

“The most delightful and choicest pleasure is that which is hinted at, but never told.”

(Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot or The Knight with the Cart*)

“There’s language in her eye, her cheek, her lip…”

(Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, 4.5.55)

### Courtly Lyric, Laughter, and Familiar Paradigms

The debate in Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s *Das Frauenbuch* has touched upon the poetic tradition of honoring and venerating women (*Frauenehre*), but what can better represent this discourse than courtly love poetry? In fact, one may wonder if a different treatment of laughter and femininity might be found in the texts that openly promote the ideals of love, service, respect, and humility; that put the woman on a pedestal and impose the duties of sacrifice and self-improvement on the man. Is the lofty lady of the courtly love song, so consistently presented as the epitome of virtue that her purity cannot be doubted even in a moment of anger, safe from the overt sexualization and stereotypes that accompany laughter?

The answers to these questions are not as obvious as one may initially think. The German manifestation of the worldwide phenomenon of medieval love lyric, commonly known under its German term *Minnesang*, is a highly sophisticated art that portrays a fictitious relationship between a knight and his highborn lady. Despite this seemingly rigid and limiting configuration, the Minnesang displays, as Gibbs and Johnson point out, a great variety of expression and diversity of form and content.¹ One would expect the textual treatment of laughter to vary or change within the corpus that developed over the course of two centuries (from its earliest mid-twelfth-century native poems through the late-thirteenth-century, post-*Blütezeit* songs) and shows both liberal borrowings from other vernacular traditions and remarkable individuality. And yet, a diachronic look at the Minnesang reveals that even though laughter and smiling indeed appear to be accepted in medieval courtly lyric, this genre relies on familiar paradigms and symbolism that characterize other discourses already examined in this book.

¹ Gibbs and Johnson, *Medieval*, 224.
The use of the motif at different stages of the Minnesang’s development unveils the same careful balancing between the need for eroticism and the limitations of propriety and virtue that mark conduct literature and the romance epic.

Nevertheless, courtly love lyric is also distinctly different from other discourses due to its unique erotic structure. It is the only kind of writing that elevates women to the position of authority and assigns men an inferior role of servitude, thus inverting the traditional power configuration. The woman is often infinitely removed from her male admirer, which results in a peculiar one-sided perspective where everything (including the lofty lady herself) is seen through the eyes of the male narrator (at least in the male-voiced songs). Love lyric is thus the only genre that does not conceal but rather reflects on its own constructedness, openly presenting its audience with a fantasy of femininity, with a product of the male poet’s imagination.

For this reason, the Minnesang can further elucidate the role of laughter in constructing the eroticized female body and highlight the contradictions within the courtly ideal of femininity.

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2 This chapter focuses mostly on the male-voiced canzone, the predominant subgenre of the Minnesang. However, it has been argued that the songs written in a female voice ultimately present an essentially male idea of femininity. See the discussion later in this chapter, as well as Klinck and Rasmussen, Medieval Woman’s Song. For more on gender in Frauenlieder and Frauenstrophen see Kasten, “The Conception of Female Roles,” 152 – 167; Kasten, Frauen-dienst; Rasmussen, “Representing Woman’s Desire,” 69 – 85; and Jackson, “Reinmar der Alte,” 73 – 101.

3 Of course, other discourses essentially present male fantasies of desirable femininity as well, yet unlike courtly lyric, they never acknowledge it. While many courtesy texts feature a sole authoritative male voice evaluating the comportment of female bodies, they (with the exception of Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s Das Frauenbuch) seldom reflect on the relationship between reality and the views of masculinity and femininity they set out to promote. Such self-reflection is absent in courtly epic as well, albeit for different reasons. Romance never deals with exclusively female bodies, but always represents two genders, creating an illusion of objectivity. In addition, the epic is clearly a fictional narrative; even though the audience’s and the narrator’s attention is deeply absorbed by all the twists and turns of the romance plot and its characters, everybody remains keenly aware of the line between the secondary and primary worlds. The listeners of the tales are invited to deduce lessons from these fictional works and in this way establish a connection between fiction and reality, to emulate the positive models and shun the negative ones. In this respect Das Frauenbuch is different again, combining the didacticism and “realism” of courtesy writings with the fictionality of the courtly narrative. Because it is a didactic work, the audience hearing Ulrich’s story-within-a-story is always supposed to be aware of two discursive plains: their own world and the universe of the poem, and within the poem itself between the “reality” of courtly life represented by the lady and the courtly ideal to which the man aspires.
“Laugh, My Dear Lady”: When Courtly Women Smile

The anonymous German love song “Der walt in grüener varwe stât” (MF I.XIV) features a touching conversation between the poet and the woman he adores. As expected, the man serves her unconditionally, fulfilling all her wishes; this behavior is quite typical for courtly love poetry. She, in her turn, inspires him and fills his soul with gratitude and joy. Two aspects of their relationship, however, make this early love song stand out in comparison to later poems, particularly to the so-called songs of lofty love (known in German as Hoher Sang). First, the love relationship between the woman and her servitor is reciprocal. Even though the meeting between the two lovers is clandestine (the male speaker’s first impulse at seeing his lady is to check their surroundings), there is no attempt to conceal the intimacy between the two lovers from the audience. The “I” of the poem acknowledges quite openly that the lady provides him with true comfort (“diu mich troestet sunder spot,” MF I.XIV.1,5), which could be interpreted as a purely emotional consolation if the statement were not echoed by the lady herself. In the third stanza, the lady proclaims that even though their secret meeting may cost her bitter tears, she is nevertheless ready to reward the man’s service and grant him her greatest favor—her body:

‘Ich wil weinen von dir hân,’
   sprach daz aller beste wip,
   ‘schiere soltu mich enpfân
   unde tròsten minen lip.’ (MF I.XIV.3,1 – 2)

“I will cry because of you,” said the worthiest of women. “You should receive me swiftly and comfort me/my body.”

The skillful play on words in the last line of the strophe allows the poet to hint at the lovers’ impending physical union. The MHG expression min lip can refer to either the lady’s whole person (equivalent to the English pronoun “me”) or more specifically to her body, thus turning the expression lip tròsten into a clever euphemism for sexual intercourse. Like other early poets, this author does not separate the spiritual and sexual sides of love, and he glorifies a mutual relationship that inflicts joy and sorrow on both parties. Although this love is not at all immune to pain resulting from the limitations imposed on it by society (the famous watchers/overseers known as merker, or the male surveillance of women

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4 All the quotations in this chapter come from MF, KLD, SMS (see the list of abbreviations), and Walther von der Vogelweide, Werke. For practical reasons, individual poems from MF, KLD, and SMS have been referenced as follows: the first number (either a Roman or an Arabic numeral) refers to the number assigned to the author in the collection; the second numeral designates the poem; the last two Roman numbers refer to the stanza and line(s), respectively.
called *huote*), it nevertheless always strives for its fulfillment—the union of the two lovers.

The second aspect that separates this early Minnesang from many later poems is laughter. The woman is asked to smile and, presumably, would not refrain from doing so in order to please her lover: “Swie du wilt, só wil ich sin, / lache, liebez vrowelin” (“Whichever way you wish, so I want to be. / Laugh, my dear lady,” *MF* I.XIV.3,5–6). Although it might be easy to see this request as a simple invitation to be joyous and not to think of the gloomy consequences of their little rendezvous, the poem’s overall erotic mood also allows for a different reading. The man’s request suggests that laughter makes her more attractive, enticing, and inviting. If one looks at this poem as an allusion to the *quinque lineae amoris*, it is possible to interpret the lady’s gesture as a sign of encouragement and welcoming of the male speaker, signaling the beginning of their love game.

While this little poem is representative of the work performed by women’s laughter in love lyric, and the context of eroticism in which it is usually evoked, the popularity of the motif differs greatly depending on the subgenre, that is, on the poem’s perspective and degree of sensuality. The majority of references occur in the male-voiced canzone inspired by the Romance models of Occitan troubadours and Northern French *trouvères*. In this unidirectional type of poetry, the male lyrical “I” describes his desires and projects them on the woman of his dreams. In contrast, laughter is conspicuously scarce in the songs that do not feature this contemplative-meditative state, as, for example, in most poems structured as a dialogue (*Wechsel*) or that emphasize things other than the startling beauty and intimidating glory of the lofty lady. Thus it is rare in most of the poems by Wolfram von Eschenbach, Neidhart von Reuenthal, or even the early native German minnesingers, which favor action over the exploration of the male speaker’s inner feelings. Their lofty lady is not stared at or fantasized about as she is in the canzone; instead, she acts, talks, complains, or commands. Songs of this kind lack an important aspect of the Romance-inspired lyric—the notorious male gaze. Scrutinizing, appropriating, and eroticizing, the gaze proves to be the most necessary feature of the courtly love poetry that mentions women’s laughter.

Within the songs of lofty love (MHG *hôhiu minne*, mod. German *Hoher Sang*) themselves, one can distinguish patterns as well. The image becomes important only after a certain point in the Minnesang’s development. Despite the fact that the lady of the pre-classical canzone is not yet completely transformed into what Marion Gibbs calls “the obdurate creature who comes to characterize so much of

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5 Neidhart von Reventhal’s works are represented by two editions: Neidhart von Reuenthal, *Lieder*; and Bennewitz–Behr, *Die Berliner Neidhart*. Neidhart mentions women’s laughter six times in all of his 131 poems (the total for both Wießner’s and Bennewitz–Behr’s editions).
the later lyrics, no laughter is mentioned in the songs of such poets as Meinloh von Sevelingen, Der Burggraf von Rietenburg, and Kaiser Heinrich. During the classical stage of the courtly lyric, it appears only in the works of Heinrich von Morungen, Walther von der Vogelweide, and Wolfram von Eschenbach—the three authors famous for their generous use of erotic elements in their poetry. The scarcity of laughter in the texts of the classical Minnesang stands in stark contrast to its sudden “splash” in post-classical lyric, where the word *lachen* as a reference to “erotic smiles” is used in almost every poem. The lady’s smiles are desperately sought and appear to be the only thing mattering to her male admirer. Unsurprisingly, these references occur conspicuously, often when the poems mention the lady’s red mouth, whose symbolism enables the poets to communicate indirectly. This allows them to convey a hidden message that they cannot state explicitly due to the restrictions of the genre to which they emphatically proclaim their allegiance. The fixation on laughter in the Minnesang goes beyond a mere expression of joy and contentment; it can be interpreted as a “metaphorical strategy in the taboo area of sex-organ nomenclature” and as a new way to sexualize the lofty lady, thus playing a crucial role in the construction of a sophisticated discourse on love, gender, and power.

“*I Love a Woman Who Is Good and Beautiful*”: The Courtly Lady’s Two Bodies

What makes a woman irresistible to the man singing in her honor? The first and most obvious answer to this question would be her physical beauty, for the convention dictates that she be beautiful. The modern reader, however, is usually

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6 Gibbs and Johnson, *Medieval*, 244. Gibbs and Johnson point out the active part the lofty lady plays in these poets’ works, particularly in those by Meinloh von Sevelingen: “She, too, is committed to this love and, stronger party that she is, she will defend it in spite of the opposition of rivals and spies. It looks, then, like a new view of the old relationship, but the tone is more one of confidence and even happiness” (ibid.).

7 In *MF* *lachen* occurs a total of 23 times in only 18 poems. In contrast to *MF*, *KLD* contains a total of 165 examples of women’s laughter (160 instances of the word *lachen* and 5 of its synonyms *smielen* or *smieren*) and 41 examples in 32 poems in *SMS*. Walther von der Vogelweide’s collected poems include 9 songs and 2 *Sprüche* (in Schweikle’s edition). His use of laughter is very abundant and varied, including non-gendered laughter (L 39,11 and 51,13), men’s laughter (L 47,26; 65,17; 74,20; 128,18 and 184,1), and women’s laughter (L 27,17; 27,27; 66,21; 110,13; 115,6; 120,25 and 184,1). In the conventional Minnesang, Walther’s use of women’s laughter is very similar to Morungen’s. As far as the stages of the Minnesang are concerned, I follow the chronology suggested by Gibbs and Johnson, which overall coincides with Schweikle’s somewhat more detailed periodization. See Gibbs and Johnson, *Medieval German Literature*, 238 – 303; Schweikle, *Minnesang*, 84 – 102.

8 Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, 259.
struck by how general and vague the descriptions of the lady’s appearance are in the Minnesang, particularly at its earlier stages. She, of whom the male speaker dreams, is attractive, but it is not easy to find any descriptor more concrete than schoen (beautiful), minnecl(o[wch (lovely), or best (the best).9 In her splendor, she is said to surpass all others but remains hard to imagine for the lack of any detail. While top-to-toe descriptions of female beauty, known as laudes membrorum, are ubiquitous in medieval romance,10 they are scarce in German courtly lyric, which is true for both the early native poetry and that inspired by Romance models.11 Friedrich von Hausen, for example, is said to be the first poet to praise the lady’s seductive red mouth, yet among his eighteen surviving poems only one mentions it (MF X.X). Similarly, only two songs (MF XI.I and MF XI.XXXVII) by Heinrich von Veldeke make any references to specific body parts such as eyes, chin, mouth, and arms.12 Mostly, the praise of the lofty lady’s beauty seems to be nothing more than a poetic cliché.

As James A. Schultz has recently pointed out, courtiers in medieval texts are attracted to one another not merely by beauty but rather by their inherent nobility: “Courtly lovers are aristophiliacs: they fall in love with nobility and courtliness.”13 Nowhere is aristophilia more palpable than in the lofty song. The woman appears to be desired not so much for her physical charms as for the nobility and virtue of her body. Her very beauty functions as an indicator or proof of her aristocratic status, worthiness, and power over the male speaker. The duality of the courtly lady’s depiction (her physical body and her lofty status) resembles the famous distinction between the body politic and body natural in Ernst Kantorowicz’s seminal study of medieval kingship.14 The king is said to be a “twinned person,” of whose two faces, “one descend[ed] from nature, the other from grace […] ; the one through which, by the condition of nature, he conformed with other men; another through which by the eminence of [his] deification and by the power of sacrament, he excelled all others.”15 The body natural thus represents the king’s biological body, while the body politic is seen

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9 Rudolf von Fenis notices his lady’s schoener l(o[w (“beautiful body,” MF XIII.III.5,1); Pseudo-Veldeke mentions her minneclicher l(o[w (“lovely body,” MF XI.XXXIV.1,7).
11 Kasten points out the absence of the actual female body in the classical Minnesang, despite its praise for the woman’s beauty: “Da die Minnesänger dabei vor allem die sittliche Vollkommenheit der Frau, kaum aber ihre äußeren Reize preisen, verliert die Frau ihre Konturen als konkrete Gestalt und erscheint als Inbegriff der Tugend selbst.” (My emphasis.) Kasten, “Minnesang,” 174.
12 Conspicuously, one of them happens to be a Frauenlied (a song written in a female voice).
13 Schultz, Courtly Love, 4.
14 Kantorowicz, King’s Two Bodies, 7. For a discussion of how Kantorowicz’s social model can be applied to medieval German literature, see Wenzel, “Die schuldlose Schöne,” 89 – 107.
15 Kantorowicz, King’s Two Bodies, 43, 42, 500.
as the body of royal power and honor. Renate Kroll has borrowed Kantorowicz’s terminology to talk about female corporeality in medieval French literature, adopting the term “body natural” to designate the woman’s “naked body in all its seductive femininity” and “erotic radiance,” while the “body politic” represents the lady’s public persona endowed with decorum, dignity, and her authority as a ruler.\textsuperscript{16} Scholars interested in political theory may perhaps question to what extent Kantorowicz and Kroll describe the same phenomena, yet the separation of the two bodies offers a useful model for thinking about medieval gender. For the purposes of this chapter, I would like to adopt a similar binary to describe a clear and pervasive distinction between the manifestations of the lofty lady in the Minnesang. Since direct references to the naked female body are far less common in the German tradition than in the French, the concept of the body natural has to be further modified to suit the German-speaking lyric. From this point on, I will use the term “body natural” as a general reference to the desirable female body.\textsuperscript{17}

In the male-voiced songs of the \textit{Hoher Sang}, the lady’s body politic—i.e. her status and virtue—is no less important than her physical beauty. By using the word “status,” I do not imply the true social standing of either the poet or the lady, but rather the power relationship between the woman and the male speaker in the fictional world of the poem.\textsuperscript{18} The body politic in courtly lyric is constructed in two ways: through direct references to the woman’s nobility and with the help of the concept of love service (German Frauendienst), which borrows its imagery and vocabulary from the language of feudal vassalage. Already at the early stage of courtly lyric, the lofty lady is commonly called \textit{werdez w(o[‘wp “(a worthy, noble woman,” MF III.I.3,7) or \textit{ein edeliu vrowe “(a noble lady,” MF III.I.5,3).\textsuperscript{19} Bernger von Hornheim chooses a different word (\textit{rich}), but imbues it

\textsuperscript{17} Walther’s famous poem “Si wunder wol gemachet w(o[‘wp…” (L 53,25; Schweikle 144) describes the man’s voyeuristic pleasure at the sight of the nude lady leaving her bath, but is considered to be unique in its bold content. As Schultz points out, it is not at all representative of the Minnesang. Schultz, \textit{Courtly Love}, 26.
\textsuperscript{18} The claims of the lady’s social superiority—the misconception that presents her as a woman of high nobility and her servitor as a man of lower (if not humble) origins—have long been rejected because of the purely fictional, literary nature of courtly love poetry, and because of the variety of backgrounds found among minnesingers. Some include the high or the highest nobility, such as Kaiser Heinrich, Burggraf von Rietenburg, or Burggraf von Regensburg. Schweikle points out that even though the romanticized constellation “noble lady—socially inferior poet” could definitely have been accurate in certain cases, overall it should be seen as an “ephemeral accident rather than a rule”: “Dies war dann aber bestenfalls ephemeres Akzidenz, nicht Prinzip.” See Schweikle, \textit{Minnesang}, 187 – 188.
\textsuperscript{19} Both expressions belong to Meinloh von Sevelingen. Also on four other occasions: “vil
with the same meaning: “mîn vrowe ist so rîche unde guot” (“my lady is so noble and good,” *MF* XVI.II.3,3). Such references are frequently found in the context of love service modeled after the political relationship between a lord and a vassal. Even though the concept of service can be found in the native German tradition (for example, in the writings of Meinloh von Sevelingen or Burggraf von Rietenburg), it is, as Schweikle points out, not yet tied to the man’s request for and the woman’s denial of a reward, but rather functions as a metaphor for special devotion leading to sexual fulfillment and is not gender-specific.\(^{21}\)

With the increased influence of Romance models, the woman gradually becomes transformed into a powerful, lordly figure before whom the male lover bows in respect and service, homage and worship. C. S. Lewis noticed the striking similarities between love service and vassalage as early as 1936. In his famous *Allegory of Love*, Lewis writes, “There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord. The lover is the lady’s ‘man.’ He addresses her as midons, which etymologically represents not ‘my lady’ but ‘my lord.’ The whole attitude has been rightly described as ‘a feudalization of love.’”\(^{22}\) Unlike the French and Occitan traditions, in which the service of ladies purportedly corresponded to and was inspired by the actual political structures of lordship and inheritance, the German-speaking lyric inherited this concept as a result of a purely literary transmission.\(^{23}\) For this reason, the feudal terminology in the Minnesang is less developed than in the troubadour and *trouvères* poetry, including the gendered vocabulary to reflect the lofty lady’s special lordly status.\(^{24}\) Even so, the male “I” frequently refers to himself as his

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\(^{22}\) Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 2.

\(^{23}\) “Dabei war der Frauendienst im Wirkungsbereich der Trobadors nicht nur ein literarisches Modell, sondern auch eine Form realen gesellschaftlichen Handelns, da adlige Frauen auf Grund des Erbrechts häufig selbst Herrschaft ausübten haben. […] Da den deutschen Dichtern die Vorstellung, daß Frauen tatsächlich Herrschaft ausüben und Männer ihnen dienen könnten, eher fremd war, ist das Modell für ihre Dame nicht der Typus der Lehns- herrin, sondern eine Frau der höfischen Gesellschaft, und entsprechend schwach ist bei ihnen die Lehns- terminologie ausgebildet.” Kasten, “Minnesang,” 168 – 169. For more on the lordly status of the minnelady and its correspondence to reality, also see Kasten, “Frauendienst und Verfassung,” 64 – 76; Sayce, *Medieval German Lyric*, 41.

\(^{24}\) Kasten, “Minnesang,” esp. 174; Sayce, *Medieval German Lyric*, 30 – 31. The language of vassalage is particularly favored by the poets of the Rhineland region, of the so-called “Hausen-School.”
lady’s *eigen* (vassal) and *undertan* (subject), while she is said to exercise *gewalt* (authority and power) over him. Ulrich von Gutenburg, for example, proclaims: “swie mın vrowe wil, só sol ez mir ergán, / der ich bin ze allen ziten undertân” (“As my lady wishes, so it shall be with me; I am forever her subject,” *MF* XII.Lied.1,5 – 6); and admits with resignation: “Diu mac sín gewaltic mìn. dëst reht, ich bin ir eigen / nu vil lange” (“She may well show her power over me. It is her right, for I have been her vassal for a long time now,” *MF* XII.Leich.IV,9 – 10). Typically, it is the male speaker who presents himself as the woman’s vassal; however, in one of Heinrich von Rugge’s female-voiced stanzas, it is the lady who uses this term:

welle er ze vriundinne mich gewinnen,  
 só tuo mit allen sinen sinnen  
 daz beste und hüete sich dà bi,  
 daz mir iht komme ze maere, wie rehte unstaete er sì:  
 waer er mìn eigen denne, ich liez in vri. (*MF* XV.I.5,5 – 9)

If he wishes to have me as his beloved, let him strive as hard as he can to do his best and beware lest I hear any report of his disloyalty: for in this case if he were my vassal, I would release him.

A quintessential example of how the language of vassalage can be harnessed to refer to courtly love can be found in Albrecht von Johansdorf’s song, “Mín èrste liebe, der ich ie began…” (*MF* XIV.I), which generously uses feudal terminology to describe the relationship between the male speaker and his Lady Love.

Ich wil ir räten bi der sèle mìn,  
 durch deheine liebe niht wan durch daz reht.  
 was moht ir an ir tugenden bezzer sin,  
 danne obe si ir umberede lieze sleht.  
 Taet an mir einvaltecliche,  
 als ich ir einvaltic bin!  
 an vröiden werde ich niemer riche,  
 ez enwaere ir der beste sin.

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25 Cf. Rudolf von Fenis and Pseudo-Veldeke: “I gave her my body and my mind as a freehold in hope of favor; this lies in her power” (“Lip und sinne die gap ich vür eigen / ir úf gnâde, der hât si gewalt,” *MF* XIII.V.2,1 – 2); “I am her serving subject” (“ich bin ir dienest immer undertân,” *MF* XI.XXIV.1,4). Also see Engelhart von Adelnburg (*MF* XXI.I.3,2), Reinmar der Alte (*MF* XXI.XXII.2,2), and Hartmann von Aue (*MF* XXII.XII.3,8 and 4,1 – 2). One can draw a parallel to the contemporaneous MHG epic texts, such as *The Nibelungenlied*, that use similar rhetoric when they refer to real political authority. For example, when Rüdiger promises Kriemhild vast power in exchange for her marrying Etzel, he says: “Ir sult ouch frouwe über manegen werden man, / die mîner frouwen Helchen wären undertân” (“You will also become a lady/ruler over many a worthy/noble man who used to be subject to my [late] Lady Helche,” *Nibelungenlied*, vv. 1236 – 1237) (my emphasis). Cited according to *Das Nibelungenlied*.  

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Ich wande, daz min kûme waere erbiten;
dar úf hat ich gedingen menege zit.
nu hat mich gar ir vriundes gruoz vermiten.
mìn bester tröst der waene dà nider gelit.
Ich muoz alsen wilen vlêhen
und noch harte, hulf ez iht.
herre, wan ist daz min lêhen,
daz mir niemer leit geschiht? (MF XIV.I.2,1 – 3,8)

By the salvation of my soul, I wish to advise her, but only out of duty, not out of affection. What could be better for her virtue than if she were to set the rumors straight? If only she were as honest with me as I am with her! I shall never be full of joy unless it would be also in her best interest. It seemed to me that I had been scarcely expected: I had hoped for it for a long time, and now I am denied her friendly greeting. My best consolation, methinks, is now completely gone. Just as in former times, I have to entreat [her] and try hard, so that it would be of any avail. Lord, when will it be my reward [my fief] that no sorrow shall ever come my way?

In this poem, the legal rhetoric is intertwined with the language of love. In the first strophe the man speaks of advising (räten) his liege-lady and of his own sense of duty or law (durch daz reht). He indicates that the woman’s well-being is above all else, even his own happiness. However, he also hints at the lady-lord’s own responsibility to her vassal, i.e., her duty of reciprocity. In exchange for his trustworthiness, openness, and honesty, he would like to receive hers (“taet an mir einvalteclîche als ich ir einvaltic bin,” MF XIV.I.2,5 – 6). He therefore inquires at the end of the second strophe about his lêhen—a feudal fief or tenure that in this context can be read as “reward.”

Albrecht’s poem contains striking parallels to the medieval rules for lords and vassals, such as the ones mentioned in the letter of Bishop Fulbert of Chartres to Duke William V of Aquitaine (ca. 1020). A vassal’s oath of fealty is said to include a promise to abide by six principles, namely, to remain “harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, [and] possible”:

Harmless, that is, he must not harm his lord in his body. Safe, he must not harm him in his secrets or in the fortifications by which he is able to be safe. Honorable, so that he must not harm him in his justice or in other affairs which are seen to pertain to his honor. Useful, that he might not be harmful to him in his possessions. Easy or possible, so that he not make difficult any good which his lord could easily do nor make anything impossible that is difficult. […] Therefore it remains that he should give his lord counsel and aid in these same six above mentioned things if he wishes to be seen worthy of his benefice and to be safe in the fealty he has sworn. The lord should act toward his

26 Similar vocabulary appears in Ulrich von Gutenburg’s songs as well, e.g., in his Leich (MF XII. Leich).
vassal reciprocally in all these things. If he does not do so, he deserves to be considered of bad faith...  

It is clearly the failure to abide by the last requirement—the lord’s reciprocity toward the vassal—that bothers the speaker in Albrecht’s song and causes him to voice his discontent in the second stanza. The lady has withheld her favor—her greeting—from him despite his loyal and lengthy devotion. The refusal to reward the singer is equated with the breach of feudal troth and is strongly condemned in courtly love lyric. It drives some particularly dissatisfied minnesingers to abandon love service altogether:

Ich was ungetriuwen ie gehaz:
u nu wolte ich ungetriuwe sin.
mir taete untriuwe verre baz,
dann daz mich diu triuwe min
von ihr niht scheiden liez,
diu mich ir dienen hiez.
u nu tuot mir wÞ,
si wil mir ungel()net l()yn. (MF XXII.III.2,1 – 8)

I have always hated the disloyal ones, but now I wish I had been disloyal. My infidelity would have been far better than my loyalty that did not let me leave her who had called me into her service. Now it pains me that she wishes to leave me unrewarded.

The classical lofty lady is not a concrete and living woman, but rather a “shadowy figure, the passive recipient of [the minnesinger’s] devotion,” whose body politic supersedes the body natural. Her nobility is inseparable from and reinforced by her dignity and moral perfection; her virtue supersedes even her beauty. The abstract vocabulary used to describe the woman’s moral qualities—güete (goodness), kiusche (chastity), sælde (blessedness, perfection), zuht (good breeding), or werdekeit (worthiness, nobility)—only enhances the sense

27 Geary, Readings, 386.
28 “Ich sprach, ich wolte ir iemer leben...” (Hartmann von Aue, MF XXII.III).
29 Gibbs and Johnson, Medieval German Literature, 247.
30 Kasten, “Minnesang,” 165. The lady’s moral superiority is much stronger in the Minnesang than in troubadour and trouvère poetry. Kasten interprets this as the need to legitimize the expectation of male servitude and submission, since it did not have as much real-life basis in Germany as it had in France. The connection between virtue and physical beauty is apparent in the common phrase “ir tugende und ir schoene” (“her virtues and her beauty,” MF XIX.IX.1,7). Heinrich von Rugge, for example, warns that one should not value female beauty too much (MF XV.IX.1,1 – 8), and Walther von der Vogelweide uses his own experience to warn against choosing external beauty over internal goodness: “Ich gesach nie houbet baz gezogen, / in ir herze kunde ich nie gesehen. / ie dar under bin ich gar betrogen, / daz ist an den triuwen mir geschehen” (“I have never seen a more beautiful head, but I could never look into her heart. This is precisely what betrayed me. This is what happened to me for all my loyalty,” L 52,31; Schweikle 294).
of her vagueness and grandeur, drawing attention to the total lack of specific
physical traits. It is, therefore, not surprising that the lady’s emotions and
gestures are rarely discussed in the songs of lofty love; their bodily nature makes
them incompatible with the concept of bodiless and abstract perfection. The
absence of the body natural corresponds to the absence of women’s laughter. It is
not until the “sensualistic” poetry of Heinrich von Morungen that the lady’s
smiling red mouth becomes a permanent object of poetic admiration and ref-
lection.

“Her Red Mouth Began to Smile Almost Unnoticeably”: Sexualizing
the Body Natural

Si hât mich verwunt
rehte aldurch min sêle
in den vil tøttlèn grunt,
dô ich ir tet kunt,
daz ich tobte unde quêle
umb ir vil güetlèn munt.
Den bat ich zeiner stunt,
daz er mich ze dienste ie bevêle
und daz er mir stêle
von ir ein senfêz küssen, sô wêr ich iemer gesunt.
Wie würde ich gehaz
ir vil røsenvarwen munde,
des ich noch nieder vergaz!
Doch sô mëet mich daz,
daz si mir zeiner stunde
sô mit gewalt vor gesaz.
Des bin ich worden laz,

31 Schweikle calls it a “strong idealizing trend” and links it to the Greek ideal of beauty and
virtue, kalokagathia. He also points out the negative aspects of this idealization, such as a loss
of individuality and the projection of the male’s dissatisfaction and aggression onto the
woman: “Mehr und mehr aber werden die umworbenen Frauen passivschemenhaft—als Ziel
einer Fernliebe, eines Dienstangebots—, bis sie dann, erstmals bei Friedrich von Hausen,
von den Werbenden als die Abweisende, Gleichgültige, Unnahbare, ja Hochmütige, Lau-
nische, Ungnädige, Grausame erfahren werden.” Schweikle, Minnesang, 182 – 183.

32 The image of the red mouth is by no means Morungen’s invention. It appears in two poems
by Friedrich von Hausen and Heinrich von Veldeke, where it is tied to eroticism and beauty.
Hausen proclaims that a king himself would be elated if he got a chance to kiss the lady’s red
mouth (MF X.X.1,5 – 8); and in Veldeke’s Frauenlied, the female speaker dreams of kissing
her beloved, leaving the rest of their romantic meeting to the audience’s imagination (MF
XI.XXXVII.5,1 – 4). Yet it is Morungen who begins to use the motif consistently and fre-
quently.
alsô daz ich vil schiere wol gesunde
in der helle grunde
verbrunne, ð ich ir iemer diende, in wisse umbe waz. (MF XIX.XXVII)

She mortally wounded me, deep into my soul, as I made it known to her that I raged and raved about her lovely mouth. I once appealed to this mouth that it order me to serve her and that it steal for me one of her soft kisses. Thus I would be healed forever. How can I hate her rose-red mouth that I have not been able to forget no matter what! Yet it pains me greatly that she once ruled over me so. I have become weary of that and would sooner burn in the depths of hell alive than ever serve her without knowing in exchange for what.

He loves her, she loves him not; he pines for her, but she is deaf to his supplications; he is ready to serve her for all eternity, but she remains unresponsive; in this, Heinrich von Morungen’s song is representative of a large corpus of medieval love poetry. What is unexpected, however, is how Morungen describes his lofty lady. There is barely any reference to the woman’s appearance, not even such generic epithets as “beautiful” or “noble”; and yet there can be no doubt as to the importance of her beauty in this poem and its effect on the male speaker thanks to the prominent image of the red mouth. With its complex triple function as an attractive facial feature, a metonymy for the woman’s entire body, and an independent, disembodied entity with power over even its owner, it draws the audience’s attention to the lady’s body natural and introduces sensuality and physicality into the poem. Despite the use of the familiar tropes like goodness (güetlich), power (gewalt), and service (ze dienste bevêlen), this lady is judged by somewhat different standards; her lordly splendor alone is no longer sufficient for the man who finds both the distance separating them and her control over him disturbing. It is her body natural that he truly desires. The poem makes this point by skillfully juxtaposing the references to the personified red mouth and the woman to whom it belongs, developing two parallel subtexts—eroticism and power. It begins and ends with the references to the lofty lady (si and ir, “she” and “her”) and the traditional concept of love service, placing the sensual image of the red mouth directly at the center of the poem, in the second half of the first stanza and at the beginning of the second one.33 The focus thus shifts from the woman herself to her orifice, virtually transforming the former into the latter with the help of metonymy and personification. The mouth is given agency and control not only over the male speaker but also over its female owner; it can collude with the man and heal his wounded heart by stealing kisses34 from her

33 Morungen’s strategy of bringing together the motifs of a stolen kiss and of a denied service is highly innovative. See Kasten and Kuhn, Deutsche Lyrik, 797.
34 As Kasten points out, the motif of stolen kisses can be found among the French troubadours (known influence on Morungen’s writing), esp. Peire Vidal and Peirol, and in the German-
supposedly unwilling and distant body. The motifs of kissing and lovesickness imbue this bold request with additional eroticism, since both can be seen as allusions to intercourse—kisses as a stage of the *quinque lineae amoris*, and lovesickness as a malady that can be best cured, according to medieval literary and medical texts, by “therapeutic intercourse” with the woman who has inflicted it. Both motifs insinuate that the man would very much enjoy having greater access to the lady’s body. Once the speaker’s bold request is denied, however, the focus shifts back from the mouth to the lofty lady as the figure of authority and to the concept of service, taking a form of a reproach for insufficient reciprocity.

Remarkably, the man is not angry with the mouth itself, the orifice, the personification that uttered the rejection; he is still under its charm, exclaiming rhetorically: “How can I hate her rose-red mouth that I have not been able to forget no matter what!” (*MF* XIX.XXVII. 2,1 – 3). His anger is with female power alone. While the physical body remains appealing, it is the body politic, so frequently admired in awe by Morungen’s contemporaries, that he rejects. The man is bothered by the fact that “she once had so much power over [him]” (“daz si mir zeiner stunde s(o)) mit gewalt vor gesaz” *MF* XIX.XXVII.2,5 – 6). Here the verb *vor sitzen* does not simply refer to his amorous obsession but it also bears legal overtones, still detectable in the modern German word *vorsitzen*, “to chair, to preside.” The speaker rejects the idea of an ennobling and selfless service unless he is rewarded for it. The lofty lady’s two bodies are no longer separate; in order to be able to tolerate one of them, the man has to have access to the other.

Not every poem that plays with the red-mouth motif ends in such a resolute rejection of the love relationship. In fact, most of Morungen’s works uphold, albeit while lamenting, the idea of courtly love service, of a virtuous lofty lady, and of the futility of the man’s desires, thus remaining firmly anchored within the conventions of the genre of lofty song. In Heinrich’s poetry as well as in that of his later imitators, the lady remains, in actuality, distant and unavailable. On speaking lyric in the poetry of Reinmar von Hagenau and Walter von Vogelweide. Kasten and Kuhn, *Deutsche Lyrik*, 797.

35 Medieval works utilizing this motif include, for example, Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan* (both Riwalin’s and Tristan’s stories) and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (Gawan-adventure). For more on medieval views of therapeutic intercourse see Zago, “Women, Medicine,” 68; as well as “Introduction” and chapter 1 in Wack, *Lovesickness*, xi–xvi, 3 – 30, respectively.

36 Scholarship on the Minnesang consistently emphasizes Morungen’s strict belonging to the lofty song (Germ. *Hoher Sang*). In contrast, two other prominent poets of the time—Walther von der Vogelweide and Wolfram von Eschenbach—consciously position themselves outside this genre. Walther’s vast and diverse oeuvre includes both the traditional Minnesang and bold attempts at subversion, taking the lyric in a new direction. For his part, Wolfram consciously chose not to follow the form and aesthetic ideals of the *Hoher Sang*. See Gibbs and Johnson, *Medieval*, 202. Also Schweikle, *Minnesang*, 90.
the level of fantasy, however, things appear to be quite different. The poem employs the so-called “rhetoric of two spaces,” that is, the poet’s keen awareness of two distinct worlds (of his poem and of his audience). When combined with this strategy, the motifs of the red mouth as a metonymic representation of the woman’s beauty and of laughter as a silent encouragement of the man’s advances allow courtly poets to add an erotic subtext, to sexualize the remote courtly lady, and to make her more attainable by suggesting some seduction or complicity on her part:

Ich minne ein wip, diust guot und wol getân.
diu lât mich aller rede beginnen,
ich kan ab endes niht gewinnen.
dar umbe waere ich nû verzaget,
wan dazs ein wênic lachet só si mir versaget. (L 120,25; Schweikle 70)

I love a lady, who is good and beautiful. She always allows me to begin my speech, but I can never come to the end. I would indeed be distraught because of that, if only she didn’t smile at me a little bit while rejecting me.

At the same time, the male speakers are careful to protect themselves with the disclaimer that their requests for a reward are nothing but a dream, a wish, or are simply impossible due to their own personal limitations (such as inexperience or even impotence), as is the case, for example, in the following excerpts from one of Morungen’s songs:

Ir lachen und ir schoene ansehen
und ir guot gebaerde hänt betoeret lange mich.
in kan anders niht verjehen.
swer mich ruomes zihen wil, vûr wâr, der sündet sich.
Ich hânt sorgen vil gepflegen
und den vrouwen selten bû gelegen… (MF XIX.VII.4,1 – 6)

Her laughter, her lovely appearance, and her good manners have long bewitched me. I cannot say anything different. Whoever wishes to accuse me of boasting, truly sins. I have lived through great pain and seldom lain with ladies.

37 Goldin, Mirror, 122.
38 “The red mouth is a very common symbolic attribute of the lady. […] It has the associations of beauty, youth, love, and joy (as the phrase fröiden rich makes clear).” Sayce, Medieval German Lyric, 172.
39 Cf.: “Durch das Lächeln, das Morungen der Minnedame mehrfach zuschreibt (vgl. auch Nr. 108,5,1 f. und 112,2,1), erlangt das Bild der frouwe im Minnesang der Zeit eine neue, weichere Facette.” Kasten and Kuhn, Deutsche Lyrik, 790.
40 See e.g., Ulrich von Liechtenstein (KLD 58.XLI).
Be it the distance that separates him from his lady, her haughtiness, or his waking up from a dream, the poet’s erotic fantasy remains forever what it is—just a fantasy. In reality, the woman is said to remain unattainable and safe.\footnote{Dewhurst mentions the influence of the famous Provençal troubadour Bernard de Ventadorn on Morungen. It is from Bernard that Morungen must have inherited the technique of indirectness, for the Provençal poet quite commonly “addresses an audience of voyeurs, inviting desire and complicity through descriptions of his domna which conceal more than they reveal.” Dewhurst, “Vrouwe,” 26.}

Two of Morungen’s poems (\textit{MF XIX.XXII} and \textit{MF XIX.XXI}) illustrate how these strategies can work to both create and obscure the erotic subtext.\footnote{The captivating effect of the lady’s mouth is also very clear in Morungen’s song “Mich wundert harte…” (\textit{MF XIX.XXVI}), in which its speech and beauty rob the male speaker of his senses. For additional examples see \textit{MF XIX.XIX}, \textit{MF XIX.IX}, \textit{MF XIX. XXVII}, \textit{MF XIX.XXVI}.} In both of them, smiling functions as a form of secret communication understandable only to the two lovers inside the poem and disclosed to the public outside it, even though it is always left open whether such communication takes place in actuality or merely in the male speaker’s imagination. “Ich bin iemer ander und nicht eine…” (\textit{MF XIX.XIa} and \textit{Xlb}) addresses a public relationship between the lady and her minstrel, which the latter is eager to imbue with private meaning. Aware of the importance of discretion in the presence of others, the notorious \textit{huotaere} (“watchers, guardians”; \textit{MF XIX.XIa–b.1,3}), he relentlessly searches for the smallest signs of the woman’s favor in her public behavior, the gestures that could be interpreted as her consent to greater intimacy. Since his own surreptitious glances carry a special message to her, he is eager to detect a response to his plea in her laughter—an encouragement to his silent supplication:

\begin{quote}
Miner ougen tougenlichez sehen, 
daz ich ze boten an si senden muoz, 
das neme durch got von mir vür ein vlēhen, 
und obe si lache, daz si min gruoz. (\textit{MF XIX.Xlb.2,1 – 4})
\end{quote}

Let her read for God’s sake a plea in a secret glance of my eyes that I have to send to her as a messenger. And if she smiles, this will be my welcome.

To the outsiders, the woman’s smile is nothing but a traditional greeting bestowed by a feudal lady upon her minstrel, but privately, it tells the man that she understands and welcomes his longing and desire: “The secret has persisted, a triangle between him, and her, and her image.”\footnote{Goldin, \textit{Mirror}, 136.} However, the illusoriness of this communication quickly becomes apparent in the speaker’s jealous outburst (last stanza in \textit{Xlb}; st. 2 in \textit{XIa}). The intended meaning of the lady’s smile turns out to be public, after all; she does not single out the poet, but only bestows on him the
common gesture of courtesy and courtliness available to anybody who deserves it.

Si ensol niht allen liuten lachen
alse von herzen, sam si lachet mir,
und ir ane sehen sô minneclîchen machen.
waz hat aber ieman daz ze schouwen an ir,
der ich leben sol,
und an der ist al min wunne behalten?
joch enwil ich niemer des eralten,
swenne ich si sihe, mir ensi von herzen wol. (MF XIX.Xla.2,1 – 8; MF XIX.XIb.5,1 – 8)

She should not smile at everybody so cordially as she smiles at me, and she should not make such a lovely face. What business has anyone to behold all this in her, for whom I must live and in whom all my joy resides? Yet I would wish to never become so old that my heart would not rejoice at the sight of her.

In a jealous outburst, the “I” reproaches his lady for laughing indiscriminately, for not finding the same meaning in their private relationship as he does—the painful fact he has to accept if he wishes to continue the tradition of lofty love service with honor.

The so-called “Venus”-song uses a similar strategy of bold suggestions followed by a retreat into the safety of the convention (MF XIX.XXII). “Ich waene, nieman lebe…” opens and closes with the familiar description of the lady's remoteness and the man’s futile loyalty and torment:

Ich waene, nieman lebe, der minen kumber weine,
den ich eine trage,
ez entuo diu guote, die ich mit triuwen meine, vernimt si meine klage.
Wê, wie tuon ich sô, daz ich sô herzeclîche bin an sî verdâht, daz ich ein kûnicrîche vûr ir minne niht ennemen wolde, ob ich teilen unde weln solde?
[…]
Ich tuon sam der swan, der singet, swenne er stirbet.
waz ob mir min sanc daz lihte noch erwirbet, swû man minen kumber sagt ze maere, daz man mir erbunne miner swaere? (MF XIX.XXII.1,1 – 8 and 5,5 – 8)

I think nobody among the living would beweep the sorrow that I alone bear, unless the good one, to whom I am loyal, does it upon hearing my lament. Oh woe, why do I long for her with all my heart to such an extent that I would not wish to accept a kingdom instead of her love if I could decide and choose? […] I act like a swan who sings as it is dying. But what if my song might at least bring about one thing: that whenever my sorrow is mentioned, people will envy me in my suffering?
Despite the dejected tone of this frame narrative, the center of the poem is much more cheerful. Between the first and the last lament strophes, Morungen includes memorable descriptions of his fantasies about the woman he loves: of her pursuing him in his imagination (st. 2), her Venus-like beauty (st. 3) that robs him of his senses, and her alleged teasing him (st. 3 – 4) in a game of enticement and rejection, in which her laughter once more plays an important role:

Und ir liehter schin
sach mich güetlich an mit ir spilnden ougen,
lachen si began üz rötem munde tougen,
så zehant enzunte sich mìn wunne,
daz mìn muot stêt höhe sam diu sunne. (*MF XIX.XXII.4,5 – 8*)

And her shining beauty looked at me kindly with frolicking eyes. Her red mouth began to smile at me in secret, and my joy was enkindled at once, so that my spirits remain as high as the sun.

The response that the lady’s red lips and barely discernible smile produce in the suffering male speaker suggests that yet again he is eager to treat it as an encouragement, a welcome, and a promise of solace. However, like the previous song, this text is ambiguous as to the true existence of this promise. While the MHG word *tougen* means “in secret, discreetly,” the last stanza casts doubt on the man’s suggestions about the woman’s complicity; he himself acknowledges the imaginary nature of their love relationship by calling everything previously said about her “a joke” (*spot*). The male speaker also returns to the motif of unrequited love by asking himself why he so willingly prolongs his own agony:

"Wé, waz rede ich? jà ist mìn geloube boese
und ist wider got.
wan bite ich in des, daz er mich hinnen loese?
ez was è mìn spot. (*MF XIX.XXII.5,1 – 4*).

Oh woe, what am I saying? Indeed, this belief of mine is weak and against God. Why don’t I pray to Him to deliver me from here? What I said before was only a joke.**"**

Together with the last four lines of this strophe quoted earlier, this admission abandons the fantasy of reciprocity and reconfirms the poem as a song of lofty

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**44** Cf. Moser and Teervoren’s annotation for line 5,4: “Was ich vorher gesagt habe, war nicht mein Ernst” (*MF*, 68). Also Kasten’s translation: “Das vorhin war nur ein Scherz.” Kasten and Kuhn, *Deutsche Lyrik*, 790. Also see Goldin: “She smiled at him then *tougen*—discreetly? or only in his imagination? Were her goodness and the consoling promise it brought him real or only his fantasy? Nothing is certain, for something has made him aware that his whole relationship with her was a lonely invention. ‘Thus all his heavenly joy is nothing but the illusion of a solitary man.’” Goldin, *Mirror*, 137.
love with its ethos of glorified suffering, so vividly expressed in the metaphor of a dying swan and the speaker’s wish that others might envy him in his torment.45

“I Would Gladly Speak of That Which Should Not Be Named”: Circumventing Lofty Love

How to voice desire while belonging to the tradition that requires yearning for the lofty, the inaccessible, and the perfect? This remains a problem for many courtly love poets who come after Morungen. The late Minnesang is commonly described as epigonic, shallow, and no longer innovative, full of clichés and repetitions.46 Mostly grouped in schools (e.g., Swabian or Swiss Minnesang) rather than referenced by individual authors, post-classical lyric is marked by a striking likeness in form, style, and content. The lofty lady’s red mouth and laughter become so ubiquitous that it might be tempting to dismiss them as simply inherited tropes as well. The popularity of this motif in the lyric of the late-Staufer period by far surpasses anything found on the early and classical stages of its development.47 However, its treatment by those innovative poets who do stand out (e.g., Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Gottfried von Neifen, Burkhart von Hohenfels, Ulrich von Winterstetten, to name just a few) reveals their continuous experimentation with the two bodies of the lofty lady and their further attempts to circumvent the convention while proclaiming allegiance to it.

45 Although it does not use laughter, Morungen’s famous “Narcissus-song” (MF XIX.XXXII) similarly employs the motifs of the attractive red mouth and of the discrepancy between dream and reality. One of the poem’s original aspects is its depiction of the lady’s mouth as pale, which has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Sayce treats its lack of color as a sober reminder of the transience of all things—love, youth, and beauty—and, ultimately, of the contrast between the speaker’s ideal aspirations and his “harsh reality.” Sayce, Medieval German Lyric, 172–173. Goldin sees it as a symbolic representation of the lady’s virtue, whose blemish causes the male speaker to question her perfection and thus individualizes her. Goldin, Mirror, 155. The evidence that he uses, however, for his interpretation of the red mouth as a traditional symbol of virtue and unattainability is in itself problematic (Mirror, 154–155, note 42), since the frequency of the motif among the post-classical authors he names (such as Neifen, Luppin, Hamle, etc.) cannot account for Morungen’s own use, but rather should be seen as a manifestation of his influence on the later poets. For a detailed periodization of the Minnesang see Schweikle, Minnesang, 84–102.

46 As Thomas Cramer indicates, the most typical descriptions of the late Minnesang among Germanists include “epigonic nature,” “clumsiness and banality,” “cliché and stereotypical content,” and a “striking lack of originality” (“Epigonalität, […] Plumpheit und Banalität, Schablonehaftigkeit und stereotyper Inhalt, ein ’erstaunlicher Mangel an Originalität’”). Cramer, “Só sint doch gedanke frí,” 47. Matthias Meyer speaks of the “stagnating canzone” (“die stagnierte Kanzone”). Meyer, “Objektivierung,” 185. Also see Kasten, “Minnesang,” 181; Schweikle, Minnesang, 94; and Hugo Kuhn’s seminal study, Minnesangs Wende.

47 See the comparison of the frequency of this motif earlier in this chapter.
What distinguishes this post-classical lyric from similar poetry by Morungen is its starkly diminished interest in suffering and spiritual growth as a necessary component of a courtly love relationship. 48 This new spirit is best summarized by Ulrich von Liechtenstein in his famous work Frauendienst:

Es sol des edelen jungen lip
sin hochgemuot durch ein guot wip.
und ist er niht von wiben vrô,
sô muoz er immer leben sô,
daz er an freuden ist verirt.
sîn trûren im unsælde birt:
shelten, spotten alle zît
im sîn swachez trûren git. (FD, st. 1686)

A noble young man should keep his spirits high for the sake of a good woman. And if he is not made joyous by women, then he must live forever, with joy denied to him. His grieving brings him misfortune: at all times his unmanly sorrow brings him blame and mockery.

Such a drastic reconceptualization of courtly love service inevitably affects the impassable divide between the lady and the minstrel, resulting in what Ursula Bolduan calls “an ever increasing concretization and personalization of the love-wish.” 49 While the conventions of lofty love continue to govern the standards for expressing male desire, the emphasis shifts from the ennobling role of the woman to her passing the test of (sexual) reciprocity. 50 The insinuation of return is commonly conveyed in a variety of ways: through euphemisms, sexual metaphors, and word play (such as plucking flowers or roses 51); through Goldin’s

50 “Die Aufgabe der Frau besteht nicht mehr nur in der distanten Erziehung des Mannes zu höfischer Gesinnung und Haltung, sondern im Realisieren, Praktizieren, Bewähren…” Bolduan, Minne, 154.
51 Bluomen or rôsen brechen is a standard trope for sexual intercourse or rape. See e.g., Walther (L 75,9 and 112,3; Schweikle 278 and 98), Neidhart SL 17.1, Der tuginhafte Schriber (KLD 53.1), Graf Kraft von Toggenburg (SMS 1.1), and Gedrut-Geltar (KLD 13.IV). Schweikle also mentions two other variants—rôsen lesen (pick roses) and ze holze gân (to go to the woods). Schweikle, Minnesang, 198. A telling example of such double talk is found in Chuonrat von Kilchberg’s poem: “diu mir ie was liep vor allen wiben, / frœlich in des meien bluot / bræche ich ir ein schatehuot” (KLD 33.III.5,4 – 6), which can be translated as “I would gladly break May blossoms to make a hat for her whom I have always preferred to all other women.” However, the word schatehuot has two meanings: “a hat providing shade” (Schatten gebender Hut) and “protection” (schatehuote von Gott = schützende Behütung). Lexer, HW 2:672. Considering the man’s wish to be close to the lady (“if only I could be at her side now” solte
“secret triangle” or what Kremer calls the *chiffre* between the two lovers;\(^{52}\) and through further sexualization of the woman. The post-classical lofty lady is more likely than ever to be imagined with a body that includes eyes, cheeks, hair, and arms—and sometimes even breasts and legs.\(^{53}\) But first and foremost, she always has a very attractive laughing red mouth, often described in rather provocative ways. Unsurprisingly, the eroticized female smiles and laughter appear precisely in the poems where the “male gaze” discovers these bodily charms. Ulrich von Liechtenstein speaks not only of the mouth’s color—“reter denne ein rôte,” ‘redder than a rose’\(^{54}\)—but of the way it must feel on his lips, sweet and hot—“süez unde heiz” (*KLD* 58.XLVII.6,1 – 2). He also invents a special adjective *kleinvélröt* to refer to the tender, delicate, and soft skin of the female lips (*KLD* 58.XLVII.7,3; 58.LII.4,1; 58.LVIII.5,1). Kristan von Hamle admires a mouth so red that it can glow in the dark (“nahetész der vinster gleste,” *KLD* 30.III.4,3). Heinrich Hetzbolt von Wissense builds his whole Song VIII around the image of the mouth that allegedly challenges him with its redness: “daz stet alsam ez spreche ‘ja trutz, wer tar küssen mich?’” (“It is as if it were saying, ‘Well, who would dare to kiss me?’” *KLD* 20.VIII.1,7 – 8; 2,7 – 8). These suggestive, erotically charged images reveal what the poets truly desire—physical contact, a response, a physical reward: Wissense dreams of avenging himself on the seductive organ (“könide ich nach dem willen min an ime mich gereche,” *KLD* 20.VIII.1,4 – 5) and of being embraced by the bare white arms (“müeste ich noch mit blanken armen vrölich umbevangen s,” *KLD* 20.VIII.3,3 – 4); Hamle would not mind admiring the shiny redness *in rehter nähe*, “from a right distance” (*KLD* 30.III.4,5) and finds his ideal of love in complete physical surrender:

Von fröelîchem lîbe mit armen umvangen,  
ze herzen gedrücket, wie sanfte daz tuot;  
von tröstlichem wîbe mit rœslehtem wangen  
vor liebe gelachet, daz fröiwet den muot.

\(^{52}\) Even though Kremer does nothing to explain the imaginary nature of this code or its effect on the fantasy of medieval courtly femininity, he also notices the erotic subtext of many post-classical songs. Kremer, “Das Lachen,” 98.

\(^{53}\) See, for example, Kristan von Luppin: “zwar sî treit gar slechte wize hende, wol gestalt unmâzen gar. sint dâ bein inne? ich wæne nein.” (“She has smooth white hands, exceedingly well-shaped. And are those really her legs? I do not believe so.” *KLD* 31.VII.2,3 – 5). Also see *KLD* 31.III.

\(^{54}\) The comparison of the mouth to a rose is already suggestive in itself, since the rose is not simply red, but also a flower that above all others symbolizes the female sexual organs. On medieval plant symbolism see Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, 263 – 264.
dä sìnt zwei herze und ein einiger lip,
mit worte unterscheiden, ein man und ein wip… (KLD 30.I.1,1 – 6)

How sweet it is to be embraced by the joyous body and to be pressed to one’s heart! How much it gladdens one’s spirits to receive a smile of love from a woman with rosy cheeks who can offer solace! Then there will be two hearts but one sole body, or, to explain it fully, a man and a woman.

Even Ulrich praises kissing (evoking the familiar sensual image of the rose) as the most pleasurable experience imaginable, with the exception of the intercourse itself:

Küssen ist der Minnen růse,
dà si reitzet wunne mit,
sō si mit der liebe löse
ist nách ir vil süezem sit.
sō getet nie niht sō wol,
wan daz einen des man nennen niht ensol.

Gerne ich von dem selben spræche,
waz ez wunne und frôide git.
obe ich mine zuht niht brâche,
ich nantz frôiden hôchgezît
und der minnen lôn alsô… (KLD 58.LVI.6,1 – 7,5)

Kissing is Lady Love’s rose, through which she causes bliss as she is wont to do with all Love’s fickleness according to her sweet custom. Nothing ever feels so good, unless it is that one thing which must not be named. I would gladly speak of that, because it gives bliss and joy. If only I didn’t reveal myself as uncourtly by doing this, I would call it a celebration of joy and a reward of love…

And yet the male speaker is careful only to hint at the fantasy without ever naming it explicitly. He candidly admits that he does not dare to put his reputation at risk: “dannoch vil des ich niht tar gejehen” (“however, I dare not speak much of that,” KLD LVII.7,7). The poets are well aware both of the sensuality of their songs and the limits of the tradition they have consciously chosen. While they pry into their mistresses’ “hidden features,” they are no less eager than Morungen to be perceived as courtly, as belonging to the genre of lofty love (hôhiu minne). To dispel any potential doubts, Ulrich von Liechtenstein categorically denounces the so-called low love (nideriu minne), with its purely

55 Burrow mentions a general move away from public kissing in the thirteenth century. Burrow, Gestures, 51. Kissing thus becomes more and more of a private phenomenon. It is quite common for late minnesingers to describe their imagined actions towards the lady as occurring in secret or in private (tougenlîche). For a detailed analysis of the medieval German perception of private and public space see Wenzel, “Die schuldlose Schöne,” esp. 250.
56 Andreas Capellanus, On Love, 35.
physical satisfaction, and returns to the traditional praise of the high ideals of lofty love (hôhiu minne):

Hôher muot, du twingest mir den lip ze hôch,
unde ist dir daz herze mîn dar zuo bereit,
wanz ie die nidern minne flôch.

[…]
Nideriu minne: an frôiden tôt
ist er, dem si an gesigt.
gît diu höhe sende nôt,
doch wol im, der der selben pfligt!
Si gît sorge, und ist diu sorge frôiden rich. (KLD 58.III.5.5 – 7; 6.1 – 5)

High-mindedness, you press me too hard, and still my heart is ever ready for that, since I have always fled “low love.” […] As far as low love is concerned, he, who lets himself be conquered by it, is an unhappy man. Even if lofty love causes pain, he who pursues it is still blessed. It causes sorrow, but this sorrow is rich with joy.

The devices used to maintain the appearance of staying within the boundaries of conventions include indirection57 and familiar topoi of unrequited passion and the lady’s remoteness and virtue. In the suggestive song about kissing analyzed earlier, Liechtenstein creates a string of euphemisms and adopts a strategy of neutralization, pairing up each sensual mention of the lady’s body with a reference to her virtue and nobility58: “rœter denne ein rôse / ist ir munt süez unde heiz. / sist mit zühten löse” (“her mouth is redder than a rose, so sweet and hot. She is as friendly as modesty allows,” KLD 58.XLVII.6.1 – 3); “brûn ir brâwe, wiz ir lip. / von geburte ein frouwe ist si, / und von tugenden wîp” (“Her brows are brown, her body is white. She is a lady by birth and a woman by virtue,” vv. 6.5 – 7); “kischtlich smielen lachen / kan ir kleinvelrôter munt” (“Her little soft red mouth can smile and laugh chastely,” vv. 7.1 – 2) (my italics in all ex-

57 As Zeyen points out, indirection is typical of medieval writing, especially of an erotic, obscene, or scatological nature. It allows the speaker to unmistakably convey his message while avoiding any improper direct references to the erotic or obscene concept. Zeyen, “daz tet,” 214. Beutin agrees: “Diese Art der Metaphorik ist nichts anderes als die sprachliche Respektierung des Tabus bei seiner gleichzeitigen inhaltlichen Durchbrechung.” Beutin, Sexualität und Obszönität, 113.

58 Curiously, as Monica Green demonstrates, in the Middle Ages the red mouth itself functioned not merely as a standard of female beauty but also as an indicator of a woman’s social status. According to one of the most authoritative medieval medical treatises, the twelfth-century Trotula ensemble, the very ingredients of the potion used to make one’s lips red and supple, hardly could have been accessible to women of humble origins. In fact, the Trotula itself was intended for a noble audience, addressing “noble Salernitan women” (nobiles Salernitane), a scribal correction from “noble Saracen women” (nobiles Sarracene): “The attribution of a certain cosmetic preparation to Muslim noblewomen suggests Christian women’s turning to this neighboring culture for any symbols that would help secure their own class aspirations.” Green, The Trotula, 9.
amples). Similarly, Wissense’s provocative fantasies about the titillating red mouth and a sexual union with his beloved are quickly rendered harmless through emphasizing that she, alas, remains deaf to his supplications: “swie vil ichs an getribe so ist toup der Schoene Glanz” (“No matter how much I persist, the Shining Beauty remains deaf,” KLD 20.VIII.3,7–8). However, while maintained in this way, the convention is also simultaneously conquered since both parties (the poet and the audience) are well aware of the existing erotic subtext: Ulrich’s euphemisms (“that one thing that one should not name,” “celebration of joy,” and “reward of love”) in Song XLVII are unmistakable in their explicitness; and his emphasis of the chaste nature of the woman’s smiling and laughter (smielen and lachen)—a distinction in itself unusual for the Minnesang—suggests the poet’s awareness of the contemporary controversy around their function and propriety. The poem thus simultaneously denies and validates the erotic quality of the lofty lady’s laughter, reinforced by the final lines of the poem that reveal the uplifting effect of her red mouth and bright eyes: “ir munt unde ir ougen liht, / s(o) mich diu an lachent, / h(o)s muotes man mich siht” (“her mouth and her bright eyes—when they smile at me, my spirits are raised high,” KLD 58.XLVII.7,5–7,7).

When one compares the later lyric with Heinrich von Morungen’s songs, it becomes obvious that it has adopted several motifs and strategies, such as the rhetoric of two spaces and the special meaning of consent attributed to the woman’s laughter. At the same time, there are also substantial differences in how these techniques are used. Unlike Morungen, who discovers his fantasies of the red mouth to be nothing but an “illusion of a solitary man,” post-classical poetry tends to lack such introspection. It no longer accentuates the love-object’s unattainability by dwelling on the disparity between reality and dream, ideal and wish. Its tone is playful, its minne is a game, its fantasies no longer refer to the past but belong to the present and are recurrent, while the desire to which it gives voice is often clearly articulated and no longer suppressed. Later authors borrow Morungen’s concept of secret communication issuing from the lady’s mouth and intensify it. In several poems, the laughing red orifice speaks to them, tempts them, and even provokes them to attack it with kisses. Thus it is made

59 Wissense was clearly influenced by the Romance models. The name “der Schoene Glanz” is a pseudonym, inherited from the Romance tradition (cf. Bel Esgar). See Bumke, Courtly Culture, 406.
60 Also see KLD 58.XLIV.3,5.
61 Goldin, Mirror, 137.
62 “The courtly ideal is made to coincide with actual conditions.” Goldin, Mirror, 175.
63 Cf. Kristan von Luppin: “ir mündel kuste ich unde wolde sprechen ’sich, dîner rœte habe dir daz” (“I would kiss her little mouth and would like to say, ’See, your redness brought this upon you,’” KLD 31.III.3,6–7). Also see Ruodolf von Rotenburg: “ir minnerichen munt, gelich dem als er zaller stunt spraechec ’küsse, küsse mich!” (“Her mouth rich with love,
clear that the love game takes place in the male speaker’s head. “Did she or did she not?” is no longer the question to reflect upon, nor is it a source of torment; the focus is on the man’s desire alone.

While the performative aspect of the Minnesang is no longer accessible to us now, the poets’ communication with the audience is unambiguous even in the extant written text. The audience is invited to guess, to enjoy, and to become voyeurs. The very popularity of the red-mouth motif suggests that the public really took pleasure in deciphering what stood behind the poet’s seemingly innocent rhetoric, thus becoming accomplices in his clever impudence. The kind of linguistic play of indirection one finds in the post-classical lyric is part of a new way of talking about sex that, as Joachim Bumke points out, gains more and more popularity over the course of the thirteenth century. It also indicates a changing fantasy about the desirable woman; she is still beautiful, highborn, and honorable, but no longer asexual and no longer invulnerable to seduction. The “new” courtly lady is sexualized by the use of the convention that itself makes use of euphemisms to be suggestive, thereby being both erotic and courtly at the same time.

**Vor liebe gelachet: Laughter beyond the Canzone**

The sensuality attributed to the lady’s mouth and her laughter is only supported by the genres that do not belong to the male-voiced canzone, such as village (doerper) poetry and so-called women’s songs or strophes (Frauenlieder). Authored by men, the latter unsurprisingly echo the male-voiced songs’ treatment of both motifs so closely that they perpetuate the male fantasy of erotic courtly femininity rather than subvert it. The absence of the notorious male gaze, so skillfully used in the canzone as the prerequisite for the sexualization of the woman, is compensated by her depiction as desiring, loving, and conscious of her own sexuality and its effect on men. In Heinrich von Veldeke’s *Frauenlied*, it is the female narrator who fantasizes about a love encounter: “ich wil in mit blanken armen umbev(o[yhen, / mit m(o[‘wnem r(o[))tem munde an s(o[‘wnen balde looks as if it were to say ‘Kiss, kiss me!’” *KLD* 49. Leich III, vv. 128 – 130). See more of Luppin (*KLD* 31.VII and 31.VI.3,7) and Gottfried von Neifen (*KLD* 15.XXXIII.5,7 – 10; 15.IV.3,1 – 9).

Cf. Umberto Eco on medieval symbolism: “It was a type of aesthetic expression in which the Medievals took great pleasure in deciphering puzzles, in spotting the daring analogy, in feeling that they were involved in adventure and discovery.” Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 55.

Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, 412.

Many female-voiced songs are quite open in expressing the sexual desire of the female speaker. This is characteristic of the so-called woman’s song in general. See the Introduction to Klinck and Rasmussen’s, *Medieval Woman’s Song*, 1 – 14. Also see Doss-Quinby, *Songs of the Women Trouvères*; and Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, 367.
“I want to hold him in my beautiful white naked arms and to press quickly my red mouth onto his,” *MF XI.XXXVII.5,1 – 2*.

In the exchange, “War kan iuwer schoener lip....,” by Reinmar von Hagenau, the woman-speaker mentions her inability to resist welcoming her lover with an attractive smile, doing it *vor liebe* (“out of love,” *MF XXI.L.4,4*). She, however, does not stop at this confession; her laughter is, familiarly, only the introductory stage of the courtship process that is supposed to and does culminate in a sexual union of the two lovers. Tellingly, it is the female narrator herself who initiates the encounter, using a familiar euphemism of plucking flowers to express her desire: “Ê ich danne von im scheide, / s(o[m) mac ich sprechen ‘gên wir brechen bluomen ûf der heide’” (“Before I take my leave of him, I may say: ‘Let us go and pluck some flowers in the heath,’” *MF XXI.L.4,5 – 6*).

Reinmar’s woman is thus both elusive and bold. With skillful indirection, she presents herself as a woman in love and willing to grant her love. Her laughter indicates her joy but also bespeaks her sexuality.

Similar themes are found in Walther von der Vogelweide’s well-known song “Got gebe ir iemer guoten tac...” (L 199,17; Schweikle 192). The young female narrator does not conceal that she has been wounded by Love’s arrows and thus desires to be united with the man she loves:

im wart von mir in allen g(o[yhen

ein küssen und ein umbevählen:
dô schöz mir in mûn herze daz mir iemer nâhe lit,
unz ich getuon des er mich bat.
ich tætez, wurde mirs diu stat. (L 119,30; Schweikle 194).

In haste he received from me a kiss and an embrace. Then something shot me straight into my heart; and this something will remain there until I grant him what he asked for. I would do so whenever I have an opportunity.

This song is unique, however, in its reflection of the contemporary concerns regarding laughter. Just like her counterpart in Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s *Das Frauenbuch*, Walther’s lady complains about the social control over female emotions and about her need to be ever mindful of the public perception of her

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67 Zeyen points out that the adjective *blank* is used ambiguously in this passage. It refers both to color (white) and the nakedness of the woman’s arms, which in turn metonymically refer to the lady’s whole naked body: “So ist mit der Übersetzung von *blank* als ‘glänzend, weiß, schön’ nur indirekt ausgedrückt, was eigentlich gemeint ist: Die Arme sind unbekleidet und die nackten Arme wiederum stehen als ‘pars pro toto’ für den ganzen nackten Körper.” Zeyen, “*daß tet,*” 180.

68 For example, in Walther von der Vogelweide’s famous “Under der linden” (L 39,11) similar imagery reveals to the audience, albeit obliquely, what transpired between the maiden and her lover: the woman remembers the broken roses that served the two of them as a bed.
behavior. She chooses to conform to social pressure and forfeits laughter as an open display of joy and as proof of her being in love:

Ich wäre dicke gerne frô,
wan daz ich niht gesellen hân.
nû si alle trûrent sô,
wie möhte ichz eine denne lân?
ich müese ir vingerzeigen liden,
ichn wolte frôide durch si miden.
sus behalte ich wol ir hulde, daz siz lâzen âne nît:
ich gelache niemer niht
wan dâ ez dekeiner siht. (L 119,35 – 43; Schweikle 192).

I would gladly be joyful, but I do not have a companion. Since everybody is so grave, how could I alone behave any differently? I would have to endure their finger-pointing, were I not to abandon joy for their sake. Therefore, I would rather keep their favor, so that they let me be. I never laugh except there where nobody can see it.

The euphemistic way of speaking is particularly prominent in Walther’s most famous female-voiced song, “Under der linden” (L 39,11; Schweikle 228), in which the young woman describes a romantic encounter with her lover in an idyllic setting. While there is no doubt as to the sexual nature of their relationship, the very details of the meeting are hinted at with the help of euphemisms: the falling blossoms, the broken roses, and the lady’s red mouth. Circumlocution here is not a mere necessity because of the sensitive subject matter; rather, it helps, paradoxically, to enhance the eroticism of the poem as well. The woman is the one who points to her red mouth as a silent hint at the ultimate outcome of the love encounter: “He must have kissed me a thousand times. See how red my mouth is” (“Er kuste mich wol tûsent stunt, tandaradei, seht wie rôt mir ist der munt,” L 39,26; Schweikle 228). The reference to the mouth’s redness is ambiguous. It is the symbol of her feminine beauty and the body part inviting the man’s caresses, and at the same time, its color is a direct result of passionate kissing, the first stage of the quinque lineae amoris.70

69 Recent scholarship has rejected the view prevalent in the older Germanistik regarding the age, marital, and social status of the female speaker in Walther’s so-called Mâdchenlieder, as well as the quality of the love they express. On the most recent debates about the famous vrouwe / maget and hôhiu minne / nideriu minne distinctions, see Schweikle, Minnesang, 148 – 149; Gibbs and Johnson, Medieval German Literature, 268, 272; Masser, “Zu den so- genannten Mädchenliedern,” 3 – 15; Bennewitz, “vrouwe/maget,” 237 – 252; Bumke, “Walt- her von der Vogelweide,” 197.

70 Cf. “Almost all physical descriptions and details of the lovers and their act have been erased, replaced by nature imagery and the woman’s mouth, which both bear traces of the act. […] The female speaker displays herself as a speaking trace of the sexual union. Her shame, while related to the modesty of the noble lady, does not control the poem. Rather, it has become a coquettish motif, a part of the poem’s exhibitionistic rhetoric of concealment and revela-
It is unsurprising that the laughing protagonists of MHG Frauenlieder are sexually active, loving women. Women’s songs and strophes pretend to give voice to female desires, yet the only sensibilities truly represented in these male-authored songs are, of course, those of contemporary men. As James A. Schultz succinctly points out,

Nowhere is the lady more a product of the singer’s imagination than in those strophes where she appears to speak in her own voice. These too are visions, fantasies of the singer, who ventriloquizes the lady he wants. Should we be surprised that in so many of these strophes she turns out to want the very same things he does?\(^71\)

Both in male- and female-voiced courtly love poetry, women’s laughter ultimately performs the same work and is evaluated according to the same standard: it is encouraged only as long as it stems from or enhances the pleasure it gives to male onlookers.\(^72\)

"I Can’t Help Thinking of Love": Woman’s Laughter and Man’s Dreams of Power

Unlike conduct and religious discourses that present the value of women’s laughter as uncertain (to say the least), courtly love song seems to treat it in a surprisingly positive way. It presents an ideal of femininity where laughter is a welcoming gesture, a part of the protocol that suggests the lady’s favor toward her vassal-like male servitor. In moving away from suffering as a tool of self-betterment toward more explicit expectations of reward and intimacy, its role in increasing the woman’s value and facilitating communication between the sexes grows in importance. The Minnesang echoes Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s Das Frauenbuch and provides additional insights into how courtly women are sexualized through laughter. As Joan Ferrante observes, the game of courtly love is only “a series of fantasies, which work best around the man’s mental image of a woman.”\(^73\) Despite its unique reversal of traditional gender hierarchy, love lyric, just like other discourses, only expresses the male desire for power and control. E. Jane Burns points out that it is not coincidental that the inverted power structure should coincide with the increased importance of the cult of the Virgin and appear precisely when the real political power of women was at its low

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\(^71\) Schultz, *Courtly Love*, 122.
\(^73\) Ferrante, “Male Fantasy,” 67. Also see Burns, “The Man behind the Lady,” 258; Blamires, *Case*, 10 ff.
Both Mary and the idealized courtly lady can be read as elaborate myths developed by the male-centered medieval institutions of the Church and of the lay aristocracy, based on “the underlying concept of woman in the service of man”—a clever strategy of subjugation and subordination:

To make her into a “lord” is to masculinize her identity, to absorb her into the arena of male activity so that she can be judged by those standards of reciprocity expected of a suzerain toward his vassals. Once placed in the role of Lord, the Lady can be required to repay the lover’s emotional investment with *merce*; otherwise she is discredited for neglecting her rightful duty.

It is precisely the expectation of a reward (OF *merce*, MHG *lön*, *gnade*) that explains the function of laughter in courtly lyric; love poets in the Romance and German traditions all express a desire for recompense, proving that notwithstanding the differences between the individual sub-genres, the most positive and desirable image of the woman ultimately combines virtue and accessibility. Focus on the mouth invests the lofty lady with a gendered attribute, draws attention to her sexualized body, and thus can be seen as a way of obtaining a reward through an erotic verbal game, even if the promise of return exists entirely in the man’s imagination. This strategy reverses the unusual power balance and restores the traditional male authority by tying female identity back to corporeality. The eroticized woman of the post-classical song may remain *physically* unattainable; however, she is conquered by means of insinuations.

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74 Burns, “The Man,” 260. The historian Judith Bennett concurs with Burns: “In the Central Middle Ages, as monarchs began to assert control over localities, as bureaucrats began to replace ad hoc administrators, and as formal institutions began to supplant the informal arrangements of the household, the power of feudal women waned.” Bennett, *Medieval Women*, 22.

75 Burns, “The Man,” 262. The appearance of these myths of feminine identity is historically related to what Bennett terms a new ideology of gender difference, developed by the twelfth century. Bennett refers to the studies by JoAnn McNamara and Susan Mosher Stuard, who have argued that the eleventh and twelfth centuries have been figured as a time of “gender crisis.” In McNamara’s view, “an early twelfth-century *Herrenfrage*—or masculine identity crisis—emerged from both the relative pacification of European society (which meant that masculinity could no longer be asserted by military prowess alone) and the strict imposition of clerical celibacy (which fostered male fears of women).” For her part, Stuart observes that a new polarity of gender roles emerged from such factors as the Gregorian reform, the development of new customs of marriage, and the recovery of once-lost classical texts. As a result, “women were more likely to find themselves being directed, rather than directing […] as they had done in the past.” Bennett, *Medieval Women*, 21 – 22. Both Bennett and Burns are echoed by R. Howard Bloch and Alcuin Blamires, who interpret such male devotion and the seeming empowerment of women in courtly lyric as yet another form of misogyny. Blamires, *Case*, 10; Bloch, “Medieval Misogyny,” 8. Bloch echoes the earlier observation by C. S. Lewis that idealism and cynicism about women are twin fruits of the same branch. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 145.

double talk, and erotic fantasies, thus allowing the male speaker to regain his masculinity, potentially put into question by the “woman-on-top” hierarchy: “The lover himself acts out stereotypically ‘feminine’ traits. […] He describes himself as helpless, suffering, waiting, passive and fearful.”

One of Gedrut-Geltar’s poems ridicules what may be perceived as effeminacy by offering a rowdy alternative to the timid, selfless love service of the minnesinger Wachsmut von Künzich:

Von Kunzechen hêr Wahsmuot
der minnet sine frouwen
über tûsent mile: dannoch was sim gar ze nâhen,
wande ez im sô sanfte tuot
ob er si solde schouwen
üf eim höhen turne und daz er danne solde enpâhen
von ir hand ein vingerlîn: daz kuste er tûsentstunde.
læge er bî der wolgetânen mit ir rôten munde,
er geruorte niemer sî, wand er vor liebe erwunde.

Wäer aber ich sô sælic daz
ich die vil liebe hâte
alters eine an einer stat dâ uns dâ nieman schiede,
wir schieden allez âne haz.
ich weiz waz ich ir tæte,
obe ich ir gewaltic ware: ich sagte ir mine liebe;
ja n’kuste ich iht daz vingerlîn dazs an ir hende trüge:
ich kustes an ir rôten munt, ich ware als ungefüge:
mich dunket, solde ichs iemer pflegen, michn mûhtes niht genûgen. (KLD 13.1a)

Lord Wachsmut von Künzich would pine for his lady as if separated [from her] by a thousand miles. Yet she was all too close to him. For it feels so good if he chanced to see her [standing] on a high tower and then received a ring from her hand. He would kiss it a thousand times. Were he to lie at his red-mouthed beauty’s side, he would never touch her, for he would already be in bliss from love. If only I were so blessed that I could have the lovely one completely alone in a place where nobody would separate us! We would have solved everything amicably. I know what I would do to her if I had her in my power. I would proclaim my love to her. Truly, I would not kiss the ring on her hand. I would kiss her red mouth; I would [indeed] be so uncourtly! It seems to me that even if I were to do it forever, I would still never have enough.

Wachsmut’s choice of the Fernliebe (“love from afar”) and asag/asai as the ultimate test of love and virtue are interpreted here not as a virtue but as a sign of his inaptness and weakness. Depending on the choice of punctuation in the last

77 Ibid., 268.
78 Asag/asai is the ultimate test in the Occitan tradition in which a man is supposed to demonstrate the depth of his love for the woman despite her lying naked next to him or allowing him to kiss and caress her naked body. See Nelli, “Love’s Rewards,” 219–235.
stanza of Gedrut-Geltar’s poem, the speaker’s actions to reassert his masculinity can vary in intensity, yet regardless, they provide a stark contrast to Wachsmut’s patient inaction. The “I” parades his own masculinity by presenting himself as uncourteously aggressive, but strong—just as a real man should be. Helmut de Boor’s alternative punctuation creates an even bolder reading of lines 15–17 (vv. 2,6 – 8):

\[
\text{obe ich ir gewaltic wære? ich sage iu, mine liebe:} \\
\text{Ja enkuste ich niht daz vingerl(o[\['wne liebe:} \\
\text{ich kustes an ir r(o[\))ten munt; ich wäre als ungefüge…}\text{79}
\]

Would I have her in my power? [Would I be violent toward her?] I will tell you this, my dear[s]: I would not just kiss the ring on her hand! I would kiss her on her red mouth. I would [indeed] be so uncourtly!

The question mark at the end of the first sentence splits the possibility of proclaiming one’s love into a rhetorical question and an answer, while the pronoun *iu* (“you, to you”) rather than *ir* (“her, to her”) turns this stanza into a boast or bravado, emphasizing the speaker’s manly spirit even more than the previous version does. In addition, the word *gewaltic* has multiple connotations, including “to have power, control over somebody/something” (mod. Germ. *Gewalt haben*) or “to rape somebody” (mod. Germ. *vergewaltigen*). Thus the statement “we would have solved everything amicably” (“wir schieden allez (o[\[yne haz,” *KLD* 13.Ia.2,4) becomes ominous in referring to taking by force what is not willingly granted, in a secluded place where nobody would or could separate the two lovers (“eine an einer stat d(\[]y uns d(\[]y nieman schiede,” *KLD* 13.Ia.2,3). Lest one dismiss Gedrut-Geltar as unconventionally boisterous, it should be said that similar sentiments can be found in the poetry of more “courtly” poets, such as Kristan von Luppin and even Walther von der Vogelweide:

\[
\text{ich wünsche mir sô werde daz ich noch gelige} \\
bî ir sô nähen deich mich in ir ouge ersehe \\
und ich ir alsô vollelichen an gesige, \\
swes ich si denne frâge, daz si mîrs verjehe. (L 184,11; Schweikle 352)
\]

I wish I were so worthy that I would lie at her side so closely once more that I could see my reflection in her eyes and triumph over her so completely that she would grant me whatever I would ask from her.

These poets hide their desire for domination (MHG *gesigen* means “to win,” “to conquer”) behind the veil of fantasy; however, all of them reaffirm their own

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79 De Boor and Newald, *Geschichte*, 1759 – 1760. Kraus in his *KLD* also cites the form *vch* for manuscript A. Emphasis is mine.
80 Lexer, *TW*, 70.
masculinity by imagining their triumph over the haughty lady and their return to the position of “the man-on-top.”

One can see the village poetry (*doerper*-songs) as an extension of the overall Minnesang trajectory. The poets, who choose to parody the convention of the lofty love, find their object outside the traditional courtly setting, in an uncouth peasant girl. The eroticized female mouths and laughter in these songs of *nideriu minne* (“low,” or sexual, love) no longer have the same effect, since the power balance is much more conventional. According to Andreas Capellanus’s popular treatise *De amore*, a woman of lowly descent can and should be obtained with ease any time.81 In Tannhäuser’s poetry, the girl’s implied availability is made evident by her extreme and overt sexualization, her body is violated by the male gaze. The audience hears about the maiden’s breasts, legs, thighs, and even her genitals.82

blanc alsam ein hermelin
waren ir diu ermelin.
ir persone diu was smal,
wol geschaffen üeral:
Ein lützel grande was si da,
smal geschaffen andeswa.
An ir ist niht vergezzen:
lindiu diehel, slehtiun bein, ir füeze wol gemezzen. (III.37 – 49)
Her little arms were as white as ermine. Her body was slender and well-built everywhere. She was a little bit large down there, but otherwise slender-built. Nothing was forgotten: tender thighs, slender legs, well-sized feet.

wol stent dinui löckel,
din mündel rot, din öugel, als ich wolde. […]
rosevar din wengel, din kellin blanc. […]
Gedrat dine brüste.[…]
là din sitzel blecken
ein wenic durch den willen min, da gegen muoz ich scherecken. (XI.15 – 18, 21, 23 – 24)
Your little locks become you. Your little red mouth and your little eyes are just the way I would wish them. Your little cheeks are the color of roses, your little neck is white. Your breasts are fragrant. Show your little buttocks for my sake. I am in awe of them.

nu seht an ir fuoze,
die machentz so suoze;

81 “And if you should, by some chance, fall in love with one of their women, be careful to puff them up with lots of praise and then, when you find a convenient place, do not hesitate to take what you seek and to embrace them by force.” Andreas Capellanus, *Art of Courtly Love*, 150.
82 The Bakhtinian *snizhenie* (“pointing downward”) is very clearly employed here to subvert the tradition and laugh at this lyric’s lofty predecessors. See chapter 2 for more information.
Now look at her feet, they make it so sweet. Take a look at her little legs! Her *mons Veneris* is curly and brown.

Here the desired object is rendered accessible by virtue of her social status; any similarities between her and the traditional lofty lady are only part of the overall parody. There is no need for the euphemistic mode of speaking, and for this reason, the girl’s laughter, used as a refrain, sounds like nothing more than a repetitive cliché: “ir zimt so wol daz lachen, daz tusent herze müesten von ir krachen” (“Laughter becomes her so well that it could break thousands of hearts”).\(^8^4\) Women’s laughter in the Minnesang thus participates not only in the construction of gender, but of class as well.

Despite the differences in form, perspective, and treatment of gender roles among various types of courtly lyric, the images of women and approaches to laughter consistently reveal more about men’s sensibilities and fantasies than about the laughing women themselves. Laughter thus performs similar work to that of conduct discourse, uncovering the tensions within the medieval construct of desirable femininity. Whether the lady is remote and mute, or loving and talking, or a simple peasant girl who happens to attract the attention of a nobleman, the way she is admired, gazed at, and scrutinized bespeaks the repressed male fantasy of love that requires women to be virtuous yet accessible, or to use Walther’s words, to remain “women who know how to be grateful” (“vrouwen die können danken”).\(^8^5\)

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\(^8^3\) Quoted according to Siebert, *Der Dichter Tannhäuser*, 115. The man openly acknowledges that he thinks of love: “Und ir gürtelsenken machet, daz ich underwilent liebe muoz gedanken” (“And when her belt falls down, I can’t help but think of love,” XI.11 – 12). The belt is a popular medieval allegory for the loss of virginity.

\(^8^4\) In Siebert’s edition, see Songs III, IV, VII, XI. The cliché-like nature of this hyperbole is obvious in the fact that Tannhäuser uses the exact same description for a man in Song I.

\(^8^5\) L 47,36; Schweikle 332.