

# LITTLE-KNOWN MEDIEVAL TEXTS

## GOOD COUNSEL FOR A YOUNG LADY: A LOW GERMAN MOTHER-DAUGHTER CONDUCT POEM

In the course of doing research for a book one usually turns up more interesting material than can be used in the project at hand. This was certainly the case when I was working on my book, *Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997). Once I had decided that my book would not survey the primary material but rather provide what I hoped would be focused studies of a few, significant texts, lots of notes and photocopies went back to their manila folders and were refiled for possible future use.

One such text is the anonymous 121-line conduct poem, “Eyne gude lere van einer junchvrowen” [Good Counsel for a Young Lady], in which a mother instructs her daughter in good behavior.<sup>1</sup> This poem did not make it into my book largely because it raised a great many interesting questions that were, alas, marginal to the way in which I had decided to frame the book. First, there was the unusualness of its language, Middle Low German, the language of northern Germany and the Hanseatic league. In the late Middle Ages Low German had achieved the status of a literary language, only to be slowly but surely replaced in that capacity by High German during the early modern period. Today Low German survives as a spoken dialect in northern Germany, and the geographical region in which it is spoken has shrunk considerably over the past five hundred years.

But that was far from the only puzzle the text posed. The sole surviving copy is written in a faulty Middle Low German that is replete with “scandinavianisms.” No wonder it is so hard to read! An inquiry into the manuscript containing “Eyne gude lere,” Stockholm, Kungliga Bibliotheket, Vu 82 (the so-called Jütische Sammlung), opened up more questions than it answered. The manuscript was copied in the northern Danish monastery of Borglum; it contains low German and Danish texts and an unusual mix of genres, from Low German *Minnereiden* (discourses on love) to a Danish prose novel about Charlemagne. Finally, the section of the manuscript in which “Eyne gude lere” appears is dated to 1541, though the editor Seelman argues that it was written much earlier (and there is nothing in the text that speaks against this assertion).

All these conundra convinced me that the extensive research needed to learn enough about the text and its manuscript to clearly situate my interpretation in a social and cultural context would only distract me from finishing the book. I did take time, however, to write a brief analysis of the text, which I share here. The text is of interest, I think, for two reasons. First, the urban, domestic life and

modest female behavior it stages resonate with the Middle English text, “How the Goodwife Taught her Daughter,” whose gender dynamics have recently been analyzed by Felicity Riddy, upon whose work I rely.<sup>2</sup> Second, “Eyne gude lere” is more explicit than most conduct texts in asserting that a woman can maintain her standing as a respectable woman by managing the figure she cuts in public and the gossip that circulates about her. As I mention below, the text rather slyly suggests that when it comes to honor, a young woman’s servants are her best friends. Is there a comic undertone to this text? I’m not sure.

The text, written in rhymed couplets, represents a mother’s advice to her daughter on comporting herself as an exemplar of a modest housewife. Modesty is stressed. Whether the daughter is walking on the street (where she is to keep control of her glances), working outside of the household, or visiting another home, she is to avoid excessive drink, frivolous talk, and flirtation (ll. 11–32). Upon marriage the daughter is to subordinate herself to her husband, regardless of his age or personal characteristics:

Be subservient to your husband industriously  
And in all things.  
God has created man for the purpose  
that he must protect and care for women  
both evening and morning  
because this preserves honor  
And therefore the man holds the upper hand. (ll. 38–44)  
Mett vliitte wes im underdan  
Und mett ale dine sache.  
Gott hefft den man dar to geschapt,  
Datt he de fruen mutthe besorgen  
Bede awentt und moriigen  
Allent, dat to den eren behort,  
Und dat he beholde de offwerhant.

The mother gives her daughter tips on how to put this philosophy into practice: she herself, rather than a servant, should attend her husband, she should always be kind and soft-spoken, and she should protect her husband from knowledge of everyday household disorder caused by servants such as angry words and broken dishes. There follow rules for church-going, and a reminder that the daughter should pray for her husband, herself, and all of their servants [jngesynde, l. 76]. When visiting, the daughter is to observe the ill behavior of other and learn to avoid their mistakes. Above all, she must strive to be virtuous, to control her speech, and to be gentle at all times. In closing, the mother reminds her daughter of her duty to obey her husband [volge em, so deistuu

recht, l. 116], assuring her that this behavior will bring husband and wife happiness on earth and salvation in the world to come.

The feminine behavior being taught in “Good Counsel for a Young Lady”—modest reserve in public speech and action, unhesitating obedience to husband and God, unfailing gentleness and kindness towards all—is situated in a specific time and place. The backdrop is urban, the economic unit is the household workshop, the class setting is middle class. The daughter can expect to do productive work of an unspecified nature in other households before marrying (“Whenever you enter a house, ply your trade and then leave” [Wo duu komest in ein hus, / Werff din werff unnd gaa dar utt], ll. 17–18). However, the text imagines that this stage of the daughter’s life is temporary, a transition to becoming the female head of a household through marriage to a man who may well be considerably older than herself.

As I noted, the understanding of exemplary female conduct and the social values articulated in “Good Counsel for a Young Lady” closely resemble those in the Middle English poem “What the Goodwife Taught her Daughter,” which circulated from the mid-fourteenth to the late fifteenth century. “Good Counsel” does not discuss the specific tasks that comprise managing a husband’s household, being more concerned with general rules for decorous behavior at home and in public, yet it certainly represents the daughter’s “adult working life . . . as inseparable from her marriage” (Riddy, 69). Above all, “Good Counsel” articulates the invention of domesticity as a part of the “bourgeois ethos” (Riddy, 67) of the urban household in preindustrial towns. “In the bourgeois ethos the household seems to have represented a distinctive complex of values—stability, piety, hierarchy, diligence, ambition, and respectability” (Riddy, 67). These values are all represented in “Good Counsel,” but chief among them for the daughter is her *êre*, her honor, fame, or reputation.

Perhaps *êre* might better be translated as “respectability.” It is clear from “Good Counsel” that honor is not primarily an inner state, attitude, or private virtue. Rather, it is the publicly circulated “common knowledge” of oneself; for one’s honor, one’s reputation, to have any effect, it must be known to others. The text talks a great deal about how the daughter is to behave when she is “in the street,” in church, or in other people’s homes. But the key element to creating a reputation for respectability and prosperity are the servants. The daughter is to conceal her servants’ failings (angry words, broken dishes) from her husband; she is to pray for them, and treat them gently. And following her mother’s instructions in these matters will bring about good results, because “then your servants will like you and sing your praises far and wide. Child, then your household is prosperous” [So mogen dy dynne denstluude liden / Wunder spreckenn verne din loff / Kint, saa steitt wol din hof, ll. 108–10]. The mother

assumes that the ultimate creators and arbiters of her daughter's public "fama" are her servants. Their gossip will produce the widest possible circulation of the daughter's reputation for honor and prosperity.

One wonders whether the alliance that the daughter has been urged to strike with her ill-tempered and clumsy servants against her husband will pay off in other ways. But such a thought is doubtless born from the reading of countless examples of late medieval fabliaux and farces, in which subalterns routinely conspire against housefathers. This example of conduct literature imagines that the daughter's model comportment as an obedient wife will guarantee that notions of respectability and prosperity govern the community's perception of the household to which she belongs.

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1 I use the edition by Wilhelm Seelman, ed., "Eyne gude lere van einer junchfrowen," *Jahrbuch des Vereins für Niederdeutsche Sprachforschung*, 8 (1882): 1–53. Elisabet Sandström, manuscript librarian at the Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm, wrote to me that a recent critical edition has appeared as a dissertation, but I have been unable to locate a copy: Ann Thorsson Johansson, "Die Borglumer Handschrift Vu 82: Eine kritische Ausgabe," Dissertation Tarragona 1997.

2 Felicity Riddy, "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text," *Speculum* 71 (1996): 66–86.

