



Rooms of love – On the treatment of the heart in medieval literature





Modern thought distinguishes clearly between the medical image of the heart and the heart as a linguistic image. This is not the case in medieval literature: the idea of the physical organ and the linguistic image are still closely connected.

The sociologist Niklas Luhmann describes love as a communication code, a common language based on general human experiences. But like any other language, it exhibits epoch-specific characteristics. The familiar example of the linguistic image of the broken heart illustrates this quite clearly.

This metaphor already occurs in the vernacular literature of the Middle Ages, i.e., in texts that are not written in Latin. But it can be used in an astonishingly literal sense. This is the case, for example, in “Herzmaere” by Konrad von Würzburg, an author from the second half of the 13th Century, where the lovers grow deathly ill as the result of broken hearts. The basic formula is as follows:

*»der enzwei braeche, mir das herze
mîn, / der möhte sî schöne drinne
schouwen.«*

*“If you broke my heart into two
pieces, you could see her inside in all
her beauty”*

a quote from “Minnesangs Frühling”
121,1 in the Karl Lachmann edition,
revised by Hugo Moser and Helmut
Tervooren, Stuttgart 1997.

The interior world of a lover thus remains hidden, for breaking open the heart would result in the lover’s death.

The heart as body, as person and swap object

The same applies to the linguistic image

The poet Hartmann von Aue, who greatly influenced courtly literature of the High Middle Ages, for example, used the concept of the soul when he reflected on the relationship between body and heart and in his poem “Klage” (“lament”, around 1180), he depicts the soul as that which both have in common. But the quarrel between body and heart, which revolves around the pain of love, focuses on two instances that are clearly thought of physically, that are vulnerable and also mortal. Love and its mental phenomena are consistently constructed physically in literary representation (Philipowski, 2006). The need to depict abstract phenomena such as love or the soul graphically is also clearly evident in



nearts. The basis for such a concrete development is an unusual connection between language, idea, and physical state.

The heart as a room one can enter

In the vernacular literature of the Middle Ages there is an abundance of descriptive heart metaphors that are unknown to us today. Many of these linguistic images are based on the idea of a bodily interior space. The heart is an enclosure in which a person lives, and which can be entered, conquered and ruled. The origin of this idea is Biblical in nature, where God is thought to be present within the hearts of humankind.

The abstract language often used, and the meaning condensed by elliptical constructions become more vivid through the spatial depiction. Heinrich von Morungen, who wrote poetry around the turn of the thirteenth century, is particularly masterly in his depictions of inner states of the heart. The heart becomes the dwelling of the person being wooed, which is entered secretly through eye contact. Once the beloved is inside of a man's heart it is impossible

of the swapping of hearts. It can be found throughout the genre and its meaning is ambiguous. It can be used literally, but also metaphorically, symbolically or ironically. The heart can be removed from the body as a physical object, it can be occupied, shattered, and swapped. If an author understands this linguistic image literally, he speaks of the concrete swap of hearts between lovers: If the couple splits up, the heart, and thus a central element of an individual's self-understanding, remains with the other person.

The Aristotelian understanding of the heart as the vessel of the soul, the central organ of vital heat and the capacity for perception and thought (Aristoteles, "De anima", II.1,412a2-3), otherwise of central importance in the Middle Ages, hardly plays a role in the depiction of the swapping of hearts in love poetry. The theological and philosophical debates about the immortal, immaterial, soul created by God that animates the body has no place in courtly poetry. When the soul comes up, its localisation and capacities are not the issue.

medieval book illumination.

The swapping of hearts as miracle

In "Iwein" (about 1200, verses 3000-3028), Hartmann von Aue demonstrates the problems that can arise when the linguistic image of the swapping of hearts is imagined in a concrete way. He stages a dialogue between the author and personified love (*vrou Minne*), in order to clarify how a knight, who has received a worried feminine heart through a swap, can practice knighthood and how a man and woman can live without their own hearts at all. The swapping of hearts brings with it a problem concerning the logic of identity, since separation of body and heart call into question the wholeness of self. Nonetheless, and this is astonishing, the self is expressly confirmed in its identity. Frau Minne explains in "Iwein" why this is the case: only she is capable of accomplishing this miracle. She strengthens the power of the individual despite the swapped heart.



is inside of a man's heart, it is impossible for outsiders to perceive the woman inside the heart – to do so, the heart would have to be broken open.



The heart as a dwelling: This miniature from a mystical contemplative book from Bavaria (around 1470) depicts the heart as the dwelling place of the Mother of God and her Son. (Picture credit: bpk/Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin)



Love as sickness: Dido, the Queen of Carthage has collapsed because she is violently but unrequitedly in love with Eneas. Illumination of a manuscript by Heinrich von Veldekes »Eneas«-Roman (Bavaria, around 1220; Picture credit: bpk/Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin)

Hartmann offers no medical or philosophical explanation, but argues on

Love was also depicted as an illness time and again, as an illness of courtly

»si wurden ein und einvalt, [...]



philosophical explanation, but argues on a level familiar within the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, the level of the miraculous. The concrete heart swap can only be comprehended as a miracle. To a mind-set shaped by Biblical knowledge, this argumentation was quite comprehensible. In his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 3:20), Paul speaks of Christ taking up residence in the human heart through faith, rooting and establishing the individual in love, which works as power within them.

The heart as location of vital heat and of sickness

Hartmann speaks of the loss of identity connected with the concrete swap and even affirms it when he talks about the “heartless body”.

»daz ofte man unde wîp/ habent herzelôsen lîp«

“Man and woman often have a body without a heart”

Verse 3017f., as quoted in the edition: Hartmann von Aue, Iwein, Texte und Kommentare, edited and translated by Volker Mertens, Frankfurt am Main 2008

time and again, as an illness of courtly love, or lovesickness (*minnesiech*), which led to massive physical and psychic changes. Typical symptoms, portrayed particularly drastically by Heinrich von Veldeke in his novel “Eneas”, are alternating between blushing and turning pale, breaking out in sweat, trembling, agitation, extreme weakness, insomnia, and sighing. Dido, the queen of Carthage, is ill, because she loves Eneas unrequitedly and beyond measure.

Verse 872–874:

»in korzer stunde wart si rôt,/ dar nâch schiere varlôs:/ ir was heiz und si frôs«

“In a short time she blushed, then turned immediately pale. She grew hot, and then began to freeze.”

Verses 1385-1387:

»vil unsanfte si lebete,/ si switzete unde bebete,/ sie leit michel ungemach«

“She was unwell. She sweated and trembled and suffered great agonies.”

Verses 1455-1459:

»si clagete [...] ir ummaht,/ daz si in aller der naht/ nehein teil gesliefte./ si

ietweder dem anderm was/ durchlûter also ein spiegelglas./ si haeten beide ein herze«

“They became one and united [...]. They were transparent to each other like the glass of a mirror. Together, they now had only one heart.”

Verse 11716 f., 11725-27, quoted in Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, *Mittelhochdeutsch/Neuhochdeutsch*, Stuttgart, 2017,

The heart as object, food and symbol of love

Following Gottfried von Straßburg, Konrad von Würzburg devises an unusual unification phantasy.

“Herzmaere” (around 1260), a novel-like text shaped by aristocratic-courtly values, develops a love triangle between a husband, his wife and a knight who loves her without the love between the knight and the lady ever being physically consummated. The relationship, however, is not described metaphorically, as a dwelling in the heart of the other. It becomes a cannibalistic act in which the wife eats the heart of the knight.



But at the same time he speaks about love – graphically depicted in the swap of hearts – as an increase of power, and of life, that strengthens identity. Metaphorical and concrete depictions are layered in a way that expands meaning. It can be assumed that Hartmann von Aue was also interested in the meaning of the most powerful human organ. Vital heat was, for example, localised in the heart in medieval medicine, and blood, with its qualities of warmth and moistness, was one of the four life-sustaining bodily fluids in medieval humoralism (four-temperament doctrine). If excessively present, it disrupts the balance necessary for good health and causes illness.

sûfte vile tiefe/ und wart vil ubele getân«

“She lamented [...] her weakness, that she did not sleep the entire night. She sighed from deep in her heart, and looked quite awful.”

Gottfried von Straßburg constructs the love relationship in his novel “Tristan” (around 1210) in analogy to lovesickness. The love between Tristan and Isola even affirms pain and death. It is a special love, devised as bodily union that renders the lovers transparent to each other. It finds its expression in a common heart. In this phantasy of unity, interior and exterior no longer exist.

The theme of the eaten heart exists as an idea in almost all cultures (Bohnenengel, 2016). The European variation can be divided into two groups. In the first group are texts in which the jealous husband kills the lover and takes revenge on his wife by setting the prepared heart before her. In the texts belonging to the second group, the lover dies in exile and has his heart sent back to his beloved. The husband intercepts the messenger by coincidence and has the heart, prepared by his cook, set before his wife (Blamires, 1988/89).



The heart of her lover as a dish for the unfaithful wife: Illumination of Giovanni Boccaccio's »Decamerone« is from a codex from 1414. (Picture credit: Cod. pal. lat. 1989, Biblioteca



The author





Apostolica Vaticana, fol. 143.v.)

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The popularity of this theme has led to it being used in literature in a great variety of ways up through the 20th Century [Bohnengel 2016: S. 635-742]. For example, it occurs in “Vita nuova” by Dante Alighieris (around 1290), in “Decamerone” by Giovanni Boccaccios (around 1350), in “Gabriotto and Reinhart” by Jörg Wickram (1551), in the baroque poem “Das gefressene Hertz” (1654) by Georg Philipp Hardsdörffer

The knight has his heart cut out, embalmed, and sent to his beloved in a reliquary, so that the sight of his broken heart will recall to her his pain. Her husband intercepts the messenger by coincidence. He has the heart prepared, his wife eats it as an extraordinary sweet treat. Analogous to the Christian ritual of communion, the act of cannibalism receives a new meaning, as the honey sweetness of the host is considered a

The heart as last fare – interior love becomes concrete

In “Herzmaere“, linguistic, concrete and symbolic images of the heart are densely packed together side by side (Kragl, 2009, Quast, 2000). The metaphorical heart becomes the literally broken heart that is removed from the body and embalmed for remembrance;



and later in Ludwig Uhland's "Der Kastellan von Couci" (1812) and in Stendhals' "Le Rouge et le Noir" (1830).

In Konrad von Würzburg's story about the eaten heart, the unattainability of the beloved forms the premise. Initially, love is longing, portrayed as an ache in the heart. But the physical symptoms of lovesickness cannot be hidden from the husband. To protect the knight who loves her, the lady sends him on a pilgrimage. The separation leads to the knight's physical dwindling. At first, the knight is metaphorically lovesick: scorched inside and with his heart in shreds, he is in a state of living death. But he then grows literally ill from this condition and dies of lovesickness. Konrad rigorously shifts the familiar metaphors of love's yearning to the concrete level and tells of disconcerting matters.

miracle of the host (Karle, 1997).

Eating the embalmed and yet sweet heart can be interpreted as a Eucharistic miracle, in the sense of vivification of the couple's unity. When the husband reveals the ingredients of the delicious meal, the lady grows pale, her heart grows cold, she suffers a haemorrhage and dies. In this case, medical knowledge is also used selectively in a literal sense. In Arabic writings that go back to the Greek physician Galenos from Pergamon (Galen) and which were adopted in Europe, a haemorrhage is attributed to extreme inner coldness (Thies, 1967). This is similar to what Konrad von Würzburg writes: with the petrification and the haemorrhage, the vital heat of the central organ is extinguished and the body can no longer live.

but which at the same time can be dispatched as a symbol of love. The corporeal heart can be prepared and eaten. And the blood loss from a heart that has grown cold can lead to actual death. But there is also the description of internalisation as a last fare. In analogy to the last supper, the last fare is a unique union with the beloved that is consummated inwardly.

Such an extreme concept reveals a literary scope that is specified as heightened inwardness: instead of talking about coitus, the desire for physical intimacy is transferred to the inner realm. At the end of the text, at the end of the life of the knight and the lady, even the objectively concrete portrayal of inwardness is cancelled in order to conceive of love anew, beyond concrete matters of the heart: as a holy form of absolute intimacy.

By Franziska Wenzel

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