

Female Sexual Agency in the Poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide

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How does one love what one can never have? This question gilds the Middle High German *Minnesang*, a tradition of lyric poetry centered around courtly love. The genre was expanded and complicated by Walther von der Vogelweide, who is held as one of the most inventive and prolific *Minnesänger* of the thirteenth century.¹ Beautiful and revealing, Walther's poetry feeds a literary canon that has informed rituals of honor, sexuality, and courtship into the present age.^{2,3}

These rituals twine around female agency in sex and flirtation: traditional *Minnesang* idealizes women into caskets of virtue, worthy only of the deeds of unconsummated love. This juxtaposition of the lover's ardor with purity – the requirement that his lady be pure so he may desire her, and that she never fulfill his desire so as to retain her purity – is often called the *Minneparadox* in scholarship.^{4,5} However, Walther also sings of sexually active women who violate this requirement, as in his song *Under der linden*. In this essay, I explore how these distinctions marry into a holistic view of female sexual agency, informed by Walther's treatment of themes such as the position of woman as an object of love, and the practice of love as an end in itself.

“Minne ist aller tugende ein hort,” Walther sings: “[Courtly] love is the shelter of all virtue.”⁶ This is similarly true for its object, the woman who herself nurses the virtues to which

¹ “Walther von der Vogelweide.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 Apr. 2020. Retrieved 15 May 2020.

² Simpson, David L. “Chivalry and Courtly Love.” *DePaul University*, 1998. Retrieved from <https://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/courtlylove.html>

³ Brand, Emily. “How has dating changed over time? A brief history of courtship.” *HistoryExtra.com*, 27 Mar 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/dating-history-how-to-woo-date-court-courtship-marriage-courtly-love/>

⁴ Bumke, Joachim. *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008, p. 529.

⁵ Obermaier, Sabine. “Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Interpretation von ‘Dichtung über Dichtung’ als Schlüssel für eine Poetik mittelhochdeutschen Lyrik.” In *Mittelalterliche Lyrik: Probleme der Poetik*, edited by Thomas Cramer, Ingrid Kasten. Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1998, p. 24.

⁶ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 53.

her lover aspires. Alternately “herrin”⁷ and “kunigin,”⁸ she compels her suitor into the service of love, such that he might become worthy of her favors. In this aspect, the courtship between the elevated lady and her lover mimes the relationship between a lord and his subjects, a word Walther at times explicitly uses:

Sît daz ich eigenlîchen sol
die wîle ich lebe ir sîn undertân,⁹

*Sît daz ich eigenlîchen sol*¹⁰

Mirroring the feudal system, in which lesser nobles offer their service and loyalty to a liege lord in exchange for land, protection, and wealth, the young man offers his service to his love interest in the hope of winning her attention or affections. The parallel conflicts with the Minneparadox: a liege lord who does not reward his vassals would lose their loyalty, breaking the feudal bond. In contrast, a lady is served because of her honor, but to reward her suitor would besmirch it, making her unworthy of service:

owê, des vorhte ich vil ze sêre,
daz ich müeze volgen swes er wil.
gerne het ichz nû getân,
wan daz ichz im muoz versagen und wîbes êre
sol begân.¹¹

*Mir tuot einer slahte wille*¹²

⁷ Walther von der Vogelweide: *Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 219.

⁸ Walther von der Vogelweide: *Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 129.

⁹ Since I am bound to be like a serf
the time that I still live should be subject to her,

¹⁰ Walther von der Vogelweide: *Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 223.

¹¹ I fear too much that I have to do whatever he wants.
I was happy to do it now, but I have to refuse him
and continue to uphold my honor as a woman.

¹² Walther von der Vogelweide: *Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 235.

Therefore, unlike its feudal counterpart, the system of courtship works with illusory payments. The lady's currency cannot be spent discretely; once she yields, she loses the virtue that inspired service, descending to the level of her "serf". By nature of her position, she may not deal in sexual favors, regardless of her stance towards her pursuers. Courtly love cannot be reciprocal, and so little is left for the woman to do. Stripped of all courses of action, she can only lament in her *Frauenlied*.

Which itself is a rare form. Most *Minnesang* is the song of men, sung by men, who take these restrictions as natural, and either act or grieve their failures. If the woman is mentioned, she is mentioned by role and in praise:

Ich wil der guoten niht vergezzen noch ensol,
diu mir sô vil gedanke nimt.
die wîle ich singen wil, sô finde ich iemer wol
ein niuwez lop, daz ir gezimt.¹³

*Swie wol diu heide*¹⁴

Her radiance inspires not only service, but mythic awe. The loved woman is as fair and inaccessible as legend, "more beautiful and deserving of praise than Helena or Diana."¹⁵ The reference to the Roman goddess Diana, beautiful and virginal,¹⁶ compounds the value of purity, which is appended in its fullest extent to the admired lady. The mention of Helen of Troy alludes to the magnitude of service that can be inspired by such qualities: Helen's beauty has caused the Trojan War,¹⁷ and yet the woman described is still more beautiful. The beloved ascends through this cycle of adulation

¹³ I do not want to forget the noble one, nor can I
her who robs me of so many thoughts.
As long as I sing, I will always find
a new praise that befits her.

¹⁴ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 107.

¹⁵ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 69.

¹⁶ "Diana." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 31 Oct. 2007. Retrieved 15 May 2020.

¹⁷ "Helen of Troy." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 May 2020. Retrieved 15 May 2020.

to a state of new power: although she is implicitly prevented from engaging sexually with the narrator, he frames her rejection as a deliberate choice which is his place to accept:

bî der ich vil gerne tougen wære
beide naht und ouch den liechten tac.
des enmag nû niht gesîn,
ez enwelle diu liebe frouwe mîn.¹⁸

*Ir vil minneclîchen ougenblicke*¹⁹

The narrator sways in conflict: he knows his admiration must be without gain, for if the woman returns it, she will become untrustworthy, unvirtuous, and therefore undesirable: “If I am rewarded for my loyalty, no man must trust her again.”¹⁶ Thus the untouched woman is granted an inverted form of sexual agency: it is her wish that precludes sex, a wish that is obeyed because of her elevation over men, and which ensures that she remains elevated and hence inspires obedience. The system of favor and deed becomes self-sustaining through this illusory agency, which ties imposed restraints to a source of noble power, and so frames them as moral truth. Since the suitor describes and interprets the woman and her wishes, whatever values he sees in his love-object become the fact of her. If he connects some action to this fact, this action is imbued with the same value. Thus the suitor as narrator vacates and lauds his beloved, and all choice of hers is also lauded, so long as it reflects her chaste responsibility – and therefore is not a choice personal and free.

This vacancy is also an absence of the body. The suitor in his song may dream of “[her] smile”, of “the permission to speak to her,”²⁰ but his desires are not restricted by chastity – the beautiful woman retains her sexual appeal. However, these desires mostly trace the outline of her

¹⁸ [To whom] I would so happily be familiar
at night as I am in the bright day.
This cannot now be,
unless my dear mistress wishes it.

¹⁹ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 63.

²⁰ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 65.

form, as if there is no flesh to sing of: he mentions being with her at night, or “[crushing] flowers with her in the sunlit grass;”²¹ “[plucking] roses with the Beloved.”²² This absence is at heart a sublimation, turning song into prayer and deed into sacrifice. The erotic veil falls over each stunted word and deed, marking a place of suffering for the man who wants, but is reminded at each turn that he will never get. The beauty he adores becomes sweeter and more distant: if the woman turns far enough away from the physical truths of love, she will trade her sexual agency for divinity, the ultimate inaccessibility of God. She is conflated with the concept of an allegorical *frouwe Minne*, ‘Lady Love,’ from whom one can solicit only emotional satisfaction:

Nû, frouwe Minne,
kum si minneclîchen an,
diu mich twinget und alsô betwungen hât.²³

*Ez war uns allen einer hande sâlden nôt*²⁴

In this saintly position, *frouwe Minne* is completely desexualized. She is the mouth from which one begs the words of relief. Thus a woman’s sexual presence and agency change with respect to her degree of abstraction: as a sanctified entity, she completely loses face or body, acting as arbiter in the game of love. She is the spirit of chance and of restraint, making no choice but foretelling the end of all choices. As the beloved, she is sterilized into a stone figure, at the feet of which one will toss the rose of his won glories. She is praised in her absence, at times even invented. Her sexual agency clothes the fact of her restriction. A woman cannot respond, cannot encourage, cannot partake in pleasure. If she does, she loses her worth and her love.

²¹ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 69.

²² *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 99.

²³ Now, frouwe Minne,
come lovingly to her
who overcomes and has overcome me.

²⁴ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 93.

But there are songs where the body lives. *Under der linden* is a *Frauenlied*, narrated by a girl who meets her lover for a tryst in a meadow.²⁵ Immediately different from the aforementioned *Minnelieder* is the mention of the meadow, a *locus amoenus* which visibly has been “unser zweier bette,” a concrete aspect of sex that has been shared by the singer and her lover. Thus, the woman is introduced as a partner in the act that has taken place and has “[flattened] the grass and flowers.” Her deflowering is an entrance “into the meadow, where [her] friend had already arrived,” symbolic of the sexual realm into which she is welcomed, and for which she cries to the Holy Virgin in happiness; “he kissed me a thousand times,” she reports, “*tandaradei* – look how red my mouth is.” This nonsense word, which is repeated in every strophe like a refrain, stands in for a description of the act that has made her mouth so red, the “mund” being an ambiguous metaphor for both lips and genitals.

Any passerby can see the evidence of her encounter of her and her lover, “in the roses... where [her] head once lay.” Thus, the song paints the picture of a young woman who does not yield to her lover, but rather chooses him, chooses sexual knowledge of him, and the act is natural, surrounded by light and nature. It explicitly refers to the physical reality of her body and her actions, which are infused with a sense of joy. But however much she enjoys it, she cannot own up to her choice; free as she is in the grass, it is isolate grass, excluded from society:

Daz er bî mir læge,
 wessez iemen,
 (nû enwelle got!) sô schamt ich mich.
 wes er mit mir pflæge,
 niemer niemen
 bevinde daz wan er und ich
 und ein kleinez vogellîn,
 tandaradei,

²⁵ Walther von der Vogelweide: *Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 228-231.

daz mac wol getriuwe sîn.²⁶

*Under den linden*²⁷

Thus this kind of sexually bold and joyous woman is clasped by her lover in faithful, clandestine love. She does not fear his knowledge of her body: the bed is theirs, the secret shared. Yet it is still secret, hemmed in by the threat of shame. The light that pools cannot pour. Sexual agency goes as far as discretion, beyond which it bends its neck to the constraints of purity.

The exception to this rule is created by Walther himself: his song reveals what is meant to be forgotten. True to his *nom de plume*, this singer from “der Vogelweide” is the little bird in *Under der linden*; he witnesses the act, and in song preserves it. At other times, he appears explicitly in the narrative as a trusted friend and advisor, able to speak the demands and confessions a lover cannot make:

Hœrâ Walther, wie ez mir stat,
mîn trûtgeselle von der Vogelweide:
helfe suoche ich unde rât,
diu wol getâne tuot mir vil ze leide.
kunden wir gesingen beide,
daz ich mit ir müeste brechen bluomen an der
lichten heide!²⁸

*Ich bin nû so rehte fro*²⁹

²⁶ No one must know that he lay with me
– no, by God, I would be shamed.
What he did with me, no one must know
except he and I, and a little bird
– *tandaradei* –
that will not say a thing.

²⁷ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 230

²⁸ Hear how it is with me, Walther,
my trusted friend from the bird-pasture.
I seek help and counsel,
for I feel much sorrow for the beautiful one.
If only we could both sing
of me being allowed to crush flowers with her
in the bright meadow!

²⁹ *Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, Band 2: Liedlyrik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998, p. 68.

The suitor is trapped by decorum, the young woman by chastity. The voice of both is Walther and his singing; his words veil their identities, and so their acts and feelings can be expressed without blame, outside the constraints of decency. Thus it is the poet and his poetry that allow a formerly hidden realm of sexual agency to be revealed without shame, albeit anonymously as always.

A sexually active woman may be loved, but by few men and quietly. Courtly love, on the other hand, is not quiet, and does not expect satisfaction. The suitor loves in words, in dreams, kneels beside an urn of virtue that is the woman described. His power as narrator washes his object of fault and emotion, taking from her the chance to love or to act with love; it assumes her indifference, and lauds it as the source of his desire. Thus, the courted woman in *Minnesang* is a sexual agent only in inversion, only insofar as it is assumed that her choice is sexual distance. Else she is spurned, unworthy of the gallant acts that wash men to goodness. The end of sexual agency is secrecy, and when not it is abstraction, the drawing of the touchable into the divine. The only refuge of sexual love is *minnesang* itself: the singer, free from censure or constraint, can refer to a choice that belongs to no one by name. Thus he reveals what on its own would silently corrode.

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