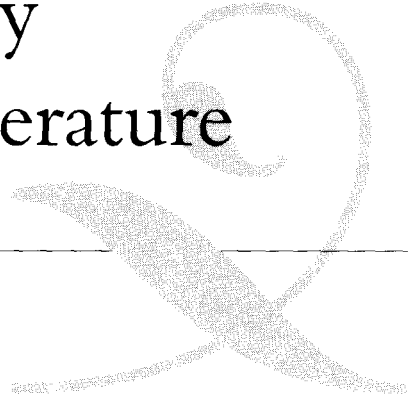


A New History of German Literature



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✪ Circa 1230

A wandering poet known only as “der Stricker” composes the comic romance *Schwänke des Pfaffen Amis*

The Dual Economy of Medieval Life

The works of the author who called himself “der Stricker” (“the weaver”) are generally assigned to the reign of Emperor Frederick II (1212–1250). He wrote in a German of southern Franconian coloring, and his main area of activity is thought to have been the duchy of Austria. He cannot be connected to a more precise location because his potential patrons and audiences cover a wide social and geographic spectrum—from the court of the Duke of Austria in Vienna and the landed aristocracy to urban patricians and the clergy. Der Stricker was most likely a wandering poet. His pseudonym is best understood as a metaphor: the Middle High German verb *stricken* means to weave, knit, or tie together, and *der Stricker* would thus be a “weaver” of tales, a maker of texts (the Latin word *textum* = a woven cloth or fabric). Although most of what is known about this weaver’s identity comes from his own writings, he has a clear profile. Der Stricker was one the great innovators in medieval German literature. The verb *erniuwen*, “to renew/reform/innovate,” sums up his literary achievement in a dual sense: renewal of past literary traditions and creation of new genres in vernacular literature. To the latter he added several forms: the *maere* or minor epic in prose; the *bîspel*, a type of short tale illustrating a moral; and the *Schwankroman* or comic romance. In addition, he produced two works in the prevailing large forms of courtly literature, *Charlemagne*, a *chanson de geste*, and *Daniel from the Blossoming Valley*, an Arthurian romance. All in all, he displays a range previously unknown in German literature.

The work *Schwänke des Pfaffen Amis* (*Jests of Priest Amis*), thought to date from about 1230, is a “romance” consisting of 2,300 lines in rhyming couplets that link a series of comic episodes to a single protagonist in what is essentially a biographical narrative. It is the first tale of its kind, although struc-

tural antecedents can be found in epic tales of animals, such as *Reinhart Fuchs*. The originality of *Priest Amis* accounts for its notable success; the work enjoyed widespread distribution well into the early era of printing. Subsequent writers, both of verse chronicles and courtly romances, therefore, could assume that references to the central character would be understood. The comic romance became a separate epic form and achieved its greatest refinement in the 16th century with the prose work *Ulenspiegel*, which explicitly mentions the Weaver, and later the *Lalebuch*, containing tales about the town of Schilda and its famously foolish citizens. *Priest Amis*'s literary success cannot be attributed to a smooth, seemingly harmless, texture; rather it can be traced to the shifting refractions in a disconcerting tale of a disconcerting hero.

The story begins with Amis's bishop threatening to remove him from his parish in the English town of Tranis, because he suspects the priest of trying to turn the social hierarchy of the clergy upside down. Indeed, by the end of the tale, the priest attains a rank equal to the bishop's when the monks of a Cistercian monastery choose him as their abbot, assuring him of eternal bliss. Priest Amis achieves his goal by leaving his parish after the quarrel with his bishop and traveling through England, France, and Lorraine. After his return, he twice leaves Tranis again on journeys to Constantinople before finally coming home for good—first to his parish and then, by way of the Cistercian monastery, to God. The plot is based on the simple narrative pattern of exile and return. In this case, the repeated journeys of the protagonist suggest that the courtly romances about King Arthur and his court, the most important model in high courtly narrative literature for endowing experience with meaning, served as a point of reference. The Weaver used the symbolic structure of the courtly Arthurian romance, first developed by Chrétien de Troyes and Hartmann von Aue, in his own Arthurian romance, *Daniel from the Blossoming Valley*. In *Priest Amis*, however, the axiological coding of the pattern is fundamentally altered: Amis does not shine as a courtly knight, but as a swindler and thief. The story revolves entirely around lies and deception, and it goes without saying that the protagonist's goal is to increase not his virtue or honor, but his store of worldly goods. His victims are monarch and aristocrat, peasant and knight, man and woman, layman and cleric in equal measure.

As a result, *Priest Amis* has often been read as a parody of the courtly Arthurian romance and a critique of its idealistic ethics. It is not the courtly knight who leaves King Arthur's court here, but a sly, dishonest priest, who leaves his parish not in search of aristocratic *ere* (honor) but of material *gut* (goods). Furthermore, his actions are not honorable duels governed by rules and fought with knightly physical prowess, but by duping everyone intellectually inferior to him. Undefeated opponents he sends to the king; the riches he manages to acquire go to his parish. As a parody of courtly and knightly tales, the Weaver's comic romance is evidence of a deeply pessimistic or new realistic view of the world. This world of the first half of the 13th century, a world of social upheaval, economic changes, and political crises, would have offered many opportunities for satirical treatment of the traditional epic models' idealized im-

age of the feudal aristocracy. But the world very often invites critical glances, and so to regard *Priest Amis* as simply a moralizing tale or parody of an established literary genre would trivialize it. The work is noteworthy not only for the contrasting references to earlier narrative forms and the ethical concepts of courtly romance, but also for the disconcerting tensions within the text itself. The central character is a priest who devises fraudulent schemes and has an insatiable appetite for worldly goods; a man who should represent truth and honesty serves as the source of all deceit. Such extremes of dissonance exist virtually nowhere else in German narrative literature of the time.

The protagonist's confrontation with the world effects no changes in him. Amis gains riches, but no new insights. From the start, he possesses all the knowledge and skills he needs to function as the hero of the tale, namely, the ability to see through others while preventing them from recognizing his own intentions. His game is one of deception, which from the outset depends not only on complete mastery of the rules in the world, but also on opportunities to exploit them. Amis succeeds in making them serve his own long-term material interests. However, the framework within which the hero acts is the prevailing order based on rules of a premodern culture that does not distinguish between faith and knowledge. Such a culture frequently has recourse to the category of miracles, and always reckons with the possibility that salvation can enter the world; it is also a culture in which economic forms of exchange have a complex overlay of noneconomic social ties. How this appears in the Weaver's text, and how Amis manipulates the rules and structures of his world, constantly deceiving others for the sake of material gain, can be illustrated here on the basis of a single episode.

The Weaver begins by relating a trick that Amis often employs on his travels: The priest sets out from Transis as an itinerant preacher, carrying with him a holy relic, part of the skull of Saint Brendan. He goes from one village fair to another and asks *gebouren* and *vrouwen* (357; peasants and noble ladies) for donations to build a cathedral to the saint. Amis tells the ladies that naturally Brendan will accept donations only from women who have not committed the sin of adultery. He encodes the message in such a way that the women have little choice but to pay up: "Every woman who held back would have immediately set tongues wagging. People would have accused her of having secret lovers" (401ff). The encoding reckons with a logic according to which the qualification of the donor is substantially present in the act of giving and in the quality of the donation. And the calculation pays off. Crowds of women come forward, especially those who have committed adultery, of course, to make "the largest donation ever offered to a priest" as proof of their virtue (422ff). They even go so far as to borrow the money. Hence the episode shows a social order based on universal deception only the swindler Amis is able to perceive. He thus gains not only in material goods but also in personal prestige and reputation as a "holy preacher" through his pseudo-exculpation of society (480).

Amis's calculations always work out; luck never goes against him. The hero's exploits virtually replace a metaphysical Providence, for it is he alone

who works miracles, assures salvation, and turns the wheel of fortune (1829). Yet, unlike the characters in some later comic tales, the Weaver's hero does not represent an anarchic or destructive force, disruptive of the existing order to no purpose. His rational calculations and cunning have a clear, transparent goal: the increase of his wealth. Thus Amis's deceptions do not act as a catalyst to expose the irrationality or corruption of the social order, as has been suggested. Even where such order might be dubious, as in the episode of Saint Brendan's relic, Amis does not disturb the social order; rather he stabilizes it through the effect of his scam. The priest's victims operate, it has been suggested, within a logical framework that recognizes only what exists in a given situation, whatever is immediately present and evident in a moment, be it the presence of salvation or an opportunity for financial gain. Amis, by contrast, makes his calculations in terms of situations and situational contexts. His cunning consists in distancing himself from whatever exists in a given situation. The protagonist is a unique figure in his environment, and also a lonely one. In this respect, too, he differs from the courtly knight, who may restore order to the world single-handedly, but always as a representative of court society. Amis does not work on behalf of either a collective or a court, but only for himself. He represents nothing more than what he himself is. But who is he, and why?

To answer this question, it is important to note that, according to the frame story, Priest Amis's primary motivation is not greed but its opposite, charity, his desire to distribute his wealth among others without limits, conditions, or distinctions. The comic episodes do not show unmitigated evil at work. The priest's scams have an ulterior motive, the continuation of his generosity. This generosity constitutes endless festivities, and it is the threat to these festivities that inspires the priest's forays. His journeys always remain connected with the permanent festivities, and Amis sends the spoils of his schemes home as soon as he acquires them. This implies that the party goes on uninterrupted back in *Tranis*, or rather vice versa: the epic foreground of the comic episodes also represents the backstage activity in support of the play of consumption and status being enacted in *Tranis*. Thus one could say that the romance reveals the "secrets" behind courtly displays of status, and the expense and skills required to maintain them.

As a ritual that makes no distinctions and has no fixed limits, generosity of any kind, including that of Priest Amis, must ignore the fact that medieval society, on the whole, is governed by the law of scarcity and short supply of goods. Amis's capacity for denial is negated when the number of his guests exceeds his ability to offer them food and gifts, and he must set out again to increase his wealth. On these journeys, he follows a different logic from that of charity. Because he must be greedy and acquisitive in order to give lavishly, he constantly makes claims on the property of others. Hence Amis's acquisition of goods on his travels through the world—in contrast to his generosity in *Tranis*—is economic in the strict sense; in fact it is based directly on the economization and monetarization of the transcendental. As the figure-ground pattern of this comic romance shows, riches have a very different status

seen from the front and rear of conspicuous display and consumption. The Weaver's romance makes abundantly clear that the boundless wealth of feudal generosity and the permanence of the festivities are themselves a deception. The form of housekeeping practiced in Tranis rests on principles that must be kept invisible, namely strict calculations regarding time and money, long-term planning, mastery of the logics of immediacy and current circumstances, in addition to cunning use of situations and knowledge to deceive everyone else. Thus the text uncovers the scarcity of those resources on which all generosity depends; it shows the limits of wealth that idealistic literary depictions of feudal community, such as courtly romances and adventures, remove from the picture. The notion that generosity, the quintessence of successful courtly society, has nothing to do with economic exchange proves to be an illusion.

See also 1184, 1189, 1500 (Eulenspiegel)

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