



Self-Control, Rationality, Ethics, and Mutual Respect: A Dominican Poet Addresses His Audience and Calls Them to Reason. Ulrich Bonerius's *The Gemstone* (1350)

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Fable literature from Greek antiquity (Aesop) to today, from East and West, has proven to be of universal relevance and timeless meaning, even if modern generations seem to ignore increasingly that genre as something old-fashioned. Nevertheless, the timeless value of fables finds particularly powerful expression in the collection of fables, *Der Edelstein*, by the Dominican Swiss-German poet Ulrich Bonerius (ca. 1350). Whereas many historians have commonly tried to identify the Middle Ages as a world or culture all on its own, determined by an alien mentality, maybe even inaccessible for us in hermeneutic terms (Jauss), these fables allow us to comprehend fourteenth-century people and their concerns and ideas much more intimately than previously assumed because they commonly address universal issues people have always faced in their interaction with society. The article offers first a critical assessment of mostly erroneous assumptions about the Middle Ages and then illustrates the universal concerns shared by that past culture and us today by way of a close examination of a selection of fables by Bonerius. We discover here remarkable examples of ethical, moral, but especially rational concepts about good and respectable life. Little wonder that the *Edelstein* exerted such a long-term appeal far into the early sixteenth century, and that I was then rediscovered and greatly appreciated by late eighteenth-century scholars and writers. Bonerius offers many fables in which he formulates many observations and comments that reveal a rational universality in their content.

Keywords: Fables, Ulrich Bonerius, wisdom, rationality, relevance of the Middle Ages for us

Introduction

This paper brings into focus one of the most popular late medieval fable authors, Ulrich Bonerius, whose teachings about and messages concerning human shortcomings and failures, values and ideals prove to be of timeless relevance. While it is a common trend to regard the Middle Ages as an alien world far apart from us today in the twenty-first century, verse narratives such as Bonerius's *Der Edelstein* (ca. 1350) prove to be of timeless importance and relevance. Indeed, a critical examination of his fables will easily illustrate that fundamental issues in medieval times (vices and virtues) continue to be with us also in the present age, at least globally speaking.

Of course, the messages by this Swiss-German Dominican author are certainly embedded in their own medieval context and require, if we want to understand them critically as literary mirrors of his own time in cultural-historical terms, a bit of translation and interpretation. If we might ever have faced the question – who would not have been challenged in that by his/her students and administrators? – why we need to study medieval literature, we would be well advised to point to Bonerius's fables in their timeless value for people throughout the world. The present purpose is not to glorify this poet for his literary accomplishments, though *The Gemstone* certainly proves to be an extraordinary collection of fables highly esteemed at its time. Instead, the question is aimed at the fundamental issue of how we are to evaluate his texts as reflections of an emerging discourse on rationality and then especially wisdom, certainly being critical stepping stones from the late Middle Ages to our own modern age.

The Issue with the Past – Really?

At the risk of preaching to the converted, let me begin with some general anthropological and epistemological comments concerning the often erroneous approach to the past. Contrary to popular assumptions, the Middle Ages were not a world or a culture determined purely by fantasy, scholastic thinking, religious fear-mongering, stereotyping, prejudice, hatred, strong Christian faith radically repressing all minority groups, and the like. Such issues in human behavior can be found among peoples throughout history and all over the world. Many of the common notions concerning the flat-earth, the chastity belt, or the *lex prima noctis* have already been effectively dismissed as fake, or plainly wrong, having been the result of post-medieval perceptions driven by the desire to denigrate the past world and to paint the own as truly modern,

sophisticated, and sustained by rationality (Classen, *The Medieval Chastity Belt*, 2007); Harris and Grigsby, ed., 2010; Schleicher, 2014). There has been a tendency, however, by many people outside of academia to draw from medieval iconography, topoi, motifs, or themes to embellish their own rhetorical strategies, which thus intensifies, unfortunately, the misconception about the medieval era even further - a major hermeneutic fallacy (Marshall and Cusack, ed., 2017; Young, ed., 2015; Pagès and Kinane, 2015).

Of course, if we were to select a particularly negative lens and looked only at the negative sides, then medieval society – but how would we even identify this global notion considering the enormous diversity of the political, linguistic, economic, and also religious landscape – was certainly deeply intolerant and violently mistreated so-called pagans, heretics, minorities, women, and homosexuals (Smelyansky, ed., 2020); for the very opposite approach, (see Classen, ed., 2018; paperback, 2021). This has often led to the confused opinion that we are dealing with the so-called ‘dark ages,’ or a world ruled by barbarity, by an infantile mentality, and by a lack of rationality, in poignant contrast to our modern world as it had emerged since the age of Enlightenment (Kümper, 2010; Althoff, 2021, pp. 47-63). Possibly, if we consider the countless examples in medieval literature and art confirming the ‘actual’ existence of dragons, dwarfs, mythical creatures, giants, hybrid monsters, etc., all the result of a highly vivid imagination (Classen, ed., 2020), then this impression might be correct. But would we then be able to claim the opposite for our own world in which, let’s face it honestly, countless video games, movies, books, graphic novels, operas, card games, etc. are all predicated on fantasy, not to speak of ever-mushrooming conspiracy theories, fake news, and deliberately launched ideological propaganda? Much scholarship has already addressed these epistemological contradictions, but it is always valuable to remind ourselves of the subjectivity in the global evaluation of an entire age in its intellectual and cultural developments, which might be, all by itself, an impossibility in the first place (Arnold, 2021; orig. 2008).

However, we can certainly observe profound and constant changes within western medieval society, which allow us to distinguish in rough terms between the early, the high, and the late Middle Ages, which were then followed by the Renaissance, an equally problematic though hermeneutically valuable term. It would be unnecessary at this point to engage with the very old and intensive debate concerning those concepts of periodization. More interesting proves to be the realization that in the long twelfth and thirteenth centuries major innovations took place, initiated by an extensive translation effort both in Salerno near Naples and in Toledo, Spain, where some of the long-lost

ancient texts by Aristotle and Galen, among others, were finally translated from Arabic to Hebrew, and then into Latin, which ultimately made them available to some extent also in various vernaculars (Beer, ed., 2019; Milliaressi and Berner, ed., 2021).

Medieval European medicine experienced a profound innovation, having learned crucial lessons from their Arab neighbors and hence from the classical Greek sources (Schmitt, 2013). The twelfth and thirteenth centuries also witnessed, as we know only too well, the rise of the Gothic style, as triumphantly demonstrated by the many majestic cathedrals. Moreover, courtly culture developed strongly, primarily accompanied by courtly love poetry, romances, and verse narratives, new and elegant music, stained glass windows, a whole canopy of other art works, and much of that driven by the new focus on the courtly lady whom the poets wooed and glorified. Recent scholars have also underscored the new development of emotions, the sense of the individual, the emergence of closer family ties, the introduction of Roman Law, novel forms of spirituality, especially mysticism, mechanical arts, and new approaches to death (Jaeger, 1985; Constable, 1996; Fichtenau, 1998; orig. 1992; Dinzelbacher, 2010; Dinzelbacher, 2019). The thirteen and fourteenth centuries then witnessed tremendous technological and economic innovations and transformation, as perhaps best illustrated by the Cistercians and their intensive development of new methods in agriculture and manufacture (Becker and Burckhardt, ed., 2021). As recent research has also illustrated, the development of modern science, including astronomy, emerged already in the middle of the thirteenth century at the royal court of King Alfonso X of Spain and in Italy, as powerfully documented by Dante Alighieri with his far-reaching reception of Platonic ideas of the cosmos especially in his *Convivio* (ca. 1300), very parallel to the innovative approaches later pursued by the German astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) (Meurers, 1963; Fuchs 1975; Rimpau 2021). None of those developments would have been possible without a strong rationality in place as the driving force at many strata of society already since the late twelfth century, as propagated by the French philosopher Peter Abelard (d. 1142).

The Medieval Paradigm Shift

Altogether, to review our current state of the arts in intellectual history, we can be certain that cultural and social life changed considerably during that transformative period of the high to the late Middle Ages. Historians of medieval philosophy have discussed those aspects already for a long time, including the phenomenon of emerging

criticism of the king as a tyrant (John of Salisbury) and the question regarding the essence of God as recorded in the biblical text and the alleged correctness of the Scriptures (Peter Abelard, d. 1142). Globally speaking, then, inspired by new Aristotelian teachings, the world of late medieval European intellectual life witnessed profound transformations (Bosley and Tweedale, ed., 2006; Marenbon, 2007). The abstract notions as discussed at the various universities of Paris, Oxford, Bologna, or Salamanca soon found deep reflections if not practical applications also in more mundane texts, commonly identified as didactic narratives, such as the anonymous pseudo-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets*, the works by Thomasin von Zirclaere, Hugo von Trimberg (Classen, "Thomasin von Zerclaere's *Der Wælsche Gast*," 2008), the *Gesta romanorum*, Thomas of Cantimpré, or the anonymous *Ovide moralisée* (Feros Ruys, ed., 2008).

In fact, despite numerous major differences between the high/late Middle Ages and us today, we can easily recognize, when studying specific narrative documents, striking parallels in terms of worldview, rationality, interhuman interaction, communication, desires, emotions, and the critical study of the human body. If we are bent on identifying the very opposite, e.g., irrationality, fanaticism, ignorance, mystifying the human body, we can certainly discover horrible scenarios as well. Peter Dinzelbacher, for instance, has focused on medieval alterity and has offered a more differentiating perspective, alerting us to the alien in medieval mentalities, leaving behind a rather misleading notion of an alien mentality of the Middle Ages (Dinzelbacher, 2020, pp. 21-22). Actually, our current world witnesses the same dialectics, with science moving forward at a dizzying pace, while increasingly growing groups of people voicing strong opposition and resorting to irrational superstitions and concepts of faith. Nevertheless, we have always to be sensitive to the selection criteria in our study of the past and need to be alert as to our modern interests and own experiences which filter our perspective in negative and positive terms.

Human failures in the social context, personal weaknesses, problems, and conflicts might have changed in appearance and intensity, but in essence they have, unfortunately, remained the same until today, which thus allows us to carry out fundamental investigations regarding communication problems in the past as model cases for us today (Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung*, 2002). For instance, and this quite ironically, despite many negative perspectives regarding the Catholic Church in the pre-Reformation era, the teachings of the Seven Deadly Sins have proven to be precise and correct, also in our modern times insofar as that list has indeed identified some of the worst problems in all of human existence (Langum, 2016; Newhauser, ed., 2007; Classen, "The Amazon

Rainforest," 2020). For instance, greed, envy, anger, sloth, etc. are very common problems in all of human relationships, past and present, and if we want to comprehend their properties and functions as vices, it proves to be productive to reflect on medieval narratives where those issues are negotiated, illustrated, criticized, and discussed about (Prinz, 2021).

Medieval Fable Literature

The purpose of this paper is not, however, to examine once again the foundation of all of Medieval Studies in their relevance for us today, as important as this issue always proves to be (Jones, Lostick, and Oschema, ed., 2020). Instead, I want to address the genre of the high and late medieval fable as it was best represented by the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France, the thirteenth-century poet Der Stricker, and the Swiss-German Ulrich Bonerius (middle of the fourteenth century), a genre of universal significance, popular in East and West throughout times, having appealed to young and old in countless different cultures across the world (Rubin, 1993; Blackham, 1965; Dicke and Grubmüller, 1987). The latter, above all, will allow us to gain deeper insights into the everyday conversations as we can imagine them having taken place in late medieval urban center.

For pragmatic reasons, though, I will leave the fables by Marie aside (Marie de France, *Fables*, 1994) because the poet belonged to the royal Anglo-Norman family, as far as we can tell, and composed her texts primarily as an intellectual exercise and out of a desire to express herself in literary terms (Bloch, 2003, pp. 111-74). We notice considerable criticism against a slew of social ills in her work as well, but her collection addressed primarily a courtly audience and was an intellectual endeavor, addressing often rather extreme political concerns such as treason (no. 23), trust (no. 25), wickedness (no. 29), outward deception (no. 41), ignorance (no. 43), etc. Bonerius, on the other hand, created his fables in a rather simplistic style in order to appeal to the broader urban population and to reform them in many different ways. In his own words, the fable "enriches the minds of many people / and fills them with virtues and happiness. / A good fable comes along clothed in honor; / a good fable disciplines an uncouth man, / a good fable can tame women, / a good fable decorates young and old" (pp. 32-37). There are, of course, a good number of fables shared between her and Bonerius, among other medieval didactic authors, but there is, nevertheless, a clearly different impetus, purpose, and intention on his part, probably simply aiming at a lower register of his mostly urban audience.

After all, Bonerius, called Boner in the German context, was a fourteenth-century Dominican priest living and working in Bern, Switzerland, and hence was an experienced confessor who obviously knew enough about people's ordinary lives and their common shortcomings to employ in a very pragmatic sense the genre of the fable for his didactic purposes and literary reflections on everyday problems and conflicts. While it is obvious that he drew, just as his predecessor Marie, from the Aesopian tradition (via Avianus and Romulus; also known as Anonymous Neveleti; cf. Wright, 2001, pp. 107-44), he also included a number of narratives based on his own creativity and which are not fables in the narrow sense of the word. Moreover, we can focus primarily on Bonerius's final comments in his epimythia for the identification of this poet's opinions, which reveal maybe the biggest differences to the Anglo-Norman poet's narratives.

These fables prove to be extremely valuable for literary historians not only because they relate general teachings about morality, virtues, and vices, but because they also shed excellent light on a broad spectrum of ordinary situations which people in a late medieval urban setting would have experienced on a regular level. While Arnold Esch has perused especially penitentiary documents in the Vatican archives to discover reflections of "Lebenswelten" (Esch, 2014), the fables mirror, on a microscopic level, ordinary conditions people suffered from. Fables normally rely on animals as representatives of human attitudes, ideas, values, and concepts, and thus they convey a clear message as to norms, ideals, and critical conditions. Bonerius, as a Dominican priest, was undoubtedly very familiar with the common issues in human life, either through his personal observations or through listening to countless confessions given to him in the privacy of the church (Boner, ed. and trans. Stange, 2016; Boner, *The Fables of Ulrich Bonerius*, trans. Classen, 2020). In order to understand fully the genre of the fable, especially in the Middle Ages, and the enormous influence which Bonerius's narratives exerted on the fable tradition since the eighteenth century (such as on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing), could fill pages, and we could also discuss the continuation of fable writing since the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Bonerius's fame faded considerably. This, however, has to be the task of future research (for previous studies, see Grubmüller, 1977; Dithmar, 1997).

Ulrich Bonerius – A Fable Author in the Late Middle Ages

As to the background and literary-historical framework, I refer the reader to the comments by the German editor and translator, Manfred Stange, and to the introduction to the recent English translation. Here, I will primarily focus on the texts themselves and

examine some of them as to their relevance as literary mirrors of everyday situations in people's lives which a rather rationally thinking poet evaluates critically and through which he endeavors to provide global teaching to his audiences. As is to be expected with the genre of fables, and what we will observe particularly poignantly in the case of Bonerius's text, the emphasis rests on virtues, ethical thinking, morality, but also political values, that is, a broad discourse regarding the fundamental values serving as the glue holding human society together, both then as well as today (Bennett, 1993; Bejczy, 2011).

As Bonerius emphasizes in his prologue, "This little book is properly entitled /as *The Gemstone* because it contains / fables with a variety of wise statements about life, / and it produces also good spirits, / such as the thorn does to the rose" (64-68). Examining the fables proper, we can easily recognize a whole slew of fundamental issues which often are closely associated with the Seven Deadly Sins, but then also with many other basic human foibles and weaknesses: sloth (no. 2), slander (no. 3), unjust violence (no. 5), lack of loyalty and deception (no. 6), false witnesses (no. 7), evil company (no. 8), excessive greed (no. 9), thanklessness (no. 11), mockery (no. 14), and so forth.

There are exactly one hundred narratives, most of which fall into the category of the fable, but some of them are regular verse narratives without the inclusion of any speaking or acting animals (Classen, "Ulrich Bonerius - A Swiss-German Boccaccio?," 2021). Irrespective of that small difference in the genre, all texts composed by Bonerius address human issues, both on a political and on a private level. If we compared them with the fables as developed by Marie de France, who drew from virtually the same classical tradition, we would discover many significant parallels in motifs, themes, and subject matters (Classen. "Two Great Fable Authors from the Middle Ages," forthcoming). The genre lends itself exceedingly well for the treatment of the failures, problems, conflicts, and strife in human life.

Considering Bonerius's considerable popularity with his tales, we can focus on his work exclusively in order to pursue our goal to detect the role of rationality and reason as pursued already by medieval poets. I do not intend to level differences between the pre-modern world and us today, but there are undoubtedly throughout times fundamental concepts that have hardly ever changed in dramatic terms (Kahlos, Koskinen, and Palmén, ed., 2019). Virtue, law, ethics, duty, obligations, responsibilities, and honor have never lost their validity, whether people observe or accept them or not, especially since they are embedded in reason and rationality, and hence have always proven to be critically

important categories of all of human life. In fact, we might be well justified to trace the origin of modernity already in the high Middle Ages when the individual emerged, hence new rational thinking and life concepts developed (Koch and Nederman, ed., 2018; cf. also Fajardo-Acosta, 2010, 218-21). Andreas Hellerstedt points out, “habitus [as conceived of by Pierre Bourdieu and specified as virtue] is the nexus through which structures are perpetuated or change. It explains human action without reducing it to a simplistic maximization of interest, economic advantage” (Hellerstedt, 2018, 17). We can observe this strong emphasis on ethics in conjunction with reason also in virtually all of Bonerius’s fables and similar narratives where rather simplistic narrative plots easily open up to profound messages about fundamental issues of life. The large number of manuscript copies (thirty-six) and the existence of two incunabula containing Bonerius’s collection confirm that he had obviously managed to hit the nerve of his readers/listeners who must have regarded these fables as wake-up calls to change their lives and to pursue higher ideals in their ordinary existence.

Although the poet was a Dominican priest, he mostly refrained from religious teachings and addressed, instead, very ordinary, common situations and conditions in all kinds of social settings outside of the Church. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to assume that his fables are completely void of spiritual values. As we will observe, the messages formulated by Bonerius are of a universal kind, easily understandable, applicable to all people throughout time, and hardly ever limited by something like typically medieval notions or values with which we today, for instance, might no longer be able to identify.

Metaphors Drawn from Nature for Ethical Instructions

By way of drawing from images, sceneries, animals, plants and trees, reptiles, and birds, the narrator succeeds in addressing issues that are, unfortunately, virtually innate in human existence, whether we call them vices, virtues, habits, attitudes, or behavior patterns. In “Of a Tree on a Mountain” (no. 4), for instance, we are informed of a fundamental pattern for all of human life which we have to embrace if we want to achieve our goals and gain the desired rewards. This tree, of which this narrative relates, carries the best possible fruit, yet no one can reach them unless they are willing “first to accept[] the bitterness / of the roots, which are truly bitter, / hard and sour, without any color” (pp. 12-14). Bonerius probably was inspired by the classical proverb, “Per aspera ad astra,” probably first coined by Seneca (d. 65 C.E.) in his *Hercules furens* (Tosi, 1991, S. 749-50), which urges the individual

to accept the challenges in life, as rough as they might be, not as hurdles, but as opportunities to reach for the highest possible goal. The poet does not refer to any specific religious teachings; instead, he emphasizes the high value of virtue (p. 24).

Bonerius might have had the lessons in mind which Boethius (d. ca. 524) had formulated in his *De consolatione philosophiae* when he warns those who think “that they can enjoy, without experiencing suffering, / worldly pleasures, praise, and esteem / throughout their lives” (pp. 32-34). But this poet is not so much concerned with highly esoteric and elusive concepts, as we find them formulated in the Roman philosopher’s famous tract. Instead, he identifies the sweet fruit generally as “knowledge and wisdom” (38), which cannot be achieved without having gone through suffering and sorrow (39). Revealing his essentially didactic interests, his motivations as a teacher particularly for the youth, Bonerius appeals to young people with this narrative, urging them to guard themselves against a wasteful youth during which they would not “strive for honor, knowledge, or virtues” (p. 44). Sloth and lack of motivation would prevent the individual to strive for the highest goal, to exercise him/herself with all force to struggle and to make his/her way through the roots of bitterness to the fruit of sweetness. Anyone who gives in to the seductive force of luxury, foolishness, and vanity (p. 49) would fail to pursue the desired path. When old age would have set in, regrets would be too late, and even shedding tears about the own irresponsibility and laziness in youth would not have any power to provide remedies.

The metaphor of the tree as a mirror of human life obviously intrigued Bonerius considerably since he resorted to it several times. In “Of a Fir Tree and a Thorn Bush” (no. 86), for instance, we hear of an exchange between both the tree and the bush, with the former displaying considerable arrogance over the humble neighbor below it. The tree prides itself with its outstanding beauty, as people have given much praise to it, whereas the bush is generally disregarded or even detested because of its thorns.

Hardly has their conversation ended, however, when a man arrives with an ax and cuts down the tree, which invites the bush to question all of the tree’s previous claims, emphasizing: “Your beauty has hurt you, / Your fame has put you into a checkmate” (pp. 29-30). This then allows the narrator to address the universal problem of self-conceit and pride, which eventually led the fir tree to its demise - a direct analogy to the same issues in human life. Bonerius addresses this poignantly, and voices thereby a timeless message: “No one should overly praise / one’s own body: it is filled with weaknesses / and makes

the person remain in misery" (pp. 35-37), certainly a direct allusion to the most authoritative and popular text ever produced in the high Middle Ages, the *De miseria condicione humane* by Lotario dei Segni, the later Pope Innocent III, from ca. 1200 (Lotario dei Segni, 1978; for the 1855 edition by Eduard Weber, see <https://archive.org/details/decontemptumund00achtgoog>).

Only ca. fifty years after Bonerius, Johannes von Tepl was to rely on it heavily for the development of the arguments presented by the allegorical figure of Death in his *The Plowman from Bohemia* (ca. 1400; cf. Classen, "Engagement with Death Through Literature," 2021). The verse: "While he is still living, he is already dead" (p. 38), could have been directly lifted from that famous treatise with its vehement condemnation of the physical part of all of human life. At the same time, we clearly notice resonances of Boethius's *De consolacione philosophiae* (ca. 524), which was perhaps even more famous and influential than Innocent's treatise. There, the philosopher had warned, through the allegorical figure of Philosophy, of trusting the viability and endurance of power and fame, as Bonerius also points out (p. 42), and of ignoring the contingency of all human existence: "the presence is inconstant" (46; Classen, "Boethius and No End in Sight," 2018; see also Marenbon, 2004; id., ed., *Boethius*, 2009).

In his epimythium, Bonerius urges his audience not to rely on physical strength or bodily beauty because "Whether you are strong, noble, or rich, / in face of death everyone is the same" (pp. 55-56). This was to become the major tenor in all of late medieval literature and art, particularly because the fallout of the Black Death, which did not simply come to an end in 1351 or so, but returned in repeated waves over the next two hundred years (Classen, ed. *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, 2016). But we can give Bonerius credit for his extraordinarily effective imagery with the cut-down fir tree and the thorn bush (holly?) because most people both then and today would face no difficulties associating this image with personal experiences, both in nature and in their private lives.

In his narrative "of an Oak Tree and a Reed" (no. 83), we encounter another attempt to reflect upon the essentials of human life by way of resorting to images drawn from nature. In this case, we hear about a mighty oak tree standing on the top of a mountain impressing everyone with its enormous strength. Yet, one day, a strong storm overcomes the oak, uproots it, and makes it tumble down the hill, ending up in a swamp where many reeds are growing. Once again, the poet projects a very ordinary situation in nature most of the people in his audience would have been able to grasp immediately.

The mighty one is suddenly facing his downfall; all of his strength did not help the oak tree to resist an even stronger force, which proves to be a mundane but intriguing message reflecting a certain political position which Bonerius certainly espoused. In a good number of his fables he expressed, actually quite similarly as Marie de France, explicit criticism of tyrannical rulers and thereby warned contemporary rulers about the instability of their position (nos. 15, 24, 25, 58; cf. Turchetti, 2013; Classen, "The People Rise Up," 2008; Albert and Becker, ed., 2020).

We would, however, over-interpret Bonerius if we claimed him as a political critic bent on changing the power structure prevalent at his time. His approach to the commonweal is determined by a much more individualistic perception, as this 'fable' also illustrates. The oak tree has been defeated, after a stronger force had robbed it of all of its strength. In its conversation with the reed, the oak expresses its confusion as to how this might have been possible, wondering out aloud about the reed's survival in face of that blistering storm, here called Aquilo, that is, Boreas (p. 14). The narrative gains its relevance precisely at this point because the reed provides the crucial teaching. It explains that it knew its own limits and understood that it would not have been able to resist that storm (pp. 30-31).

In other words, for the reed, there exists a hierarchy in strength, and the reed has to submit to all those forces greater than itself. Humbleness, critical self-assessment, submission under a power far mightier than itself, and its ability to bend down almost to the ground made it possible for the reed to survive the attack. Insofar as the oak tree had aggressively fought against the wind, disregarding its superiority, it had denied physical reality and was hence uprooted and thrown down the hill to its own death. The reed can precisely analyze the cause for the oak tree's downfall, which hence becomes applicable to life at large both in the world of war and in the world of urban existence: "Your strength and your pride were too great, / and, therefore, you have lost the fight. / If you had been able to bend down, / you would have remained standing as I do" (pp. 41-44).

Only if the individual recognizes the greater structure of all life, would s/he be able to come to terms with it in practical terms. No one is safe from external forces, and those who assume that they cannot be attacked by any enemy would be the first to face defeat, from outside or from inside. Bonerius then concludes, which proves to be a universal lesson certainly valid until today: "He who cannot give in sometimes, / does not seem to me to be a wise person" (pp. 49-50). In order to underscore the meaning of this message, the narrator resorts to two proverbs which bring the realization by the oak tree to a point,

such as: “the more strength you have, the worse the fall” (p. 54). Of course, Bonerius then abstains from explaining the lesson any further; he does not offer an interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the oak tree and the reed, but the narrative illustrates the essential point clearly enough. The mighty and rich in this world are not exempt from external dangers, and the more they puff themselves up with pride about their independence, extreme influence, and power, the more likely it would be for them to suffer a bad downfall, suddenly beaten by an unexpected force.

By the same token, the reed was capable of bending down; it understood that it would never have a chance against such a strong wind, and since the storm hit primarily the top of the mountain, the reed down in the swamp was basically safe and only had to accept and submit under the storm, letting it pass in order to be well and alive. The reed emphasizes to the oak tree: “I am small, weak, and supple, / and understand of myself / that I cannot resist / the one who is stronger than I am . . .” (pp. 28-31). The oak tree was blinded by its own strength and believed that it would be able to last forever, which became the critical cause of its own failure. In essence, from an ethical point of view, which Bonerius consistently tried to convey to his audience, the oak tree, and hence the mighty people here in this world, are lacking in humility and a critical understanding of their self, which tempts them to throw themselves into conflicts and wars, some of which threaten to destroy them, after all. The reed understood how to evaluate the chances of winning in face of a superior opponent, and since its only defense proves to be its ability to be extremely flexible, it succeeded in sustaining the onslaught by the storm.

For further confirmation of our observations, we can also turn to the fable “Of a fox and an eagle” (no. 16) where a tree matters once again, though not as centrally as in the previous cases. The subtitle of the fable clearly conveys the message of this tale: “On deception and smartness,” which indicates, once again, the overarching interest pursued by the poet for him it was of extreme importance to operate rationally and smartly in this world, instead of simply giving upon in the case of danger. What we can observe here is not the destruction of the arrogant tree, but the function of a tree for the powerful one, here the eagle with its young ones, as a kind of fortress, which it has to abandon at the end because of the fox’s intelligent handling of the problem.

The eagle had snatched all the young foxes as feed for its own young ones placed in a nest high up a tree. The female fox expresses greatest worry, reflecting basic maternal instincts and love for her children, which in itself serves here well as further evidence that

the modern notion of childhood being regarded as an irrelevant age for medieval people until the children had grown up would have to be dismissed as one further mythical notion (Classen, ed. *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 2005). The fox does everything in her power to rescue her little ones and demonstrates extraordinary skill and intelligence to achieve its goal. Since the eagle at first does not care about any pleadings, the fox finally assembles straw around the tree and sets fire to the trunk. The smoke eventually forces the eagle to abandon its prey, though it remains unclear how this is happening. But it is a fable, so we do not need to concern ourselves with such details. More importantly, as the narrator emphasizes, “Only the courageous one survives!” (p. 28), who then adds the significant lesson: “Intelligence is better than brute force” (p. 37), which I would like to quote in the original also because of its importance: “Wîsheit ist bezzer denne gewalt.” If people resort to violence without observing wisdom in the first place, they can count on running into “many struggles” (p. 40). But Bonerius does not argue as a pacifist, does not appeal to his audience to abstain from defending themselves with all their available strength if necessary. He only points out that “He who combines force with wisdom will succeed” (p. 41), which is then combined with the additional observation: “He who is happy to do something good will find a good solution” (p. 42).

We could thus place Bonerius into the category of those who defended just wars (in the tradition of St. Augustine et al.; cf. Russell, 1975), such as in the case of protecting oneself from external, hostile attacks, as we learned from the fox mother. She knew that there would not have been any way for her to climb the tree to rescue her little ones from the eagle’s nest, but she recognized quickly a smart strategy to overcome her opponent after all. This finds its expression in yet another apothegm of universal value: “Force without intelligence does not last long, / just like snow exposed to the heat of the sun” (pp. 43-45).

Intriguingly, all this carries also a political meaning for Bonerius and his urban or rural audience, depending on whom he might have targeted specifically. As he concludes, there have been often some cases in which a “low-class person hurts the high-ranking one” (p. 45), and if a peasant knows how to employ intelligence, he might be able to put even a king into checkmate (p. 46). Injustice, however, imposed on individuals by means of force would never achieve its goal (p. 47). By the same token, as Bonerius concludes at the end, “With the help of smartness, power will be overcome, / just as fire melts the ice” (pp. 48-49). None of that would allow us to recognize in this fable author a social revolutionary. He does not pursue a political agenda to undermine traditional feudal

society. We would not be able to call him a defender of democracy, certainly a very anachronistic concept within a medieval framework. However, the poet argued in favor of rational, intelligent operations in all aspects of human life; he warned those in power that the use of force would not create any right, and that no social rank would justify any type of force exerted against the people at large. In fact, we could identify this fable as a major forward-looking literary message calling for rationality and intelligence to be the leading factors in human life, whereas traditional authority or military power would not be able to hold on to their privileges.

We could not claim, of course, that Bonerius pursued radically innovative ideas. On the contrary, as we have already seen, he drew from an ancient literary tradition; and we can find strong parallels in the works by Marie de France and also the thirteenth-century Middle High German poet The Stricker (fl. ca. 1220-1240; Der Stricker, 1992; Classen, "The Stricker," 2021), apart from many other poets who composed fables in the Middle Ages (cf. his contemporary, Don Juan Manuel, with his *Conde Lucanor*, 1335; Burgoyne, 2018; for a convenient and extensive introduction, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tales_of_Count_Lucanor). Nevertheless, through his selection of motifs and narrative objects or animals, and through his personal comments with which he concludes all of his tales, Bonerius reveals his great interest in addressing common problems in all of human interactions, which continue to trouble us until today.

When we consider the well-known fable "Of a Dog and a Thief" (no. 27), which was also developed by Marie de France (no. 20), we can clearly recognize Bonerius strategies to utilize the traditional motif and to expand it for deeper ethical and philosophical reflections. A dog refuses to accept the thief's bribe, insisting that it would be much better for him to protect his master's property than to take the gift since he would thus commit a form of treason (Marie). Bonerius, by contrast, has the dog elaborate extensively the 'economic' aspects, that is, weighing and balancing the food promised to it for the rest of its life in return for guard service versus the little extra food given to it by the thief (pp. 23-26).

This then provides the poet with the opportunity to examine the complex conditions of gift-giving, which has also been discussed by many sociologists such as famously by Marcel Mauss (Mauss, 1966 [orig. 1925]); and Lévy-Strauss, 1969 [orig. 1949]), and which has been an issue of greatest significance throughout the entire Middle Ages and far beyond, and so also until today. Gift-giving mirrors the social power structures, family

bonds, friendship, love relationships, and spiritual connections (Althoff, 1997, 215-28; Godelier, 1999; Davies, 2010; Grünbart, ed., 2011. Kjaer, 2019). In Bonerius's epimythium, we are warned about the hidden agendas associated with gifts which are given to a person with a secret intention (pp. 37-38). He does not advise to reject all gifts since they would regularly be of great profit for the receiver. However, he alerts his audience to consider "who offered it and why he gave it to you" (p. 41), as the example of the dog and the thief illustrated. Undoubtedly, the poet expressed great suspicion about gifts which could easily pursue no other purpose but the bribe the other side. The dog realized that the little gift of food would never be tantamount to all the food and protection it would receive from its master for the rest of its life in return for its loyal service.

The theme of gift-giving is resumed also in the narrative "Of an Individual Who was an Expert of the Black Books" (no. 94), and there as well we are quickly informed about the dubious nature of gifts, though here in a different context. A master of necromancy – perhaps an indirect allusion to Bonerius as a learned cleric – tests one of his friends and inquires with him whether he would remember him and grant him gifts if he were suddenly crowned as a king and would possess many riches. The friend assures him that he could certainly rely on him; he only would have to ask to receive any gift he might want from him: "You would be lord and master / of everything as God would advise me" (pp. 18-19).

However, the opposite then proves to be the case because when the necromancer magically creates the illusion that the friend is made into the king of Cyprus, the latter does not remember any of his previous promises and denies the request for a gift, and in fact proves to be harsh and lacking in gracefulness (pp. 40-44). The master then makes the illusion disappear again, which leaves his friend behind in a state of despair and frustration (p. 58). We might feel pity for this poor man who was elevated to such a high status at a moment's notice, and then lost it all again. Moreover, we could not even blame him fully for rejecting the master's request because he truly did not recognize him in his state of delusion.

The necromancer's purpose, however, in all of his operation, did not really aim at testing his friend's loyalty because he awakens him with the explicit intention of restoring their friendship (p. 53). We need to understand that the master/necromancer is simply a representative of the poet himself who intends to teach his friend, i.e., the audience, a fundamental lesson about the true nature of this world. First, "The world knows no

constancy" (p. 71). Second, once we have experienced joy, we have to accept suffering (p. 72), and third, wealth quickly disappears (p. 73). Fourth, fame within society proves to be a dangerous threat to one's own virtues: "It makes men women and men to fools" (p. 76). Finally, those who enjoy power and fame tend to forget about their friends and thus lose the most valuable social connections. This then leads to a brief discussion of the true value of friendship (Classen, ed. *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, 2010). Trust and loyalty are, according to Bonerius, the foundation of friendship, but the workings of the world tend to lead the individual astray who is seduced by power and fame. Altogether, the epimythium thus concludes with the curt but highly poignant observation: "Believe me, that's exactly the way how the world performs; / it gives high praise and pays badly" (pp. 88-89). We clearly perceive the Dominican priest speaking here, but the narrative itself proves to be deeply philosophical as well, mirroring in many ways the ancient teachings by Boethius and others.

Finally, when we turn to "Of a King and a Barber" (no. 100), the last narrative in *The Gemstone*, hence the ultimate keystone, so to speak, in Bonerius's architectural design, we gain deep insight into his musings about the relationship between the individual and death, which triggers deep thoughts about the meaning of human existence, and this through a medieval lens which amazingly fractures into a picture we can fully appreciate today as well. The subtitle indicates explicitly what the poet had in mind: "On considering the end," but this is not a morbid narrative aimed at rejecting the value of human life and give full credit to death as the master of all existence, as Death claims in Johannes von Tepl' *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* (ca. 1400). (Kiening 1998; Classen, "Mental and Physical Health," 2014, pp. 1-154).

Surprisingly, the poet first projects the scenario of a market where merchants offer their wares, which might be considered a metaphor of this world, with all the giving and taking among people. Next, we hear of a well-educated and highly-ranked priest – again, maybe a stand-in for Bonerius himself – who also joins this market, but he offers only wisdom (p. 16). The news of this unusual offer reach the king's ear, and he is most eager to purchase some of the priest's 'wares,' although his servants have to pay a high price for them, which deeply irritates them (pp. 41-44). After all, the priest only writes down a few lines, admonishing the king to keep in mind "the end of your deeds and remember / what will happen with yourself in the future" (pp. 36-37). Although the servants regard this as a joke and feel that they have been fooled, the king happily accepts the words of wisdom and has them inscribed on the door to his private chamber.

Only then do we learn that there is a faction at the court that intends to carry out a coup d'état by having the king assassinated. For that purpose, they bribe the barber who is later called in to shave the king. However, in the very moment when the barber reads those words, he pales, begins to tremble, and loses his self-control (pp. 73-74). Alerted to a danger to his life, the king has him apprehended and beaten until he reveals the secret intentions he had pursued, which had deeply frightened him. We are not informed about the miserable barber's destiny, but the traitors at court have to flee, while the king survives due to the words by the philosopher inscribed on the door. As the narrator then concludes: "He who can consider the outcome / of his actions is a wise person. / He who wants to keep the end in mind, / will not regret earlier deeds" (pp. 89-93).

This text specifically targets all people who might think about committing a sin (pp. 95-96), and Bonerius admonishes his readers/listeners to keep in mind that the struggle through life is only temporary, whereas the end of human existence matters centrally: "A good end never causes harm" (p. 97). Finally, the poet resorts to the metaphor of the captain who guides his ship well and can thus steer it to safe waters (pp. 99-100). This message is then carried over to the epilogue in which Bonerius urges his audience always to pay close attention to the deeper meaning of each fable (pp. 5-9). The ultimate purpose of the literary enterprise thus consists of acquiring wisdom, a message which resonated, of course, throughout the entire Middle Ages, from St. Augustine and Boethius to Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa (see, for instance, the contributions to English, ed., 1995; Classen, *Wisdom from the European Middle Ages*, 2022).

Conclusion

This now allows us to reassess the relevance and meaning of Bonerius's fables altogether. His *Edelstein* has consistently been received with considerable respect, and this not only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – though his popularity then quickly dissipated due to the great competition by other fable authors – but also from the late eighteenth century onward. We can thus easily identify him as one of the most significant fourteenth-century Middle High German poets (Classen, "Zeitlose Lebenslehren aus dem Spätmittelalter," 2021).

Some of the reasons for this high respect rest in the poet's strategic approach to the genre of the fable, using it as a literary medium to illuminate situations, attitudes, ideas, forms of behavior, and social, political, spiritual, and economic conditions in everyday life

(Classen, "Einblicke in den Alltag des 14. Jahrhunderts"). He was not a philosopher in the narrow sense of the word, but he also refrained surprisingly from offering religious teachings or dogmatic lessons, whereas his main concern rested on offering pragmatic and especially ethical advice. In all of his texts, he emphasized that people ought to pursue a rational, reasonable, but also spiritual path informed by knowledge and especially wisdom. As he formulates it in his epilogue: "A thin peel covers it [the treasure of deep wisdom, 14], / and the kernel consists of great sweetness. / A small garden often yields / the fruit from which you will gain solace" (pp. 16-18).

Ironically, Bonerius also criticizes some of his colleagues who deliver highly sophisticated sermons and yet do not understand what they are really saying (pp. 25-26). His own account consists, as he admits himself, only of simple words (pp. 9-13), but he claims to have conveyed clear messages about fundamental concerns in human life. As in the case of many other collections of fables, the *Gemstone* contains a plethora of valuable gems about virtues and vices, about foolishness and smartness, and the poet never seems to hesitate to address the issues head-on irrespective of whom he might target on whatever social level. People should act with foresight (no. 23), they should look for their own inner freedom and guard themselves from political and economic subjugation (no. 25). Excessive fear (no. 29) and evil advice (no. 30) should be avoided, whereas reasonable confidence would be important to achieve one's goals (no. 32). Interestingly, Bonerius also shares with his audience advice about legal issues, such as forced oaths which would have no standing in a court (no. 35), and he peaks out against the use of cuss-words (no. 41). The well-known and timeless fable of the ant and the locus (no. 42) reminds the audience about the need to pursue rationality and foresight to be ready for problems in life, while "Of a Mouse and Its Children" (no. 43) warns about the danger resulting from hypocrites. And the equally popular "Of a Man and His Son and a Donkey" (no. 52) concludes with the universally valid admonishment: "However much a person does good deeds, / the world will not regard it more than half good. / With open eyes many people are blind / whose hearts are filled with so much poison / that, whatever they hear or see, / they say the worst about it" (pp. 95-100).

Indeed, wherever we turn in Bonerius's *Edelstein*, we come across pearls of wisdom, always sustained by the poet's pragmatic assessment of concrete situations, actions, and conversations among people or animals. Although here we deal with the work of a fourteenth-century poet, the modern reader can easily follow and appreciate Bonerius's statements, comments, and advice as applicable irrespective of their dating. Little wonder

that the rediscovery of his work in the late eighteenth century triggered such a philological hype since these fables apparently speak so much about human truth, both in the late Middle Ages and today.

In fact, once we have understood the poet's specific messages contained particularly at the end of each fable, we recognize in Bonerius a valid conversation partner who obviously had a deep grasp of people's moral and ethical shortcomings, irrational and foolish behavior, and the potentials of applying rational and ethically upright strategies and concepts to improve one's life. If we did not know that the *Edelstein* had been composed around 1350, we could be easily confused and regard it as a piece of modern didactic literature. This collection defies by all means any stereotypical notions which we might have about the high and late Middle Ages. Of course, this phenomenon has something to do with the very properties of the genre of fables which explains their timeless popularity especially for young readers. However, Bonerius's unique contribution consisted of his commentaries with which he filled the epimythium of each fable. There we can consistently recognize the clear message concerning a wide range of human issues both in the Middle Ages and today. Ultimately, neither vices nor virtues have experienced much of a historical transformation. A lie remains a lie, hypocrisy will always be identified as such, and slander or the quest for wisdom are certainly universal phenomena.

This is not to say at all that we could thus level all differences between the pre-modern world and us today. But the analysis of Bonerius's fables has illustrated that they contain so many universal insights that we today still can easily identify with most of their teachings. In fact, Bonerius's *Edelstein* represents, though composed almost seven hundred 700 years ago, a major hermeneutic bridge connecting both cultural periods. Not much seems to have changed in the human character ever since, irrespective of the Enlightenment and the impact of modernity. We have realized, however, above all, that certain late medieval literary sources such as fables prove to be significant documents revealing a high degree of concern with a rational coming to terms with this world and with the quest for wisdom also in pragmatic, ordinary terms. Bonerius does not pursue any particularly unique ideas or concepts characteristic for his time period only.

Epistemologically speaking, there are hardly any significant barriers between his worldview and our basic notion about human interaction, sociability, virtues, and vices. His fables commonly drive home basic points we could easily agree with irrespective of our cultural framework or mentality.

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