“She Is Beautiful and She Is Laughing?” Courtly Smiling in the Iconography of Virtue and Vice

“Daz himelr(ö)wche ist gel(ö)wchet zehen meiden, der w(ö)ren fünf wise und fünf toerinne…”

(Berthold von Regensburg)\(^1\)

“Bearing makes virtue visible.”

(C. Stephen Jaeger)\(^2\)

Querying Smiling Femininity

So far, the uneasy relationship between women’s laughter and virtue in medieval vernacular tradition has been examined for the most part in terms of clerical influence on the secular aristocratic society, as a reflection of the overall ambiguous treatment of laughter and its connection to female sexuality based on the symbolic equivalence between the mouth and genitals. However, it has also become clear that the lay and religious worlds in the Middle Ages were engaged in a constant and productive dialogue, sometimes challenging, sometimes adopting the other’s ideas. Ecclesiastical discourse responded to the politics and morality of secular society, while the latter accepted or questioned religious authority, views, and pastoral guidance. As the last two chapters have shown, the belief in the inherent weakness and sinfulness of female nature coexists side by side with a different view of femininity promoted in courtly culture—the figure of a beautiful and virtuous aristocratic lady whose smile encourages, inspires, and welcomes the interest of male suitors. The enormous popularity of this image in the High Middle Ages and beyond leads to a question about the potential reverse impact of this seemingly positive alternative in religious iconography of virtue and vice: Could laughter ever grace a chaste female body? Art, particularly sculpture, lends itself well to answering this question. Thanks to its size and ability to accurately reproduce human features and bodies, portal sculpture presents vast opportunities for deepening our understanding of medieval emotions. The contemporary debates on women’s laughter and virtue are reflected and further tested in the depictions of the popular biblical parable

\(^1\) “The kingdom of Heaven resembles the ten maidens, five of whom were wise and five were foolish...” (“1. Klosterpredigt,” LXVI) in VA I:258.

\(^2\) Jaeger, Envy, 116.
about the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), unique in their use of exclusively female characters and their expression of emotions such as joy, grief, jubilation, and despair. The representations of this story on the portals of medieval Gothic cathedrals reveal the familiar tension between the courtly view of smiling femininity and the conservative religious model of a virtuous woman. The statuaries featuring the ten virgins exhibit all the necessary attributes: female figures, the clear contrast between virtue and sin, the involvement of both religious and secular values, and, most importantly, the depiction of women’s laughter. The latter’s use in plastic art illustrates that by the mid-thirteenth century it became firmly associated with the courtly way of life and was perceived as a liability for women. In Worms, the cruel and seductive Lady World (*Frau Welt*) grins as the knight she vanquished crawls at her feet. Likewise, when smiles are depicted on the faces of the foolish virgins, they represent the young women’s preference for worldly pleasures over the purity of their bodies and souls. While the innovative and positive use of laughter found on the *Paradiesportal* of the Magdeburg cathedral (ca. 1240–1260) seems to be challenging this stereotype, its reception suggests that it may be just the kind of exception that only proves the general rule that associates female virtue with self-restraint and strict bodily control. The fact that the sculptor’s vision does not survive beyond Magdeburg bespeaks the unique circumstances in which this vision of smiling femininity arose. It is also consistent with the strong apprehension of laughter in ecclesiastical and clerical discourses from the thirteenth century on, and with contemporaneous criticism of the courtly worldview. This underscores the importance of moderation within the ideal of the *vir bonus* (“good man”) and suggests that, ultimately, dignified composure might have been perceived as more consistent with virtue.

### Damned or Chosen: The Parable and Its Visual Representation

Having originated in northern France in the twelfth century, the Gothic style quickly spread across Europe and England, becoming the universal style of architecture by 1400. The portal of a Gothic cathedral usually contains an elaborate iconographic program; on the one hand, it represents the gates to Paradise, while on the other it functions as the *biblia pauperum*, the place where Church doctrine can best be communicated to the people. Typical scenes found...
on cathedral portals include biblical allegories and depictions of Judgment Day. The story of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1 – 13), which Christ told to His disciples on the Mount of Olives, is one of the most popular parables:

1Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out and meet him.” 7Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” 9But the wise replied, “No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.” 10And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” 12But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” 13Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. 5

As Regine Körkel-Hinkfoth points out in her analysis of this parable in medieval and post-medieval art and drama, its meaning and interpretation have remained full of ambiguities even until now. Such questions as the difference between the virgins, the essence of the foolish ones’ transgression, the symbolism of waking and sleeping, and the significance of the oil lamps are not deducible from the text alone and have always been open to interpretation. 6 In the Gospel of Matthew this allegory is found among references to the Last Judgment—in the parable of the faithful and the wicked slave (Matt. 24:45 – 51) and the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14 – 40). The surrounding context thus defines the symbolism of the virgin parable as belonging to the apocalyptic tradition and its message as that of an admonition about Christ’s return and the need for watchfulness. Warnings of this kind are abundant in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels of Luke and Mark. “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour,” warns Luke 12:40, and he continues: “When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from’” (Luke 13:25). “Therefore,” cautions Mark, “keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And that I say to you I say to all: Keep awake”

5 New Oxford Annotated Bible, 38.
(Mark 13:35 – 37). Carelessness will result in damnation, in being locked out of the Kingdom of God.

Another aspect of the story, open to interpretation, is the way its ten protagonists respond. The style of the virgin parable is strikingly detached and matter-of-fact, almost stripped to the bone and reduced to a mere enumeration of actions and simple dialogue. To distinguish between the two groups of maidens, the story simply labels them as either wise or foolish, beginning in the second verse (“Five of them were foolish, and five were wise,” Matt. 25:2), without providing any explanation for this judgment. The ten appear together and are treated as a group; moreover, initially the wise appear to be not much better than the foolish, for all of them fall asleep while waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. The only difference between the two groups seems to be their degree of foresight; the foolish expect the bridegroom to arrive quickly, and therefore do not bring very much lamp oil with them, while the wise are prepared for a long wait. Aside from these simple events, the story does not explore the characters’ feelings; there is not even one mention of the joy of the chosen or of the despair of the condemned. Not a word is said about chastity and carelessness, modesty and seduction, or the opposition between this world and the afterlife. All of these themes, however, are reflected in the mid-thirteenth-century iconography that helps to convey the parable’s nebulous message with the help of images.

The two leading interpretations of the virgin parable either place it within the tradition of the Virginitätslehre (“discourse on virginity”) or approach it from the eschatological perspective. The third-century theologian Origen interprets the midnight hour as the time of the Last Judgment and the virgins’ sleep as their death. The foolish virgins’ transgression is said to lie in their insufficient good works: “Non autem praeparant se bonis operis” (“They have not prepared themselves for good deeds”). In the West, Hilarius (d. 367 C. E.) associates all ten virgins with the Ten Commandments. The virgins are also said to represent those who do and do not believe in Christ, thus moving the symbolism ever more toward the ultimate dichotomy of good and evil. Among the Church Fathers, Augustine (d. 430 C. E.), whose version greatly influenced subsequent readings of the parable by Gregory the Great (d. 604 C. E.) and the Venerable Bede (d. 735 C. E.), interprets the ten virgins as the symbolic representation of the Christian

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7 Hildegard Heyne’s early-twentieth-century study shows that the Eastern branch of Christianity was particularly prone to interpreting the parable as Virginitätslehre. Heyne, Das Gleichnis von den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen, 41. Also see Körkel-Hinkfoth, Die Parabel von den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen, 20.
9 Ibid., 23.
Church (*Ecclesia*), the oil in their lamps as compassion, their sleep as death, and the awakening as the resurrection.\textsuperscript{10}

Many of these threads are continued in the Middle Ages. Rhabanus Maurus (d. 856) echoes Origen by reading the parable as an allegory of the Last Judgment. Yet in his view, the wise virgins represent those who succeed in preserving both spiritual and physical virginity. In contrast, the foolish virgins lose their purity, for even though they remain chaste in body, they do not do sufficient good. The twelfth-century *Glossa ordinaria* by Anselm of Laon (d. 1117) divides the virgins into those who have not rejected Christ (the wise) and those who do not want to accept the Kingdom of God (the foolish).\textsuperscript{11} Around the same time, Honorius Augustodunensis further complicates the matter by adding the component of sexualized female virtue to the parable. In his *Speculum Ecclesia*, the wise virgins give up carnal love for the love of Christ and thus are pure both in body and in spirit (“sed Christi amore carnis voluptates respuunt,” “but reject the pleasures of flesh for the love of Christ”).\textsuperscript{12} Hugo of St. Victor (d. 1142) adds one more detail—he accuses the foolish virgins of vanity and wanting praise.\textsuperscript{13} The foolish virgins thus become guilty of more than mere negligence and lack of foresight, they come to represent moral corruption and impurity.\textsuperscript{14}

These textual interpretations are echoed in the renditions of the parable in both sculpture and pictorial art. During the High Middle Ages, the virgin motif is widely used as cathedral ornamentation in the form of miniatures, mural paintings, reliefs, and, later, large-sized portal sculptures. Even though they are present in Romanesque art as well (e.g., in Pont l’Abbé, France), the wise and foolish virgins reach the peak of their popularity during the high Gothic period, when they become a common display on cathedral portals.\textsuperscript{15} Geographically, the wise and foolish virgins are found predominantly in France and Germany, with very few extant cases in England (Lincoln) and Spain (Najera and León), with almost none in Italy.\textsuperscript{16} The cathedrals most known for their representation of the

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{12} As quoted in Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{14} Cf. the conclusion of Book III of Andreas Capellanus’s *Art of Courtly Love* (*De amore*): “Be mindful, therefore, Walter, to have your lamps always supplied, that is, have the supplies of charity and good works. Be mindful ever to watch, lest the unexpected coming of the Bridegroom find you asleep in sins. Avoid then, water, practicing the mandates of love, and labor in constant watchfulness so that when the Bridegroom cometh He may find you wakeful; do not let worldly delight make you lie down in your sins, trusting to the youth of your body and confident that the Bridegroom will be late, since, as He tells us Himself, we know neither the day nor the hour.” Andreas Capellanus, *Art of Courtly Love*, 212.
\textsuperscript{15} Lehmann names St. Denis cathedral in France as the starting point for portal architecture and art. Lehmann, *Die Parabel*, 61.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 58 – 59. Körlkel-Hinkfoth’s volume provides a very extensive and thorough analysis of
parable include St. Denis, Chartres, Amiens, and Notre Dame of Paris, as well as Basel, Bern, Braunschweig, Erfurt, Freiburg, Hamburg, Lübeck, Magdeburg, and Strassburg.

In tracing the ten virgins across time and different visual media (stained glass, miniature painting, frescoes, relief, and portal sculpture) we can see the particular arsenal of artistic means typically used to separate the damned from the chosen. The easiest and most traditional way to make this distinction is, of course, with the lamps. The foolish are portrayed with their lamps extinguished, held low, or dropped. In contrast, the wise hold their lamps high, carefully protecting their fire. Another marker is often the presence of crowns or nimbi, particularly when the parable is interpreted as an allegory of the Old and the New Covenant, the Synagoga and the Ecclesia. The crowns sit firmly on the heads of the chosen and fall off the heads of those left behind. The distinction between the saved and the lost maidens can be further suggested through the reproduction of the story’s finale. For example, St. Gallus Gate in Basel captures the moment of the Bridegroom’s arrival. In the right half of the relief, the foolish virgins face the closed door, telling the viewer that their carelessness has locked them out of the wedding, i.e. heavenly Paradise. The wise group is placed to the left of the door and greeted by the Bridegroom’s gesture of blessing. However, as the artistic trend moves away from the Romanesque and toward the Gothic, with its different architectural and sculptural considerations and methods, depicting the parable as a sequence of events becomes less popular. When such important elements of the story as the Bridegroom (Christ) or the door that separates the two groups of maidens are no longer available, a completely new set of tools must convey the difference between the wise and the foolish.

The virgins’ clothes and adornments become one way to distinguish them. It is important to point out that the distinction in clothing per se has been used to differentiate between the two groups since early Christian art, with the wise virgins dressed in white to indicate their purity, and the foolish virgins clad in

the use of the parable about the wise and foolish virgins in art and drama. It contains an impressive catalogue of references to the parable in sculpture, mural painting, stained glass, and book illustrations, as well as textual analysis of the medieval and post-medieval drama employing this motif.

17 See, for example, the relief depiction of the foolish and wise virgins on the West portal of the Amiens cathedral (ca. 1230) or on the stained-glass window in Naumburg (ca. 1250). See LCI 2:460 – 461.
18 A similar approach is also used in Eguisheim (1220) in the Alsace region, France.
bright-colored robes. Lehmann’s study of the motif in medieval cathedral art illustrates that the use of clothing was very popular in France and in early-German cathedral sculpture, heavily influenced by the French models. During the High Middle Ages, however, the dress symbolism becomes more subtle. The robes and headwear of both groups reflect the style of the time period in which the cathedral was built (das Zeitkostüm). The wise virgins are often clothed in simple robes, with their heads modestly veiled, while the foolish ones parade fashionable contemporary garments and keep their heads uncovered and their hair loose. Thanks to this approach, the sculptural treatments participate in the contemporary discourse on virginity, echoing the ecclesiastical readings of the parable mentioned earlier. The visually depicted story juxtaposes not only watchfulness and carelessness, but also modesty and vanity, asceticism and worldliness, chastity and lack of moderation. The relief panels on Basel’s St. Gallus Gate provide a very telling illustration of this. The five wise virgins are recognizable not only by their lit lamps, with the fire still visible in some of them, but also by their attire. Their bodies are covered from head to toe with long, loose robes and their heads with monastic-looking veils. The wise virgins of Basel are clearly a part of the discourse that promotes female monastics as paragons of modesty, purity, and simplicity. In contrast, the five foolish virgins hold their lamps upside down, face a closed door, and model the aristocratic fashions of the time—their dresses display long trains and tightly fitted bodices that accentuate their breasts. Their heads are uncovered, allowing their long, flowing hair to hang freely, indicating their unmarried status but also, and more importantly, working together with their dress to symbolize their love of the world, their vanity, and, consequently, their eternal damnation. Similar iconography can be found on the portals of several other, substantially later Gothic cathedrals, such as Amiens (ca. 1230), Laon (ca. 1200), Chartres (1212–1220), Eegisheim (ca. 1230), Trier (the Liebfrauenkirche, ca. 1250), and Lübeck (ca. 1400), as well as in the relief figures of the choir of Magdeburg (1210–1220).

With its ability to reproduce human emotions much more successfully than the smaller relief sculpture or stained glass art, Gothic portal statuaries add gestures and even facial expressions to the existing iconography to differentiate between the two groups of maidens, particularly in Germany. Interestingly,
even though it is intended to make the distinction clearer to the viewer, the
virgins’ body language only further complicates interpretation, as a close ex-
amination of the cathedral statuaries in Magdeburg (ca. 1240 – 126024) and
Strassburg (ca. 1280 – 1290) proves. Products of roughly the same era, but
conceived independently of each other, the two ensembles are famous for their
Despite the differences in their iconographic approaches, the use of smiling in
these two statuaries underscores the same idea about the relationship between
laughter, virtue, moderation, and femininity. Importantly, in both cases it
functions as a trademark of the secular, courtly world.25

Enduring Prejudice: Strassburg’s Courtly Femininity and Smiling
Sin

The south portal of the west façade of the Strassburg cathedral (ca. 1280 – 1290)
presents both the medieval and knowledgeable modern viewer with a powerful
message about salvation and damnation, vice and virtue (Fig. 1). The two
sculptural groups—the wise and the foolish virgins as one, and the Ecclesia and
Synagoga (created some forty years earlier) as the other—are striking in what
C. Stephen Jaeger calls their “plasticity, dynamism, and realism” and in their
“moral transparency.”26 To use art historian’s language, the Strassburg virgins
are not isocephalic, that is, the good are not marked only by some external
device, such as lamps, but otherwise depicted as identical with the evil.27 The
message of the virgin parable is meant to be easily discernible from the young
women’s bodies, which “dramatize and enact virtue or vice” in a way that,

24 These are the ranges for the virgin statues only. Kirschbaum sets the date at ca. 1240. LCI
2:460. Behling points out the uncertainty of precise dating. Behling, “Die klugen und tü-
richten Jungfrauen zu Magdeburg,” 19 – 20; LCI 2:462. Schubert places the Magdeburg vir-
gins at about 1250, based on the comparison between them and two other sets of sculptures:
the slightly earlier Annunciation pair (die Verkündigung) and the statues of the Ecclesia and
Synagoga (ca. 1260). See Schubert, Der Dom zu Magdeburg, 19, 26. The construction of the
cathedral itself spreads from the tenth well until the sixteenth centuries.
25 Both cathedrals inspired impressive followings. Art historians point out that Magdeburg’s
overall conception was imitated throughout Central Germany (Mitteldeutschland). Its in-
fluence is clear in Hamburg (ca. 1300), Osnabrück (ca. 1300), Braunschweig (ca. 1310 –
1320), and Erfurt (ca. 1330 – 1350), particularly in the treatment of the foolish virgins.
Lehmann, Die Parabel, 77. Strassburg’s example was followed by Basel (ca. 1290 – 1300),
Nuremberg (ca. 1320 – 1330), and Regensburg (ca. 1330). Körkel-Hinkfoth, Die Parabel von
den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen, 78 – 79.
26 Jaeger, Envy, 331.
27 Ibid., 338 – 339.
according to Jaeger, presents a “decisive break with [existing] tradition,”28 a view to which I will return later.

Every detail in this ensemble appears to have been carefully planned to deliver a message about the right choices and social expectations to the public entering the church, and to portray ideal femininity as virginal, virtuous, and asexual. In this, the Strassburg sculptor chose to follow the earlier, French Gothic models rather than the native German approach represented by its rough contemporary, Magdeburg.29 The treatment of the virgin parable is strongly reminiscent of Amiens, Chartres, and Laon; the body language and facial expressions of the figures reinforce the message already conveyed through the familiar symbolism of lamps and clothing. While the bodies of the chosen ones are concealed by veils and flowing robes, their faces are peacefully calm and expressionless and their little mouths are tightly shut (Fig. 2–3). The wise virgins’ monastic-looking attire and perfect body restraint tell the spectator that this group of maidens is virginally pure and chaste. At the same time, the foolish maidens’ wrong priorities are indicated in a familiar way through their worldlier and more fashionable clothes: “They wear tight-fitting garments accentuating the shapes of their bodies, particularly their waist, breast, and thighs. The tight-fitting undergarment and the dress worn over it were common from the 12th c. on. […] The foolish virgins wear their hair loose as customary for maidens”30 (Fig. 4). The sculptures immediately bring to mind the patristic admonitions about the importance of self-restraint and moderation for women as well as the connection between laughter, foolishness, worldliness, and lack of virtue.31

The difference between the saved and the condemned is further strengthened with the help of the two male figures who lead each group. To the left of the foolish virgins, there is a statue of a handsome young man dressed in lavish courtly robes, whose back, however, reveals hideous crawling reptiles (Fig. 5). The Seducer (also known as the Prince of the World, der Fürst der Welt) offers the

28 Ibid., 339 and 331, respectively.
31 Körkel-Hinkfoth mentions an interesting (although much later) example illustrating the idea of the foolish virgins’ lack of chastity. She refers to an early-fifteenth-century illustration of the parable in which the wise virgins and the Ecclesia were depicted as luxuriously dressed, while the Synanoga and the foolish virgins were distinguished by the color yellow: “Gelb war die Farbe der Prostitution, der Weltlust und der Hoffart. In der höfischen Farballegorien war gelb auch die Farbe der erfüllten Liebe.” Körkel-Hinkfoth, Die Parabel von den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen, 110.
first foolish virgin an apple, the infamous fruit of temptation and sin, with a conspicuous smile on his lips (Fig. 6). She grins in return, one hand raised to her breast, ready to unfasten her garment. As if to dispel any remaining doubts about the hopelessness of her situation, the virgin’s belt—a powerful symbol of female chastity—has already fallen to the ground (Fig. 6). It is no coincidence that the Seducer is dressed in secular garments of the latest French fashion and that he is depicted with a traditional courtly smile on his face as well—a stark contrast to the solemn, ascetic figure of Christ in the group opposite (Fig. 8 – 9). The overall appearance of both the Prince of the World and the virgin next to him as well as the courtly smiles on both of their faces evoke the traditional ritual of courtship, where the young woman’s facial expression is consistent with the contemporary depictions of courtly welcome, love, and encouragement of the man’s sexual advances. In the case of the first foolish virgin of Strassburg, the clothes and body language work together to send a message about her imprudent worldliness coupled with moral and physical corruption, proving that, as a contemporary text observes, “all her thoughts are directed toward men” (“aller ir gedanch hin zuo den mann en stavr”). This iconography is later picked up in the Basel minster (1290 – 1300), where we find an almost identical representation of the courtly Seducer and the smiling foolish virgin.

In Strassburg and the cathedrals that use it as a model, the depictions of laughter contribute to the strong criticism of the courtly way of life, so prominent

32 The same iconography is used for the female equivalent of the Prince of the World, the notorious Lady World (Frau Welt), who is likewise depicted as fair of face but ugly or rotten from behind, seducing her followers with her charms while leading them toward perdition. This imagery was popular in the contemporary poetry as well. Cf. Walther von der Vogelweide: “Din zart hat mich vil nach betrogen, / wand er vil sùezer froûden gît. / Do ich dich gesach reht under ougen, / dò was din schehe an ze schouwen wûnneclîch a sunder lougen. / Doch was der schanden alse vil, / dò ich din hinden wart gewar, / daz ich dô ich imer schelten wil” (“Your tenderness has deceived me many a time, for it gives much sweet joy. As I looked directly into your face, there you were, truly beautiful to behold. But as I became aware of your back, it was such a disgrace that I shall curse you forever,” L 101,5; Schweikle 226).

33 A similar gesture and a smile, albeit less conspicuous than that of the foolish virgin next to the Seducer, can be seen on the foolish virgin who is separated from the main group, to the left. The same gesture and a similar smile are also featured on the face of a foolish virgin from Saint-Sauveur cloister in Vienne (Isère), France. See Figure 7.

34 My translation. As quoted in Körkel-Hinkfoth, Die Parabel von den klugen und törchten Jungfrauen, 27. Körkel-Hinkfoth cites a medieval text that sees physical love in the foolish virgins’ case as the main cause for losing God’s favor: “die werdent zuo derselben stuond verdampnet, vnd sint als schuldig vor got” (“They are condemned at once and are considered to be guilty before God”).

35 The Fürst der Welt (Prince of the World) is also found on the portals of three other later cathedrals: in Nuremberg (1320 – 1330), Freiburg (after 1300), and Regensburg (ca. 1330). In the latter, the Seducer is offering an apple, as he does in Strassburg. See illustrations in Körkel-Hinkfoth, Die Parabel von den klugen und törchten Jungfrauen, 531 – 553.
in contemporaneous religious discourse. In this view I disagree with C. Stephen Jaeger, who considers Strassburg’s approach to smiling to be unique among the representations of the virgin parable and evaluates it positively, even in the case of the first foolish virgin:

Both the tempter and the foolish virgin on his left smile broadly. The man’s smile almost turns down and this gives him a sinister aura. His smile is without humor; it seems forced and hypocritical. The virgin, however, smiles broadly, and there is little to read in her face besides abundant good cheer. In fact, her expression places her close to the famous smiling angels of the annunciation and visitation scenes on Rheims [sic] cathedral. Both have a puckish, full grin, and the comparison legitimizes the smile of the Strassburg virgin, foolish though she is. The sculptor did not want to convey a vice, but virtue unrestrained and undisciplined.36

It is hard to disagree with Jaeger’s main point about the Strassburg ensemble reflecting the moral values of the bygone era. However, some of the premises on which he bases his argument about Strassburg’s uniqueness are problematic. First, what Jaeger describes as a broad smile on the Seducer’s face is really more of a smirk, a visible yet discreet smile—nothing like the actual broad grin on the face of the foolish maiden to his left. Furthermore, Jaeger’s evaluation of the young woman’s facial expression as consistent with virtue rather than vice, albeit “unrestrained and undisciplined,” is inconsistent with the contemporaneous discourses on femininity and laughter, as well as with the rest of the sexual symbolism that the Strassburg sculptor used to hint at the maiden’s lack of modesty. The depiction of the first foolish virgin is strongly reminiscent of medieval religious texts, such as the late-thirteenth-century Alemannic poem “Vom Jüngsten Tage” (“Of the Judgment Day”), that associate laughter, smiling, and other forms of entertainment and self-enjoyment, particularly for women, with vanity and a lack of foresight:

Waz sol ich von den vrouwen sagen,
Der lip hie höhvant wolte tragen,
Die hie gezieret giengen
Und sünde vil enphiengen
Mit stolzheit und mit tenzen,
Mit schapelen unde krenzen,
Mit binden und mit risen?
ir ermuf ze brisen,
Sie trougen heftelin vil.
lachen, singen was ir spil.37 (“Vom Jüngsten Tage,” vv. 469 – 478)

36 Jaeger, Envy, 342.
37 Quoted according to “Vom Jüngsten Tage,” in De Boor, Die deutsche Literatur, 1:172 – 182.
What can I say about women who wanted to be clothed in hybris here, who came here [to hell] all adorned and committed much sin because of pride and dancing, crowns and wreaths, bands and veils? They used to wear many a clasp to fasten their sleeves and entertained themselves with laughing and singing.

The anonymous poet of “Vom Jüngsten Tage” clearly characterizes laughter, singing, self-adornment, and dancing as forms of sin (sünde), sufficient to condemn the careless to hellfire.

Jaeger’s ingenious oxymoron further ignores the symbolism the sculptor used to hint not only at the foolish and shortsighted nature of the young woman’s behavior but also at its sexual consequences: the virgin’s hand is raised to her bosom as if unfastening her garment and, importantly, her belt is already lying at her feet—a powerful symbol of her lost chastity. The sculptural depiction of the foolish virgin is thus influenced by and participates in the persistent and pernicious tradition of sexualizing the foolish virgins, of connecting them explicitly to sexual sin and temptation of flesh. Abelard’s fourth personal letter to Heloise, for example, unfavorably compares the foolish virgins to the Beloved of the Song of Songs, contrasting their sinfulness with her purity:

He [the bridegroom] makes her different from other women who thirst for earthly things and seek worldly glory, so that she may truly become through her humility a lily of the valley, and not a lily of the heights like those foolish virgins who pride themselves on purity of the flesh or an outward show of self denial, and then wither in the fire of temptation.

Similarly, some decades after Strassburg’s ensemble had been figured, the fourteenth-century religious text Büchlein von der geistlichen Gemahelschaft by Konrad (Spitzer) used the foolish maidens as an illustration of sexual sins. However, the most striking example of sexualized sin in the case of this parable comes from the so-called Erdbeer- or Kindheitslied by the poet Wilder Alexander, who gives us the following description of the poor foolish virgins:

Wizzet ir daz vünf juncvrouwen
sich versümten in den ouwen
unz der künc den sal beslöz,
ir klag und ir schade was gröz;
wande die stocwarten
von in zarten
daz si stuonden kleider blöz. (KLD 1.V.7,1 – 7)

38 Jaeger’s description of the virgin’s facial expression is also ambivalent: sometimes he describes it as a smile, and sometimes as a smile and a laugh. I cannot detect any open-mouthed laughter in this case. Jaeger, Envy, 343.
39 Personal Letter 4 in Radice, The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 139.
Be it known to you that five virgins tarried in the meadow until the king locked the hall. Their wailing and their grief were great, for the guards tore away their clothes, so that they stood there naked.

Infusing Matt. 25:1 – 13 with the elements of Ct. 5:7, in which the bride laments that her veil was torn by city guards, this version leaves the foolish virgins in front of the closed door conspicuously nude. Since corporeality plays no part in Matthew’s parable, this innovation is telling. As Annette Volfing justly points out, this punishment by far exceeds its counterparts in both original stories in its harshness. The foolish virgins are not simply excluded from their own wedding, but are turned into objects of sexual humiliation; they are reduced to their sexual(ized) bodies by being stripped naked and left on display for both the diegetic and non-diegetic audiences to disapprove of and to learn from their punishment, while also—who could deny it—voyeuristically enjoying it.

However similar the Strassburg’s foolish virgin’s smile might appear to the almost grotesque jubilation of the angels and the saved ones at the cathedrals of Reims and Bamberg, it is also qualitatively different: it graces a female, not male, body in the moment of its downfall. Her grin is just one in the arsenal of the elements that tell a tale not of virtue but of an erroneous choice and a lack of modesty, that is, of sin. It is shown in a sort of parody of the Annunciation between the Prince of the World and his female victim, as part of a courtly and courting ritual, a game of seduction, marking the presence of the sexualized female body. Ironically, Jaeger himself explores the erotic potential of female smiling, albeit in the wise virgin group. He describes one of the Strassburg wise virgins (the third one from Christ) as “the most beautiful and the most sensual in the group,” “the mistress of her own awakening sensuality,” in the “soft line of [whose] lips there is the bemused early awareness of sexuality,” and whose almost imperceptible smile contains “the sexual promise and erotic potential of virginity” (Fig. 10). The half-smile on the face of the wise virgin and the broader grin on the face of her foolish sister thus both tell a tale about temptation and its mastery.

Even though the iconography chosen by the Strassburg sculptor did not find great following among the German treatments of the virgin parable, similar choices can be found elsewhere, as, for example, in the depiction of another notorious female figure, *Frau Welt* (Lady World). On the south portal of the Worms cathedral (ca. 1300) we find yet another beautiful aristocratic woman with a smile on her lips; in her case, however, there can be no doubt as to the

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41 Ibid., 371.
42 Ibid., 371.
degree of virtue or vice this smile represents. The female equivalent of the Strassburg Tempter, Lady World is a great seductress, a dangerous woman who leads her admirers astray with her wiles. Those who follow her promise of reward lose the salvation of their souls, as the medieval poet Hartmann von Aue complains:

Die werlt lachet mich triegende an
und winket mir.
nu hân ich als ein tumer man
gevolget ihr.\(^{45}\) (MF XXII.V.3,1 – 4)

The World smiles at me deceitfully and waves to me. And I have followed her like a fool. Like in its male counterpart’s case, the facial expression of the Lady World in Worms is an indicator of her moral corruptness, a beautiful façade hiding her true ugliness represented by her rotten back. It is also, however, an allusion to the contemporary courtly ritual, the same strategy that the Strassburg sculptor used for his first foolish virgin to convey an image of fallen, sexualized femininity. One may wonder if the grammatical gender of the word “world” (masculine in Latin and French and feminine in Middle High German) is the sole explanation for the transformation of the male Prince into the female Lady World, and for endowing her with such attributes as beauty, eroticism, temptation, and moral corruption.\(^{46}\) What is more important, however, is that for two great seducers and their victims, smiling plays a crucial role in condemning secular society and its values. It helps to present courtly worldliness, particularly courtly femininity, not simply as foolish and shortsighted, but also as seductive, treacherous, and unchaste. The Strassburg ensemble therefore turns out to be far less unique in its approach to laughter; it reflects the contemporaneous views of the connection between smiling and seduction, succumbing to sin, and sensuality/sexuality.

\(^{45}\) Also see Walther’s L 67,8 (Schweikle 444 – 447) and L 122,36 (Schweikle 452).

\(^{46}\) It is important to point out that although the gender of the allegorical figures of the Prince vs. Lady World in this case corresponds to the grammatical gender of the word “world” (Latin / French masculine mundus, le monde vs. German feminine MHG diu werlt, mod. Germ. die Welt), this is not always the case, particularly when a specific quality is firmly associated with femininity in other medieval discourses. On the relationship between grammatical gender and the gender of allegorical figures see Starkey, *A Courtier’s Mirror*, 62 – 71, esp. 89 – 102. Starkey points out that the inconsistencies depend on aesthetic issues, the influence of other iconographic traditions, and cultural stereotypes. Starkey, *Courtier’s Mirror*, 99. As mentioned in an earlier note, three German cathedrals (Nuremberg, Regensburg, and Freiburg) that imitate Strassburg chose to depict the Seducer / Prince of the World as male despite the feminine gender of the word “world” in MHG grammar.
Enduring Prejudice? Magdeburg’s Courtly Femininity and Smiling Virtue

The first to represent the virgin parable in monumental sculpture and the second largest cathedral in Germany between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the *Magdeburger Dom* precedes Strassburg by several decades.47 Seeing the wise virgins of Magdeburg (ca. 1245), one is bound to draw parallels between the two ensembles: their conceptions are indeed similar in their astonishingly realistic depictions of the human form and their emphasis on the female body to represent the parable’s message of salvation and perdition. Yet they are strikingly different in their respective sculptors’ choice of emotions to communicate the divergence between the foolish and the wise.

Magdeburg presents to the viewer a familiar group of young maidens, fashionably dressed and adorned, with lively upward arm movements (one even holding her garments), and even more importantly, grinning from ear to ear (Fig. 11). The element of surprise, however, lies in the fact that these virgins are wise! The symbolism used by the Magdeburg sculptor is indeed very different from what we find in Strassburg or among Magdeburg’s predecessors. The contrast between the saved and the lost is visible only when the ensemble is viewed as a whole, since both groups of virgins are dressed in almost identical, lavish courtly clothes, and the only essential difference is in their body language.48 The foolish virgins can be easily detected thanks to their violent exhibition of grief, in stark contrast to the happy demeanor and broad smiles of their wise counterparts.

The use of vivid emotions to separate virtue from vice did not begin in Magdeburg. According to the extensive catalogue provided by Körkel-Hinkfoth, the depiction of despair is common both in plastic and pictorial arts. For example, the foolish virgins grieve in France on the portals of Aulnay (1130 – 1140), Toulouse (2nd quarter, 12th c.), Châlons-sur-Marne (ca. 1180), Fenieux (ca. 1175), and Pont-l’Abbé-d’Arnould (late 12th c.). The sinners’ emotions are also depicted in manuscript illuminations, mural paintings, and stained glass windows,49 as well as in medieval drama (mystery plays). The profound grief of the foolish

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48 “Sogar der Jungfrauentyp beider Gruppen ist weitgehend identisch.” Schubert, *Dom*, 19. In this sense, Magdeburg may be more isocephalic than Strassburg, although not entirely.
virs in Magdeburg—their faces contorted from crying, their hands wrung in despair, and their tears being wiped with the hems of their dresses (Fig. 12–13)—is thus representative of the larger trend in both the art and literature of the period. Furthermore, it accurately corresponds to the descriptions of the damned maidens’ violent outbursts in the late-thirteenth-century Thuringian play *Ludus de decem virginibus* (also known as the *Eisenacher Zehnjungfrauenspiel*): “For we are crying so much as there is water in the sea” (“wan wi geweinen also vel / also wazzers ist in dem mer,” vv. 516–517).50

The cathedral in Magdeburg also cannot claim to be the first to depict joy on the faces of the virtuous. A few decades earlier, the Reims workshop, whose influence is palpable in Bamberg’s *Fürstenportal*, Mainz’s *Westlettner*, and Magdeburg itself, introduced a new method of representing the human form marked by an increased interest in facial expressions.51 However, while the saved souls of Mainz and Bamberg, the crown-holding angel of Bamberg,52 and Archangel Gabriel (Fig. 14) of Magdeburg’s own Annunciation group (*Verkündigungspaar*)53 do display open smiles, conspicuously all of them happen to be men. In comparison, the expression used for the Virgin Mary in Bamberg’s and Magdeburg’s Annunciation ensembles (Fig. 15) and St. Catherine, the patron saint of the Magdeburg Dom (Fig. 16), is the same as that of Strassburg’s wise virgins: all three women are presented as beautiful, but composed and, in Mary’s case particularly, monastic-looking.54 Magdeburg’s innovation in regards to the virgin parable thus appears to lie not merely in its choice of emotions to distinguish between the two groups of maidens, but rather in its use of emotion to portray virtuous femininity.55 And unlike the foolish virgins, the descriptions of the wise ones’ joy in the contemporary drama are remarkably vague and non-specific; for example, *Ludus* describes their emotional state simply as *vro und wolgemut* (“joyful and high-spirited,” v. 147), saying nothing about the actual manifestation of their bliss.56

50 *Ludus de decem virginibus*, in De Boor, *Die deutsche Literatur*, 1:182–202, at 196. Also published as *Das Eisenacher Zehnjungfrauenspiel*.
52 North side, east choir. For an illustration see Williamson, *Gothic*, 175.
53 The *Verkündigungspaar* is generally accepted to be related to the ten virgins, although it is thought to be somewhat older. See Schubert, *Dom*, 25; Schubert, “Der Magdeburger Dom,” 38.
55 The first time I saw a picture of the wise virgins of Magdeburg, I initially misidentified the virgins, mistaking them for their foolish counterparts because of their grotesque smiles. It is only after seeing the whole ensemble that I realized my error. The ensemble can be seen in full in Quast, *Der Dom zu Magdeburg*, 48–49.
56 The old truism that vice is more interesting than virtue appears to ring true in the case of
Even if virtue and jubilation may prove to be less interesting than vice and despair, they are nevertheless important. The startling effect of the wise virgins’ exuberantly joyous faces has not gone unnoticed. Art historian Lottlisa Behling sees it as a novel vision, a great and new creation by a genius (“diese neue und große Tat eines eigenwilligen genialen Meisters”), but not everybody is equally enthusiastic. Elisabeth Vavra points out the unnatural, immoderate aspect of the virgins’ smiling and uses the expression “excessive Mimik” (“excessive facial expression”) to describe the Magdeburg ensemble. Her opinion is echoed by Paul Williamson, who writes of the “exaggerated glee of the figures [that] verges on smugness,” and by the creators of the online resource Web Art Museum, calling the wise virgins’ facial expressions “very close to grotesque.”

The intensity of such critique directed at the depiction of female bodies is indicative of what seems to be a gender bias among modern scholars (one may wonder why nobody characterizes the smiles of male angels or of the saved souls at Bamberg and Reims as grotesque), but more importantly, it also brings up a question about a potential medieval response to this peculiar artistic choice. Although Magdeburg’s conception was impressively influential, it is the grief of the foolish virgins that continues to be emulated even into the fifteenth century. Nowhere else (in surviving statuaries) is virtue portrayed as smiling so openly again. So, was this unusual broad grinning (“breites Lachen”) of the wise a bold attempt, a new conception, or a mere glitch, as one would say nowadays? Could there have been anything about medieval Magdeburg that might have inspired such a bold combination of smiling and virtuous femininity?

Magdeburg’s approach clearly downplays the inherited tradition of garment symbolism that would play such an important role in Strassburg a few decades

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58 Williamson, Gothic, 155. Williamson also calls the wise virgins’ facial expression “grinning” and “what amounts to a grimace.” Williamson, Gothic, 177.
As already mentioned, it is common for the foolish virgins to be presented as more richly dressed and adorned than their wise counterparts, who fit a more stereotypical iconographic, timeless image of a virgin or a chaste woman. In contrast, all ten Magdeburg statues are marked by the Zeitkostüm, even though according to the experts, the attire of the foolish is in fact somewhat less elaborate and costly than that of the wise:

A simpler depiction of the foolish is, strictly speaking, yet another difference between the figures on the left and on the right: their adornments are more modest, “probably not unintentionally.” In contrast, the wise ones wear rich ornaments as a sign of their celebratory joy, as if glittering with stars, flowers, and shining precious stones—each of them rendered unique by her tiara, brooch, belt, and ring. They are beautiful examples of jewelry of the Staufer period.

It is obvious that all Magdeburg virgins were inspired by a particular social group, namely, the German nobility. Despite the relative inferiority of the foolish virgins’ attire and jewelry, their cut and richness as well as the figures’ overall posture, elegance, and demeanor all hint at their aristocratic origin. The statues of the ten virgins were put into their present location (the Paradise Porch, Paradiesvorhalle) in the first quarter of the fourteenth century; nevertheless, they are in fact a true product of the previous, thirteenth century. Vavra demonstrates this by drawing parallels in the depiction of clothing and gestures between the Magdeburg ensemble and a roughly contemporary literary work, such as Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan (ca. 1210). The ideal of beauty that both the wise and the foolish maidens represent is the one widely available in the courtly poetry, a predominant (almost the only) model of attractiveness in the thirteenth century: they all have slim, shapely, and young figures, are richly and fashionably dressed and decorated, and display delicate, or to use Behling’s description, “noble” hands and flowing long blond hair, which is an indicator

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64 See Binski, Becket’s Crown, 255 – 256.
of their unmarried status. According to Behling, “It is an image of an aristocratic person of the thirteenth century, ennobled by education and moderation, that arises here in Magdeburg, rendered historically while simultaneously elevated into the realm of the timeless.” These virgins thus stand on their portal not merely as a reminder of joy and celestial glory on the one hand and carelessness and despair on the other, but also as reflections of aristocratic femininity as it was conceived of at the time of their conception. Unlike Strassburg’s presentation and evaluation of courtly femininity, the Magdeburg virgins—young, beautiful, noble, rich, and smiling—are not sinners. They await the arrival of the bridegroom, welcoming him and the onlookers with their gestures and their faces.

The Magdeburg ensemble is clearly not interested in condemning the courtly way of life. Instead, it is part of the tradition that focuses on the feelings of the saved and the lost. For that reason, it is remarkable that its emphasis on positive joy has not been replicated, even though as the very first Gothic cathedral on the German soil, it is known to have inspired many subsequent sculptural renditions of Matthew’s parable. While it may be impossible to account for Magdeburg’s uniqueness so many centuries later, the history of the city—marked by strong secular influences, the worldliness of its ecclesiastical authorities, the cathedral’s history of prolonged construction, and the unique coincidence of having a prominent female mystic living and writing in the area precisely when the statuary was created—can provide context for the presence of both courtly and religious elements in the iconography of the ten virgins statuary.

Secular influences had always been strong in Magdeburg. By the High Middle Ages, it had a solid reputation as a great royal court (during the reign of Otto I) and later as a major ecclesiastical court. The powerful thirteenth-century clerics, on whose order and under whose supervision the cathedral was rebuilt after the fire of 1207 (particularly Archbishop Albrecht II von Käfernburg), are commonly described as highly educated and courtly princes. The famous liberties, known as das Magdeburger Recht, were renewed in 1188 by Archbishop Wichmann von Seeburg. Albrecht II, who began rebuilding the cathedral, is likely to have found inspiration for it in the architecture of the Staufer period during his study in Italy and France. He is described by Giselher Quast as a follower or a legate of Frederick II and a worldly ecclesiastical prince (“geistlicher und Weltlicher Fürst”). An important source of inspiration may have been the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1212 – 1282), the famous female mystic, whose

68 Quast, Dom, 10, 16.
work *The Flowing Light of Godhead (Das fließende Licht der Gottheit)* coincides in timing not only with the rebuilding of the cathedral in general but more specifically with the making of the sculptures of the ten virgins. Mechthild’s imagery is strikingly similar to the one chosen by the creators of the virgin ensemble.

In the case of the five wise virgins, the sculptor might have been trying to achieve the same goal as Mechthild, that is, to use secular, courtly imagery or language to express spiritual ideas. The visionary’s imagery and rhetoric are known to have been inspired by the secular courtly love poetry that flourished during her lifetime. It is not surprising that Mechthild (and people of Saxony in general) would be thoroughly familiar with and influenced by contemporary courtly discourse. The literary tastes in Mechthild’s Saxony exhibited a strong southern influence. As Sara Poor points out in her study of the mystic’s work, Middle High German, the standard literary language of courtly lyric and romance, was of extreme importance even in the areas where native dialects were Low or Middle (Central) German, Mechthild’s native language: “Because most courtly poets relied on royal or noble patronage and because the most important courts tended to be in the south, the language of these courts became a sort of literary *lingua franca*.”

The late-thirteenth-century Saxony was very familiar with the traditions of courtly love and poetry. A number of Askanian princes were minnesingers themselves, such as Duke Albrecht I of Saxony (d. 1261), known as a patron of Tannhäuser, and his brother, Count Henry I of Anhalt (d. 1252), praised by Bumke as “the most interesting figure for literary history” and believed to have been the author of the poems listed in the Large Heidelberg Song Manuscript under the name “Der Herzog von Anhalt” (“The Duke of Anhalt”).

The court of the margraves of the neighboring Brandenburg was also very influential. Although the exact details of Mechthild’s education are not certain, it is commonly accepted that she was, in fact, educated at court before running away to Magdeburg to begin her religious career.

As a record of Mechthild’s mystic experience, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* is deeply religious, yet reveals an abundant use of the language and imagery of Minnesang. It makes frequent use of such traditional courtly vocabulary as

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70 Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, 480.
71 Ibid.
72 Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg*, 27.
73 Gibbs and Johnson, *Medieval*, 438. The entire work illustrates how the idea of courtly love and service has been transposed into the religious plain of mysticism. However, the use of courtly conventions in religious writing to describe a spiritual experience has been known at least since the twelfth century. See Wainwright-de-Kadt’s comparison of Mechtild and Hadewijch’s use of courtly symbolism for spiritual material in Wainwright-de-Kadt, “Courtly Literature and Mysticism,” 41 – 60. For more information on the courtly themes and in-
schoene, liebe, minneklich, and wol gemuote. The journey of the feminine Soul to God is called a hovereise (a journey to court), and God himself addresses the maiden-soul with a hovesprache (courtly speech). The description of maidens in the Lady Love’s (Minne) retinue strikingly resembles that of both the wise virgins statues and the stereotypical courtly female beauty, “built in a noble way, white and red in blossoming youth” (“adellich gebildet an irme liebe, wis und rot in bluejender jugent,” Licht, VII.XLVIII.18–19). The familiar image of the red mouth makes its appearance in a sensual scene, in which God offers the Soul wine: “So the Soul became alive and completely hale, as He poured the pure red wine in her red mouth” (“Also das lebendig wart die sele und gar gesunt, do er [God] den blanken rotten win gos in iren rotten munt,” Licht, I.22.58). The bodies of the saved who greet the Soul in Heaven are noble bodies that behave according to the ritual of the contemporary courtly protocol, reminiscent of courtly epic and poetry. Book III contains the familiar motif of courtly glances (minnenklich ansehen) given in a way that befits the nobility of those present (“als es in nach ir edelkeit mag geschehen,” Licht, III.1.133). The Soul herself satisfies the requirements of feminine comportment, so reminiscent of contemporary prescriptive literature and courtly romance, in her portrayal as “wise and well-bred” (wise und wol gezogen, Licht, I.IV.1). Furthermore, William Seaton points out a special significance of the greeting (Gruss) in Mechthild’s work, similar to courtly love poetry, “by which the beloved signals the suitor that there is some chance of favor.” 75 Finally, Book VII speaks of the joy of the chosen souls in the afterlife, echoing the religious message of Luke 6:21, yet described in entirely secular, courtly terms: “Der helige geist git ouch us sinen minnenden himelvlus, da mit er den seligen schenket und si so vollen trenket, das sie mit vroeden singent, zartelich lachent und springent in gezogener wise” (“The Holy Ghost also pours from His loving heavenly stream, from which He serves the blessed ones and makes them drink so much that they sing of joy, laugh or smile gently and jump in a refined manner,” Licht, VII.1.103 – 105).

While it is, of course, impossible to claim with certainty a cause-and-effect relationship between Mechthild’s masterpiece and the Magdeburg ensemble, the parallels in the descriptions of beauty, joy, and welcome in Mechthild’s work and the depiction of the wise virgins are too noticeable to be overlooked. Courtly lyric provided Mechthild with the vocabulary to describe the indescribable—her mystic experience and the joys of afterlife. It afforded her the means to render a sublime experience and religious concepts in terms that were under-

74 All the citations come from Mechthild von Magdeburg, Das fließende Licht der Gottheit.
stdable to her contemporaries, which is precisely what the Magdeburg artists strove to achieve not only in the ten virgins, but in other sculptures as well. For example, the so-called Herrscherpaar, the royal couple sitting on their thrones, is thought to represent Otto I and his wife Editha; yet the heavenly orb with seven planets and zodiac symbols in the hands of the male figure and the book in the hands of the female one suggest that it can also be interpreted as an allegorical depiction of Christ and his Bride, the Church. The famous statue of St. Maurice (1240), a Christian African martyr (d. 285) from the times of the Roman emperor Maximian and a patron saint of the cathedral, is also time specific. It depicts a warrior, fully dressed in medieval chain mail of the thirteenth century (Fig. 17).

Comparing the Magdeburg virgin ensemble to the later cathedrals inspired by it—such as Freiburg (1285 – 1300), Erfurt (1330 – 1350), or Bern (ca. 1475)—reveals that such representations of a beautiful, contemporary person indeed appealed to late-medieval tastes. Yet strangely, none of them went as far as to equal the joy on the faces of their wise virgins, while sharing the expressive grief of the foolish ones. The seeming appeal of the foolish virgins’ lack of self-possession is easy to explain. Moderation and bodily restraint were prominent ideals in both the religious and secular worlds. To depict sinners as excessive and violent in gesture served a dual function: as an allusion to their punishment in the form of eternal anguish and as an illustration of excess, yet another affirmation of the sinners’ corrupt nature. In the Thuringian Ludus de decem virginitibus, one of the foolish virgins even instigates her sisters to hurt themselves: “Nu schrigit, roufit uz di har!” (“Now scream and pull your hair out!”).

So what is wrong with the wise virgins? Mechthild’s work demonstrates that the very act of rejoicing per se was not at all alien to religious thought. After all, one of the reasons proffered for not laughing in this life was that true joy and true laughter will be possible only for the saved ones in paradise. However, even in paradise one has to be moderate. Even in Mechthild’s revelations, the correct way to rejoice and to laugh is delicately, in gezogener wise (Licht, VII.1.105). Among the Magdeburg wise virgins, only one—Virgin 3—smiles in a similarly discreet way. The first, second, and fourth wise virgins are grinning from ear to ear.

76 Williamson sees it as “the growing interest in realistic portrayal”: “Nowhere else in Europe did sculpture more closely resemble life!” Williamson, Gothic, 177. St. Maurice statue is also the very first attempt to portray him as a black soldier. (Ibid.)
77 For illustrations see Körkel-Hinkeloth, Die Parabel von den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen, 540, 547, 553.
78 V. 522 in “Ludus,” 196.
79 Vavra, “Klug oder töricht,” 422. Vavra’s contrast between moderation of the wise virgins and the “Masslosigkeit in Gestik und Mimik” of the foolish ones is, in fact, too simplistic, since it is easy to see that the difference between the wise and the foolish lies not in the intensity of emotional display, but in the nature of their affect. Both groups contain examples of excessive
depictions of the wise virgins and remains an important and moving example of experimentation with the depiction of emotions and with reconciling the secular and the religious spheres. For example, in Freiburg the ten virgins can be differentiated only by their lamps and their emotions, in a way that is strikingly reminiscent of Magdeburg; yet, there is nothing on the faces of the wise maidens of Freiburg like the jubilation we find so disturbing in its famous predecessor. The smiles of the saved are very controlled, much closer to the expression found on the face of the third wise virgin of Strassburg (Fig. 18).\(^\text{80}\) Even though the grief of the foolish virgins is preserved in the post-Magdeburg depictions of the parable, the return to the wise virgins’ calm and peaceful facial expressions suggests that a composed and serious demeanor might have been perceived as much more appropriate for the ideal of an honorable woman (even if she is dressed in courtly clothes). The wise virgins of Magdeburg and their reception point to the familiar tensions within the medieval conceptions of virtuous femininity.\(^\text{81}\)

Taking one last look at the approaches to the parable of the ten virgins at Strassburg and Magdeburg, I would like to argue that both visions are unique in their original approach; yet, however different these approaches are, they seem to reveal and support the same view of medieval femininity. Jaeger’s claim about Strassburg’s uniqueness does not account for the differences in the intensity of affect among the Magdeburg virgins, or for the curtailment of the wise virgins’ laughter over time.\(^\text{82}\) However, these two aspects do, in my opinion, only support and more moderate expressions of their respective emotions. The most violent exhibitions of joy and sorrow belongs to K1/T1, K2/T2, K4/T4, and K5/T5 (where K stands for “klug” ‘wise’ and T for “töricht” ‘foolish’). The faces of K3/T3 are rather composed and, actually, very similar. Vavra, “Klug oder töricht,” 427, 431–432. Also see See Behling, “Die klugen und törichten Jungfrauen,” 20–21.

\(^{80}\) Freiburg is reminiscent of both Magdeburg and Strassburg; of the former, in its isocephalic approach and its distinction between grief and joy; of the latter, with its figure of Christ leading the wise towards the Ecclesia. However, there is no Seducer leading the foolish virgins in this case.

\(^{81}\) Körkel-Hinkfoth points out that the intensity of emotions decreases after Magdeburg. Körkel-Hinkfoth, Die Parabel von den klugen und törichten Jungfrauen, 115. And indeed, only Erfurt’s wise virgins (mid-fourteenth century) are still presented as slightly smiling. At the end of her essay, Vavra emphasizes that eventually the depictions of the wise and the foolish virgins become almost identical in their clothes and facial expressions, which allows later artists to play with the convention, transforming die Heilige in die Sünderin. Vavra, “Klug oder töricht,” 427. Whether this suggests a change of sensibilities and the final disappearance of the medieval views tolerating excess in sinners but not in the virtuous, or whether excessive responses in the female body are perceived as disturbing no matter what, cannot be addressed in this study. To answer this question, one would have to closely examine the attitudes toward female bodies in the Late Middle Ages and all throughout Early Modernity.

\(^{82}\) Cf.: “Conversely, tradition has the wise virgins smiling. They smile, of course, because they are received by the bridegroom, that is, redeemed at the final judgment. […] Their gestures
his observation about the ideal of virtuous behavior formulated by the Strassburg virgins, and, I would claim, by those of Magdeburg and subsequent ensembles—the ideal that was, as Jaeger points out, “still mouthed and formulated by [their] contemporaries but seldom attained in reality,” the ideal that identifies female virtue with perfect bodily control, self-possession, and chastity. Furthermore, the statuaries at both Strassburg and Magdeburg (and the latter’s successors) are apprehensive of immoderation, although they express it in different ways. In both places, immoderation is represented by the foolish, as revealed in their intense outbursts of grief in Magdeburg and in the broad grin of the first foolish virgin of Strassburg. The difference is that Strassburg tells its tale by using the depiction of emotions on only one level; it explores the presence of one emotion/gesture (joy/laughter) or lack thereof. Magdeburg, on the other hand, operates on two levels: to establish the difference between the two groups (two different emotions) and to mark the difference between the individuals within each group by the gradation of their respective affect. (In fact, some of Magdeburg’s wise virgins display the same enigmatic serenity as their counterparts at Strassburg.) To communicate the ideal of virtuous behavior and salvation, Strassburg returns us to the “language” of the clergy, to the monastic view of femininity and propriety, and to the strict dichotomies between sexuality and modesty, seduction and virtue, secular and clerical, Prince/Lady World and Christ/the Bridegroom. For its part, Magdeburg tells its viewers a tale that is religious in its content, yet through the “language” of the contemporary courtly laity, not unlike Mechthild or the medieval Fastnachtspiele. One may wonder if the Strassburg artist might have known the Magdeburg’s vision but not shared its view of broadly grinning and richly clad virtue, choosing instead to return to the simplicity of monastic-looking garments and the calm comportment extolled for early-medieval religious virgins.

At the end of the thirteenth-century Thuringian mystery play mentioned above, the fourth foolish virgin reveals the moral of the story to the spectators, “Nu horit, selgen, di nu leben! / wi sin uch zu eime spigele gegeben” (“Now hear, those of you who are living! We are given to you as an example,” Ludus, vv. 566 – 567). Of course, the tale of the ten virgins is a cautionary tale, one of admonishment, not natural. Wise virgins smile because they are headed for heaven; foolish virgins frown for the opposite reason.” Jaeger, Envy, 343.

83 I am paraphrasing the following passage here: “The Strassburg group is a nostalgic reconstruction of an ideal still mouthed and formulated by the sculptor’s contemporaries but seldom attained in reality.” Jaeger, Envy, 347.

84 See a similar idea expressed by John of Garland, the late-twelfth-century Oxford-educated man who lived in Paris during the Gothic style: “Templi sculpturas morum dic esse figures / vivas picturas in te gere non perituras” (“Declare our churches’ sculptures models of civility, living pictures, to be borne in mind indelibly”). Quoted and translated in Binski, Becket’s Crown, 259.
ition, and the virgins are intended to function as a *spigel*, i. e. an example, for the viewers. However, besides this metaphorical meaning intended by the author of the play, the MHG word *spigel* also commonly refers to the straightforward “mirror.” Whether in the play or on the portals of German cathedrals, the ten virgins do serve as an example, illustrating right and wrong choices, but they are also a mirror, a *speculum*, a reflection of the contemporaneous views of femininity, beauty, and propriety.