the ridiculous and of comic elements places the text close to the rhetorical theory of *ridiculum*, but a long way away from humour as Weltanschauung, and an equally long way away from the rather general, undefined idea of humour that prevails today. While the latter concept is too superficial to grasp the text's complex structure, the former idea places a burden on the text which it is not designed to bear. Wolfram does not provide answers, but rather asks questions. He lures the listener or reader out of their shell by using well-known rhetorical strategies of persuasion only to destroy the rhetorical refinement through ineptitude and at times obscenity. In the end he leaves the vital poetic entity of *utilitas* at our disposal. This is what makes *Parzival* special: it is a romance that depicts the ongoing development in the relationship between the listener or reader and the text, a development that transgresses the boundaries of long-established patterns of interaction and reaches out to the audience in a distinctively new way. This is also what makes *Parzival* a classic text, challenging every generation anew.

University of Freiburg Stefan Seeber

[60] In doing so, Wolfram forces the audience to bridge the gaps in his narrative in the way that Iser outlines in his aesthetics of reception: see Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 57–69. But *Parzival* offers more than Iser's theory is able to cover, as it presents its audience with a superficially coherent narrative world and then encourages the listener or reader to question the whole narrative: *Parzival* is not about gaps and negations, but deceiving the audience's expectations.

[61] Susanne Knaeble, *Höfisches Erzählen von Gott: Funktion und narrative Entfaltung des Religiösen in Wolframs Parzival*, Trends in Medieval Philology, 23 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), comes to a similar conclusion after reviewing the religious structures of the text. She sees 'Räume der Auslagerung' and states that *Parzival* inspires a timeless 'Aufforderung zur Auseinandersetzung mit dem erzählerischen Spannungsgefüge' (p. 293).