

The Treatment of Love in Literary Documents as a Catalyst for Anthropological Investigations

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Review Article

However we might define Anthropology, and whatever methodology we might use in that field, there is no doubt that the study object is the human being, human society, and everything that comes along with it in terms of communication, ethics, morality, politics, emotions, ideals, values, transgressions, fears, desires, etc. In short, there is much overlapping with other disciplines, whether Literary Studies, History, Art History, Psychology, and so forth. Online we can read, for instance (Boston University), the purpose of anthropology is “to advance knowledge of who we are, how we came to be that way—and where we may go in the future” (<https://www.bu.edu/anthrop/about/what-is-anthropology/>). Or (UC Davis): “The focus of Anthropology is on understanding both our shared humanity and diversity, and engaging with diverse ways of being in the world” (<https://anthropology.ucdavis.edu/undergraduate/what-is-anthropology>). The School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona presents its own field as follows: “As a science, anthropology is the only discipline that effectively examines humans as a species, including all past and modern human cultures and physical adaptations. The anthropological perspective is unequalled in its command of both diachronic and synchronic evidence in investigations of human evolution and the origins of modern human diversity because of its conceptual coordination of research on human ancestors (pre-modern culture and hominid biology during the last five million years) with inquiry on modern humans (language, modern cultures, modern human biology) (<https://anthropology.arizona.edu/content/vision-statement>; all last accessed on March 1, 2021).

One of the central issues in all of human life has almost always been love, a highly contentious, profound, all-consuming, at times destructive, at other times glorifying force which transforms most individuals and melts them together with other individuals. Love has made people do many different things, at times crazy, at other times heroic, or baffling, amazing, hilarious, or moving. There would not be any reasonable approach to any kind of anthropological

research if we ignored this fundamental phenomenon, love, whether in historical or in contemporary terms because love has shaped human beings most profoundly throughout time, whether this has been expressed in literary, artistic, musical, philosophical, or religious terms.

Literary scholars have already taken it upon themselves for a very long time, and this quite naturally, to examine this topic through the lens of a vast body of poetic texts, and historically speaking, we could hardly gain any grasp on the world of western medieval culture – my research focus here – without a profound sense of this evanescent aspect of love. Love has also been equally influential in all other world cultures, but for the purpose of this paper I limit myself to western literary, history, and anthropology.

The intentions of the following reflections cannot be to revisit the huge, probably infinite topic of love in its physical, religious, spiritual, political, or sexual dimensions. Historians, literary historians, psychologists, religious scholars, musical historians, art historians, and many others have already engaged with this huge issue, and we cannot expect that the flood of relevant studies will slow down or dry up in the near future. Instead, I want to probe in a very modest fashion some of the reasons why medieval love poetry might be so profound for us today, especially within the context of anthropology. In a way, this paper is thus a modest attempt by a literary historian to contribute to anthropological research.

Some cultures, at least in the European context, seem to have entirely ignored the theme of love, at least as far as the surviving documents indicate, either because the poets were occupied with other issues, or because a society was extremely bound by external forces and could not afford any focus on something so evanescent as love when the own existence was at stake. While love was of central concern in antiquity, whether in poetry (Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, or Virgil) or in theoretical treatises (Ovid), the early Middle Ages appears to have been occupied with very different issues,

especially warfare, struggling against monsters, military conquests, settlements, and religion (Beowulf, Njál's Saga, Walthariuslied, El Poema de Mio Cid, the Nibelungenlied, or the Chanson de Roland). The famous "Hildebrandslied" (copied down ca. 820 C.E.) illustrates this existential focus within the literary framework most dramatically. Here two armies clash, and before the battle begins, the leaders engage in a conversation. They are separated in age by several decades, the old Hildebrand as a representative of the Huns, the young Hadubrand as a representative of a Germanic kingdom, but it becomes immediately clear that they are father and son. Tragically, which would be the common tone in much of these early medieval narratives, Hadubrand is firmly convinced that his father has died a long time ago as an honorable warrior. So, he severely distrusts his opponents and only wants to fight him in order to maintain his own social position and his masculinity, being the leader of his army. When Hildebrand realizes that he cannot even convince his son of their close blood relationship, he laments his destiny, and then the fight begins. Due to the fragmentary nature of the poem, the outcome remains unstated, but there is no doubt about the tragic conclusion, whoever might kill whom (Schlosser, ed., 68-71; for an English translation, online, see, for instance, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/hildebrand.html>).

There are no words about love in this heroic poem. Similarly, the vast body of early medieval religious literature has naturally no interest in the erotic, although we know that classical literature survived in the Christian monasteries where much of Roman literature was read (Ovid) to practice Latin in preparation for the study of the Bible. However, the theme of love emerged already once again within that world via poems and songs, such as the Cambridge Songs (eleventh century) and the Carmina Burana (early thirteenth century). And then, by the early twelfth century, the topic of love burst onto the stage, with the poems/songs by the troubadours (southern France), the trouvères (northern France), the Minnesänger (Germany), and the poets of the *stil dolce nuovo* (northern and southern Italy) [1].

In the course of time, poets and writers increasingly turned toward marital love, spiritual love (mysticism), and also crude sexuality, all typical of the late Middle Ages [2, 3]. The subsequent centuries witnessed a continuous growth of the public discourse on love and marriage [4], but the sixteenth century also experienced a strongly religious turn because one of the battle cries by the Protestant reformers against the Catholic Church aimed at their allegedly hypocritical stance regarding celibacy for the clergy.

The seventeenth century suffered badly from the Thirty Years' War, at least within the Holy Roman Empire of Germany, so love assumed a much more spiritual dimension, if it was addressed in the first place (see the poet Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, 1633-1694). And ever since, much of public culture has been determined by constantly new efforts to come to terms with love, whether we think of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1823) or Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). Surprisingly, however, despite the infinite number of relevant texts dealing with this phenomenon,

composed both in the West and the East, and certainly also in the South of our globe, conflicts and tensions between the genders have not subsided, faded away, or lost in relevance. Happiness and harmony are in desperately short supply. In fact, almost to the contrary, the postmodern world appears to be more troubled about misguided, failed, lost, destroyed, or simply absent love than ever before, at least if we consider the divorce rates, here disregarding a certain upswing in the number of stable marriages in the USA over the last ten years (<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/12/united-states-marriage-and-divorce-rates-declined-last-10-years.html>). Of course, neither marriage nor divorce can really speak to the issue of personal happiness, and even less to love as the fundamental emotional bond between two people (<https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>). Apart from statistical data, we can be certain that people's emotional relationships have certainly not improved since modernity, if not on the contrary. This means that the need to explore the meaning of love as a fundamental bonding force within society continues on a high level, so it should not surprise us that love would be a topic of high relevance also for anthropologists.

Insofar as marriage has always been a social and historical construct, we do not need to pursue here in specifics the nature and condition of this form of legalized cohabitation. But love as a force connecting two people with each other over a long period of time, if not until death, remains a universally challenging phenomenon especially because, despite its highly individualistic, subjective character, it strongly supports a person's happiness. If parents are happy with each other, then the entire family certainly profits from it as well, which thus contributes in an essential manner to the young generation's growth into healthy, constructive adulthood. This is not to say that single parents might not achieve the very same effect, but this would be beside the point in this study.

We are thus called upon to examine the topic of love much more seriously than commonly assumed and to put it more up front in a variety of other research fields, similar to literary history. I would almost go so far as to require all people who want to get married that they first take a course on love and learn the fundamentals of all human communication and interactions without which even the strongest form of love will not be able to sustain itself. Love would need to be understood from a psychological, economic, religious, medical, chemical, physiological, or legal perspective, if we want to be prepared for its arrival when it strikes the individual. Virtually all of the greatest poets, novelists or playwrights have engaged with this topic in one or the other way, whether we think of Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Jane Austin, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf or Bertolt Brecht. Conflicts, tensions, happiness, sorrow, frustration, irritation, and many other human emotions have always been clustered around the theme of love, which thus emerges as one of the crucial and permanent drives in all of human life.

One of the crucial teaching tools regarding the well-being of humans has always been the literary discourse in which both dreams and horrors of love have found vivid expressions, all depending on

the individual perspectives. By means of poetry or prose, especially from earlier times, we can gain access to a sort of laboratory of human existence, where all kinds of extreme conditions, behaviors, opinions, attitudes, and the like can be studied closely. The dream of love appears to be a universal factor, yet the reality has commonly looked very differently, though the discussion of love relationships in literary texts only rarely leads to a perfect happy end, unless we rely too much on trashy or maudlin novels representative of illusions or dreams far removed from reality.

We know for sure that love as an emotion consists of an infinitely wide range of registers, and yet we can be certain that whoever falls in love or experiences love both in short and long terms can find those experiences mirrored in literary texts, even if those easily prove to be extreme lenses through which the ordinary situation in human life finds its disproportionate reflection. Hence, once again, literature serves exceedingly well as a laboratory, where countless experiments with and about human life have been carried out. Studying fictional texts thus makes it possible to experiment with the extremes of otherwise rather ordinary conditions and thus to learn more properly to understand those situations and to handle them better in practical circumstances.

It would be virtually impossible to attempt to specify concretely what love might be, although some medieval poets such as Andreas Capellanus (*Ars amatoria*, ca. 118) certainly made a serious effort in that regard (Andreas). Each person, each character, each subject responds to feelings and external conditions, so we might be in danger of losing the academic grip on this phenomenon, unless we turn our attention to a solid body of relevant data, such as poetic expressions formulated at a specific time, within a specific cultural framework, addressing a unique audience. In other words, we must make sure that our research is solidly founded and can be verified and falsified, which the literary-historical lens makes possible. Fortunately, we have available a vast treasure trove of relevant poetry from throughout times and only need to carry out a focused study based on a selection of significant poetic statements in order to gain valid insights into a historically-determined discourse on love (see, e.g., the seminal study by Lewis; Bumke, vol. 2, 503-82).

By choosing some of the poems by the Middle High German poet Walther von der Vogelweide (fl. ca. 1190-ca. 1220), whose enormous popularity far into the early modern age is testified by a nearly endless stream of manuscript copies and continued references back to him as one of the great masters of courtly love poetry (*Minnesang*) (Richter), we will be in a solid position to identify his statements and opinions as highly influential on his society and his posterity. I do not intend to argue naively or simply that medieval love poetry would be the ideal model for modern discussions and probing of love at large; nevertheless, I propose to read Walther's poetry as exemplary of the critical perspectives examined, probed, weighed, and considered by his contemporaries, and this at a time when all those aspects, love, sexuality, and marriage, suddenly mattered so centrally, at least for the aristocratic audiences [5].

Previous research, mostly philological and literary-historical, has already engaged with Walther to a large extent; we have available critical editions of his poems, English translations (and other translations), a concordance of his works, numerous monographs, collected studies, articles, conference papers, and digital copies of his manuscripts, so we can limit ourselves here to just a few points pertaining to the timeless relevance of his works for modern anthropological research focused on the question of what love means, how it functions, and what relevance it might have for people (Walther von der Vogelweide; for an English translation of a selection of his songs, see online at <https://archive.org/details/selectedpoemswa00philgoog>; for a list of manuscripts containing his works, see <https://handschriftencensus.de/werke/414>).

Significantly, Walther was the first courtly poet to create not only love songs, but also a series of political stanzas in which he reflected critically on the conditions of his time, often targeting with biting commentaries the situation within the Christian Church. But he is probably most famous for his poems on love, especially because he probed its dialectic character so deeply and offered most insightful, almost psychologizing perspectives. The truly best one was certainly his woman's song, "Under the linden tree" (no. 16; or L. 39,11), in which an anonymous female voice reflects on her experiences with her lover who awaited her under a linden tree situated somewhere at the edge of a forest, hence away from human society, and yet not completely in the wild forest, or dangerous nature.

As much as she addresses a courtly audience, as much she insists on the privacy of the matter, her love affair. The lover had prepared a bed out of flowers and grass for the two of them, and she went out there to the meadow to meet him, which indicates that both voluntarily found each other at that secret meeting place, that he was a caring individual who wanted her to feel happy with him, and that both wanted to be completely alone. Nevertheless, the female voice is aware that other people later passed the site of their love-making and recognized from the imprint of their bodies on the love bed what had happened there. Instead of feeling anger, jealousy, or envy, those other people expressed their approval, their delight, and their own happiness about what had taken place there (stanza II), an almost utopian setting, and this already in the Middle Ages! Witnessing the erotic site, they quietly smile and demonstrate their support of this love event which was obviously beyond all traditional norms; certainly outside of the marital bonds (maybe pre-marital).

For the singer, privacy, intimacy, and personal joy emerge as the highest goals, and yet, she allows the audience to participate, like voyeurs, which underscores the extent to which all erotic love poetry contributes to a certain extent to voyeurism (Spearing). Even though she voices great concerns that her secret with her lover might be divulged, the poem itself specifically serves that purpose to transgress the privacy of that erotic adventure. Each stanza concludes with an onomatopoeic refrain, "tandaradei," which

reflects the sound made by a nightingale which had observed their love-making. As a nightingale, however, it represents poetry itself, the experience of love, and thus evokes a long classical tradition (Pfeffer). Walther thus formulates the fundamental insight that poetry itself represents love, and love leads to poetry, especially because the bird certainly would sing about what it had observed below it, but obviously only in enigmatic terms which do not reveal the full truth. Love poetry is suggestive, otherwise it disintegrates into pornography in verse.

Finally, in the second stanza the female voice appeals to the Virgin Mary for her blessing of this love relationship which she hopes would last forever, which thus adds a religious component to the entire erotic discourse. Altogether, although the singer repeatedly expresses her shame if anyone were to find out what she did under the linden tree, the entire poem serves the very opposite purpose to give vent to the strong feelings of love and to allow the audience to imagine the happy scene where two young people in love with each other had met and joined in delightful erotic embraces and sexual pleasures (Sievert).

Despite the projection of intimacy, Walther really operates as a public entertainer who also intends to instruct his audience both about the nature of love and, maybe even more importantly, about the concept behind courtly love poetry, as he illustrates in "Ich hânirsôwolgesprochen" (no. 17, or L. 40, 19). Here he sheds the role of the female speaker and reflects directly upon the social relevance of poetically treating love as a fundamental medium to train the members of the court in aristocratic civility, or urbanitas. In this poem, Walther underscores specifically that his wooing of a lady strongly contributed to her gaining public esteem, whereas the opposite situation, with her ridiculing and mocking him, would undermine all of courtly culture. Wooing for a lady's love would primarily contribute to the development of a loyal heart, hence honor and fame, i.e., the highest value within aristocratic society (Jaeger). The poet appeals to Lady Love (Minne) asking her to send her arrows into his lady's heart so that she feel the same wounds and the same pain as he does.

On the face of it, Walther might express his own lamentations that he does not receive back the same feelings of love, but in essence, as the very last line of his poem reflects, he sounds the alarm over the danger that the discourse of love might be disrupted at court. If he as the poet would no longer enjoy the usual esteem, then he would stop singing his lady's praise, which then would also undermine all courtly joys. Although indicated only in a bit cryptic language, the poet clearly underscores his central role within the courtly context because without the singing of love poems about ladies and without the male singer's wooing, all public values and happiness would be undermined and could get lost.

Similarly, in his song "Ich bin als unschedelîchefrô" (no. 19, or L. 41, 13), he reveals the true intention behind the theme of courtly love, which proves to be public esteem, honor, respect, and civility. There would be too many people who resorted to false praise and

lying and who would thus endanger the very nature of the discourse which binds and holds all members of aristocratic society together. He regards his own purpose as a composer and singer of love songs as enhancing worthy people's "werdekeit" (II, 1; worthiness), that is, social prestige based on ethical standards. Similarly, Walther regards himself as the crucial voice for women to establish their virtues, which is possible through granting their love to virtuous men. Without going too much into detail, the poet alludes to the famous notion of "hôhermuot" (IV, 2; high spirit), which comprises a wide range of ethical ideals, such as honesty, steadfastness, loyalty, trustworthiness, and goodness [6].

One of the crucial inner values in human life proves to be, as Walther emphasizes, the ability to observe moderation ("mâze") and to approach things with a calm mind, and thus also in love, as his poem "Ich hœreiusôviltugendejehen" (no. 20, or L. 43, 9) indicates. In this 'love song' he appeals to his lady to grant him not only her heart, but also to teach him how to acquire this inner value. In a poetic exchange, a man and a woman explore together the ideal of "stætecheit" (III, 1; constancy), which is closely connected with "triuwe" (IV, 4; trustworthiness). As much as the love relationship stands in the foreground, in essence, as the poet alludes to throughout, virtues and ethical ideals matter centrally. The poetic discussion of love thus proves to be a medium for the individual's development of a character according to the highest levels of courtly society. As much as the erotic appears as the basic glue bonding the singer and his beloved lady together, as much the poem actually explores social aspects which make life within courtly society worth living, if not possible in the first place. The technical term for this experience can be found in the poem "Sô die bluomenûz deme grasedringent" (no. 23, II, 4, or L. 46, 12): "hovelfîche[] hôchgemuot" (courtly high spirit). In other words, Walther here suggests that we should understand all discussions about love as a medium to develop one's character and to aspire for ideals according to the highest norms of society. The motivating force taking the individual toward that goal would be joy, both about the imminent arrival of Spring in the month of May, and about the beautiful lady whose attractiveness creates the inner spirit of happiness in the singer (stanza III) [7-21].

Once love would have filled the man's heart, then the notion of moderation would make itself felt, both in public and in private. For the poet, the feeling of love constitutes the engine which makes the drive toward moderation and other ethical values possible. Wooing itself, however, requires a careful balancing act because the lover should not aim too high or too low (stanza IV), meaning that he ought to find the middle ground between the sexual desire and the extremely esoteric dimension. Of course, in many other courtly love poems, such as in those by the first troubadour, William IX (early twelfth century), the opposite appears to be the case (Fajardo-Acosta), but this huge genre simply set the stage for the extensive public discourse on what love means, and how lovers, i.e., members of the courts, ought to aspire for it.

We cannot tell precisely how Walther might have imagined or evaluated this tension, but we can be certain that he wanted to define the striving for love as a strategy to lead a life in accordance with one's own means, needs, and desires fitting the courtly standards. "Nidereminne" (V, 1; low love) implies the excessive focus on the physical fulfillment, whereas "hoheminne" (V, 4; high love) makes the individual aim for great honor due to the elevated status of the admired lady. The latter might seem admirable, but the poet still warns about losing moderation out of sight, and urges the audience to strive for a love truly felt in the heart: "hertzeliebe" (V, 8).

In matters of love it would be irrelevant whether the lady would have much wealth or be of extraordinary physical attractiveness (no. 26, or L. 40, 25). Those women who attract many wooers because of their beauty would also easily invite hatred (stanza III). For Walther, bodily appeal should be secondary to the true feeling of love, whereas heart-felt love would transform the other person into full beauty. Explicitly, he warns his audience that it would be better to receive as a symbol of love a ring of glass, given out of a true feeling of love, than a ring of gold from a queen who would not even know the meaning of love (stanza IV). The last stanza then sums up Walther's straightforward admonishments to all lovers. Only if loyalty/honesty and constancy would be present, could one trust that true love exists between the two. Under that circumstance, the lover would not have to worry about the rise of heart pains. Love, in other words, is defined here primarily in ethical terms sustaining strong bonds without fail.

Intriguingly, Walther does not talk about passion, sexual fulfillment, or public glory as a result of a love relationship. Instead, for him, a worthy lady proves her real value through her demonstration of ethical ideals. Love thus emerges as a catalyst to transform the individual, so to speak, from narcissism to altruism. True love consists of the merging of two hearts (no. 27, IV, or L. 51, 5), to the complete exclusion of anyone else. For Walther, hence, love constitutes a bonding experience, merging two individuals, who then can rely on and trust each other.

Walther explored the phenomenon of love (*minne*) in many other poems, examining constantly changing perspectives, conditions, feelings, and exchanges with his beloved lady. In "Ich freudehelfelöser man" (no. 31, or L. 54, 37), for instance, he admits of being a complete servant of love, having lost his self-control, his mind, and self. Pain is filling his heart because of his longing for his lady. *Minne* proves to be all powerful and cannot be resisted; neither young nor old would be able to close their heart once she arrives (stanza VI). But love service would prove to be the ultimate reward, the foundation of all happiness: "lâmichdir leben mînezît" (VI, 9; let me give my time to your life).

As we finally hear – there is not any real endpoint in Walther's discourse of love – the experience of love makes him sing, and his poetry makes it possible for him to find love (*Nübel*). In short, then, courtly love as analyzed by Walther emerges as a critical instrument to help the individual to mature, to pursue ethical

ideals and values, and to establish relevance in one's life. No court without courtly love poetry, and no love poetry without a court, as he formulates in "Lange swîgen des hât ich gedâht" (no. 49, or L. 72, 31). The sensation of love induces the poet to create his songs, and those songs ultimately serve the court to practice their own ideals through a discursive engagement with the poems.

It would be absurd to talk about a long-term civilization process, as Norbert Elias had famously tried to do, especially without an in-depth knowledge of the relevant literary-historical sources. In fact, the future social developments might have left behind some of the highest ideals as formulated by this famous courtly love poet. Love was, as Walther argued, a medium for ethical ideals which are very difficult to achieve, and this until today. But the erotic desire proves to be, as we can read in these Middle High German verses, the critical engine to transform the young individual from a selfish individual into a socially responsible member of courtly society. Politeness, as we call it, originated in courtliness, and all social interactions depend on a certain degree of mutual respect. The discourse of love served the central purpose to practice courtliness, and since love appears, as we might say, naturally as part of a human's growing up into adulthood, the poet's central task was to channel those feelings (emotional, sexual, spiritual) toward the shaping of the individual determined by ethical and moral values.

To conclude, as much as we need to translate Walther's language into modern terms to understand his concrete messages, as much do his poems carry timeless value. The modern world might be far removed from the high Middle Ages, but the drive toward gaining love, hence ethical ideals, and thus toward the establishment of a harmonious, respectful society continues until today. So, Walther's poems promise to shed important light on universal concepts and the foundation upon which humanity is predicated.

Undoubtedly, this poet was a leader of the larger discourse on love, on the public examination of the relationship between the genders, and he was succeeded by countless others, both in medieval and early modern Germany and in many other parts of Europe. We might not always want to agree with his opinions, but we can be certain that his public exploration of love as a central topic relevant for all members of courtly society was exceedingly well received. By studying Walther's love poems, we gain access to a central issue of courtly society, and maybe also of ours.

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