# Communication, Community, Compromise, and Compassion: Fundamental Lessons from Late Medieval German Literature. Heinrich Kaufringer's Messages for Today

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## Abstract

For many people, the Middle Ages were a 'dark age' we have fortunately left behind. Of course, today, we live under much better material conditions, at least in the western world, but this does not mean at all that the insights and perspectives by medieval authors might be irrelevant for us today. Contrary to foolish mythical thinking about the past, we can often realize how much pre-modern thinkers had developed deep insights into the human psyche, social conditions, individual shortcomings and failures, and had also outlined significant strategies for coping in a complex society where many groups and individuals struggled against each other. In fact, as this article will indicate, by way of drawing from a list of seven key C-words (communication, community, compromise, etc.), we can explore medieval literature more deeply and extract from it timeless messages of great relevance for us today. This will be illustrated by way of examining some of the verse narratives by the late medieval German poet Heinrich Kaufringer in which we can discover powerful insights into fundamental conflicts people have always suffered from and how to come to terms with them.

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## Introduction

As long as we are willing to accept the fundamental value of literature for society at large, say, as one of its most important cultural expressions, we can calmly approach literary texts from all historical periods, whether antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Baroque, the nineteenth century, or today as relevant for us. While scientists and medical researchers engage with the physical world, or the human body, applying systematic and logical approaches for their investigations, scholars in the humanities face a much more difficult study object, the human being in his/her emotional, cultural, spiritual, and highly individual make-up. Literature, as we all know, hence serves as a most important mirror of human life with all of its contradictions, irrational elements, errors, failures, shortcomings, pain and suffering, happiness, and faith (see now Eaglestone 2019, defines literature as a living conversation that constantly invites us to rethink and reinterpret our world).

Every literary text, if its quality justifies it, can and should be used as a platform or medium to investigate specific conditions, problems, challenges, conflicts, and other issues in our existence. Sometimes, the older a text is, the clearer the perspective offered becomes because the historical distance alienates the topic to some extent and then facilitates a more insightful examination and analysis of specific types of behavior, attitudes, value systems, and concepts. Little wonder, for example, that we continue to acknowledge ancient Greek drama as the bedrock of western humanities because in them fundamental tensions, needs, misunderstandings, or aggressions are addressed like in a woodcut, roughly cut but shockingly profiled for all to see.

The same phenomenon applies to the Middle Ages, a distant world that passed away around 1500, leaving behind an enormous treasure house of literary texts in countless vernacular languages, though the largest corpus was written in the standard learned language, Latin. Unfortunately, a huge percentage of all written documents has disappeared since then for many different reasons, but we are still lucky enough to have available many literary masterpieces from the eighth through the fifteenth century, written in Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Icelandic, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and other languages (for the situation with Latin literature, see Haye 2016). Here I limit myself to the European context, but the basic concept to develop would certainly apply to literatures from other continents and other cultural-historical periods.

The purpose of this paper cannot be to present an overview of the entire literary history of the pre-modern, which would certainly be an expression of hubris. Instead, here I want to focus on the work of one late medieval German writer, Heinrich Kaufringer (fl. around 1400) and examine some of his statements that address fundamental problems in human life. Based on previous research, we can be certain that Kaufringer represents a major literary voice at his time whose comments about human life deserve closer attention not only by medieval German scholarship (Rippl 2014; Schneider 2020; Classen 2022, “The Defense of the Humanities”) but also the wider audience in neighboring disciplines and beyond.

## Preliminary Reflections

Kaufringer's verse narratives promise to shed important light on the larger issue of the critical value of literature per se and also the relevance of the pre-modern voices for the modern world. This is not to say at all that we ought to privilege older fictional texts over newer ones. The opposite would be just as wrong. The most fitting metaphor for the idea presented here is that of an orchestra with many different musical instruments, some loud and clear, and some more subtle and less audible. Without bass sound, for instance, the treble sounds would not appeal so much. Similarly, each literary voice contributes to the overarching harmony, or symphony.

Each writer or poet has his/her own sources, inspirations, influences, and models, and in the course of time can become equally influential on future generations. Many times, medievalist scholars have advocated for that model of interpretation, but it remains a struggle to convince the public, students, their parents, and school educators and hence politicians of the relevance of the pre-modern period for the critical assessment of our own time and the imminent future (Aldama 2008; Drees 2021; Classen, *Humanities*, 2022; Boldizsár Simon and Deile 2021; Albin, Erler, O'Donnell, Paul, and Rowe, ed., 2019; Kostick, Jones, and Oschema, ed., 2020; Classen, *The Relevance*, 2020; Drews, Müller, and Toepfer, ed. 2021; Tracy 2022).

While this topic has already been discussed from various perspectives (most recently, e.g., Classen, "Management of Stress," 2022; Classen, "Self-Control," 2022; Classen 2023), here I want to introduce a pragmatic model for analysis of literary texts at large and then to exemplify its usefulness in light of the verse narratives by a late medieval German author, Heinrich Kaufringer.

## Universal Meaning of Literature

To state the nearly obvious, there are many different ways to reflect upon literature, to evaluate its meaning and importance in the life of each individual. On the one hand, there is the aspect of entertainment, and on the other, the message by an author/narrator to his/ her audience about some concerns, ideas, notions, values, or issues. Through literature, we are invited to reflect upon basic ethics, morality, religion, and philosophy as they apply to one's ordinary life. Hence, we could call fictional texts a human laboratory where life's situations and conditions are experimented with.

Not everyone in society feels bothered by or concerned with the larger social issues concerning the collective well-being, but there is no doubt that everyone, as a member of human society, has to engage with other people in social, political, economic, military, emotional, or religious terms. That means that there have always been problems and conflicts, but then also delightful experiences, happiness, and profound joy. Virtually no one wants to be alone, but every social interaction is rife with tensions because no individual, irrespective of money, power, or military might can completely control others. Hence, we need, throughout life, role models, literary examples, case studies, or illustrations of bad and good behavior, of working and harmonious social interactions and of the very opposite.

For example, Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (completed ca. 1320) stands out as such a universal classic in literature because the poet presented in a unique and also universal way the whole gamut of human experiences, from the worst (*Inferno*) to the best (*Paradiso*). We might hence claim that literature serves as a kind of laboratory of human experiences.

The more we can study certain situations and forms of social relationships, the better we might be prepared for the reality waiting for us outside of the fictional texts. Some of the most important and 'classical' medieval texts mirror the whole spectrum of human experience, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400).

After all, there are only few really universal issues relevant for people all over the world: love, God, death, meaning of life, identity, hatred and aggression, hope, happiness, and purpose. Some of those can be collapsed even further into larger categories, which thus facilitates additional opportunities to explain the basic function of literature that addresses all those in a myriad of manifestations. One of the central issues to be addressed here consists of the relationship between the genders, whether in terms of friendship, love, sexuality, or marriage. But we can easily apply those insights pertaining to that aspect to social, political, economic, and legal relationships as well.

While the cultural-historical framework constantly changes, the core issues always remain the same throughout time and globally across cultures. If we accept that realization more seriously, we have suddenly available a very strong defense of the Humanities within the spectrum of academic disciplines (Nussbaum 2012) and can accept individual case studies, such as the examination of late medieval German literary texts, as the foundation for global literature (Seigneurie, ed. 2020).

## The Seven C's

Here I would like to propose a list of seven C's that capture some of the most urgent, critical, and relevant attitudes and topics in all human relationships if those are supposed to work out in a harmonious, even happy condition. With this list in hand, we are most likely to understand the theoretical model of how to achieve communal happiness within a partnership. And we are also empowered to comprehend why literature, where those seven concepts are regularly explored through negative and positive examples, matters so much for us today, whether it originated in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and in the nineteenth century (Gumbrecht 2015; Crick 2019).

**Communication**
**Community**
**Compromise**
**Compassion**
**Coordination**
**Commitment**
**Courage**

There are certainly additional concepts determining the basic relationships between people or even peoples, and much of the violence, aggression, or hatred that we observe today, and so in the past, seems to result from the absence of one, some, or all of those seven notions. By the same token, if an individual or a group of people can embrace any or all of those concepts, then there is a strong likelihood that happiness and love might be realizable. These terms are not directly related to the traditional lists of seven vices and seven virtues as established by the Catholic Church since late antiquity.

Nevertheless, they prove to be just as universal and fundamental in the critical examination of all human relationships, especially when we try to figure out why conflicts erupt, misunderstandings occur, and hatred replaces love.

Each of those terms has already received extensive attention by psychologists, family and marriage counselors, sociologists, and religious scholars, among others. But when we view them as a collective, we are in a strong position to gain a solid set of tools to address human conflicts that have tortured us since time immemorial. To elaborate on them just briefly, there is no doubt as to the universal need to establish good communication, which commonly fails between the genders, different age groups, people of different languages and religions, political systems, and races. But communication can and must be learned, and the examination of literary examples promises to make that process possible from early on.

The goal of communication can only be to establish community, which in turn is not possible without commitment to work toward that goal by all members of that group. But not everyone has the same strength or ability, so compassion and compromise prove to be critically important in order to establish this sense of cohesion. Coordination, or collaboration, would not need further comments since it is a common understanding that teamwork to handle complex and difficult tasks is the only pragmatic and effective strategy to achieve a specific and larger goal. Most people do not even know the true extent of communal collaboration because we take most objects in our lives as given although each one of them, from foodstuff to automobiles, from the internet to the refrigerator, is actually the result of an endless line of contributions to achieve the end product, whether a loaf of bread or a digital camera.

We also need to keep in mind that each individual must command considerable courage and care – certainly another important C-word – to accept the principles of good functioning communication and the ideals of a well working community. After all, communication and community require a certain degree of compromise, hence a willingness to give up something for the larger good if so required. There is, as the proverb says, no such thing as a free lunch. True harmony can only be achieved through a balancing of needs, desires, abilities, personal conditions, and resources, that is, a balance between the individual and the collective. Whoever seeks to establish a community – friendship, love relationship, marriage, etc. – needs to understand the other side better, needs to have compassion, empathy, and ought to feel a strong sense of commitment to the other. Hence, in this regard an entire bundle of those C-words comes into play, and we are suddenly confronted with the need to investigate our personal situation in light of all those concepts. This can be done in a pragmatic way, on the ground, so to speak, within a social context, or it can be done through an academic investigation via a literary analysis, for instance.

Of course, we could also include cinematographic, art-historical, musicological, historical, sociological or psychological approaches to achieve a similar goal. Here, however, I privilege the literary discourse as the most direct access to human issues in past and present that need to be addressed critically and concretely. Medieval texts, hence, promise to shed important light on our own human existence today because they serve well as narrative mirrors of fundamental types of emotions, forms of behavior, and social actions.

While these ruminations appear to be very subjective and personal at first sight, we could certainly agree that those can

and even must be generalized from the individual to the community, and from there to the nation, or even a larger unit, altogether, hence, humanity. The Humanities as an academic discipline are specifically charged with carrying out these investigations pertaining to human life through a wide scope of lenses or approaches. Again, to carry the proverbial owls to Athens, it is the literary platform where human life is experimented with, examined, probed, tested, and challenged.

As Barbara Tuchman once called it, the Middle Ages is a *Distant Mirror* (1978) and forces us to reflect on our own existence with all its problematics. However, looking backwards we are empowered to examine the reasons for failures, successes, triumphs, and fiascoes in the past and then to reflect on our situation today to recognize significant parallels or noteworthy differences. Despite numerous attempts by previous scholars to highlight the alterity of the pre-modern world (see the various studies by Jauss, published collectively in 1977), we can always discover the same human being behind the mask of a seemingly very different culture (knighthood, feudalism, dominance of the Church, etc.). The need for love, identity, God, answers in face of death, and other aspects have always remained with us, and so the longing for honor, respect, fame, wealth, and power.

Hence, there is little surprise that works such as the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1371) continue to appeal to us especially because the protagonist has to face virtually almost certain death, almost succumbs to erotic seductions, and secretly 'sells' his honor to save his life. However, the circumstances set up by his opponent, Bercilak, also operating as the Green Knight, are actually supposed to be a game and not a real attempt to decapitate a person. When Johann von Tepl created his *The Plowman from Bohemia* (ca. 1400), in which the protagonist debates bitterly with Death, charging him for having injustly taken his wife from this life, deeply moves us until today because we all are bound to die but we are empowered to strife honorably in this life which God then acknowledges full of respect for the Plowman or Everyman (Dröse 2013; Classen 2014).

## Heinrich Kaufringer – a Literary Discovery Waiting for Us

In order to explore this issue further, and to test to what extend the list of seven C's find expression in a pre-modern text, let us next turn to the rather unusual late medieval German poet Heinrich Kaufringer, who is known for his extensive body of verse narratives from ca. 1400 (Kaufringer 2014, sec. ed. 2019; I will quote from this, my own, English translation throughout; for a good basic discussion, see Stede 1993) in which he addressed universal ethical, moral, religious, and philosophical issues (for a broader discussion of the value of this literary genre also for us, see Schwarzbach-Dobson 2018). Although he was not very successful with his work at his time, which has survived only in three manuscripts, many of his individual stories (*mæren*) have proven to be of timeless value, especially in the modern literature classroom at the college level, and also among the general reader seeking for messages about critical issues in life (Classen 2020).

Each individual story to be addressed here would require an independent study to do justice to it. The purpose here, however, is to highlight some of the major issues and to demonstrate how and why they are developed by the poet who intended to address a broader audience and to provide it with model cases about conflicts in human life as they can appear on a daily basis. One of the most dramatic examples would be "The Merchants in Disagreement" (no. 23), an

incredibly revealing account of smart robbers who utilize a psychological strategy to overpower a large group of merchants and rob them of all their wealth. Although there are only six robbers, they know exactly how to pretend that they are a fierce and large force, led by a count who has outstanding demands on some of the merchants who have allegedly not paid him yet. Two robbers approach the merchants and raise the charge; the others stay behind in the forest to hide their actual number.

The two men boldly claim that they have appeared on behalf of a count who must be paid immediately because the debt is long overdue. They assume a very aggressive post and raise only generic charges without providing any evidence. All they need to do is to divide and conquer the merchants, so they do not offer any specifics and scare everyone out of their wits, being brash, demanding, haughty, and imposing, all at the same time. As the two robbers state: “If you are willing to obey, then the others can survive. But if you are not willing to do so, you will enjoy neither peace nor respite. You will lose your lives and goods” (p. 118). In other words, they promise people and security to those who are not guilty, but they then threaten them all with a harsh punishment if they resist the demands.

An older man raises his voice, reminds them of their community and its great strength in number. If they were to stand together, they would not have to fear anything. However, he does not counter the robbers’ vicious charge as such and only appeals to them all to defend themselves as a collective: “Together we will survive or die” (118). Hence, the vague charge against some of them remains standing, and when another merchant opposes that plan since he feels innocent and does not want to pay (even with his life) for those who are allegedly guilty of not having paid their dues, he undermines and actually destroys their sense of community of merchants. The others, equally weak and ignorant, follow him, driven by their own greed and selfishness, so they allow the robbers to proceed without anyone resisting them because they think only of their own self and property, which ultimately causes major harm to them all.

The two men who pretend to be a count’s servants immediately identify those who appear to be the wealthiest, overpower and fetter them, and take them to the forest where they can clean out all their pockets. Next, they return and reiterate the ‘count’s charge,’ now directed against eight others, and they warn the merchants from raising any resistance since the count would be prepared with his large force to attack them all. Now, completely frightened, the entire group kneels down, begs for mercy, but the robbers take eight of them, and then return a third time, now overpowering them all and gaining all their wealth.

As the narrator emphasizes, “Is that not a great shame? Only six men did that to them. Thus, it might happen to those who are not of the same opinion, whether rich or poor, tall or small, noble or not noble, young or old, or whatever figure they might have, who always live in such a way that one is opposed to the other” (119). These merchants at first believed in their corporate identity and their strength as a collective, all held together by their professional interests. But upon the first challenge by the robbers, selfishness, egocentrism, fear, and arrogance emerge and quickly split the entire group. Whereas before, they had a real chance to defend themselves, as they had originally intended, but they had not been prepared for a psychological warfare in which the robbers drew from their inner weakness and utilized that to their own advantage. The robbers’ manipulation by means of a clever rhetorical device made it possible for them to undermine the merchants’ resolve to stand up for each other. If they had attacked the group without any particular argument about

someone's debt to the count, they would have probably raised enough resistance to drive the robbers away. However, because the two robbers managed to evoke fear in them that they might have to pay with their goods or even their lives because some among them might have been guilty, they succeeded in splitting the entire group, atomize it, and thus to defeat it altogether.

As the poet remarked in the introduction, "Nothing is worse, as far as I can tell looking over all the world – in cities, in markets, in all the countries – hence nothing is worse by which people suffer damage and shame and more misfortune than when people are not of the same opinion. This results in discomfort and lamentable woes" (117). Worse even, as Kaufringer then comments, referring his audience to the tragic conflict or internecine strife among the Italian cities during the late Middle Ages, divided into two separate political groups, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, "Where there is no agreement, killing and murder happen" (117).

Another major narrative by Kaufringer, critically addressing a universal topic, here pertaining to marriage relationships, also deserves to be considered here, "The Search for the Happily Married Couple" (no. 8). Gender trouble has always been with us, both in the past and the present, whether a society was determined by patriarchy and misogyny or by a fairly equal system sustaining both genders (there are countless studies addressing the history of medieval women, the history of marriage, and sexuality; see, for instance, the contributions to Farmer and Braun Pasternack, ed., 2003. In fact, much of medieval courtly and late medieval urban literature was determined by a strong sense of gender conflicts, pertaining to adultery, the sexual inferiority complex, marriage, women's struggle against male dominance, etc.).

Kaufringer presents a not so unusual couple that faces tensions because she proves to be rather frugal, whereas he appears as a very generous and hospitable person, almost a spend-thrift. The husband, however, feels rather distraught that the public highly honors his wife whereas he himself suffers from her miserliness that is opposed to his enjoyment of inviting friends to his house and enjoying their company. As he realizes, there is a strong discrepancy between his wife's public status and his own perception of her role within their marriage: "The entire city assumes, and says so as well, that she follows my wishes entirely. In reality she is totally opposed to me, indeed, more than anyone knows, I have suffered from it secretly for a long time, and I cannot tolerate it any longer" (43). His unhappiness results from his perceived power differential; while everyone assumes that she is completely subservient to him, he feels constrained by her opposition to his throwing of parties for his friends. Hence, he finally decides to leave home and travel the world for so long until he would have found a couple whom he would characterize as happily married: "to find two virtuous and pure married people who are so much of one mind that each agrees with the other whatever she or he might think, without them having a fight and struggle" (43).

However, what he really has in mind is a married couple where she is completely subservient to him and carries out all his wishes. After all, he does not acknowledge his wife's own concerns and believes that a husband would be perfectly happy with his wife only if she were to obey all his commands and to live up to his wishes. A happily married couple would be one who would never fight or bicker with each other: "two married people united fully in mind and attitude who did not suffer from conflicts, fights, or bickering" (44). Of course, there is no word here about mutual respect, social equality, shared authority, and other aspects since this husband identifies the notion of 'one body and one mind' as a relationship

where she would be completely obedient.

In the course of several years traveling the world, the protagonist twice encounters a couple that seems to meet all his expectations, but each time when he is about to return home and accept the realization that he himself is unhappily married and cannot change anything about it, the respective other husband reveals to him the deception he lives with. In the first case, a wife had committed adultery with a priest, whom the husband killed and whose skull he had extracted. From that time on, he forces his wife to drink wine out of that skull every evening as a reminder of her adultery.

In the second case, the husband reveals to the protagonist that his wife had demonstrated so much sexual hunger in their early marriage that she slept with many men. He himself appears to have been impotent because had secured a sex slave for her whom he keeps in a prison cell deep underground. Filled with regret, he admits to the searching husband that all the six children his wife produced are the slave's issue. Realizing the irrelevance of his guest's search, he strongly urges him: "I advise you, honestly, do not stay away any longer from your virtuous and good wife. You behave badly toward her, indeed. She does not deserve to be treated this way because she is not guilty of any disloyalty. Her miserliness cannot be reprimanded. Believe me if you intend to travel around the country, you will squander your wealth and lose it entirely before you find what you are seeking" (47). Indeed, as he emphasizes thereupon, "No one is completely perfect. The devil likes to sow his seeds [of discontent] among married people, which makes it impossible for them to live together without any strife" (47).

The protagonist finally accepts that advice and quickly returns home where his wife is waiting for him patiently and virtuously. From then on, he tolerates his wife 'miserliness,' as he perceives it, and enjoys having an honorable and dignified marriage partner. In fact, he "tolerated her chiding" (48) and obviously hence cut back on his excessive hospitality in order to strike a compromise with his wife. As he learned from the two other couples, the public appearance of happiness would not be a guarantee for internal happiness; virtue by itself cannot be purchased through a pretense of honorability.

Of course, Kaufringer wrote this story from a male perspective and for a male audience, so he does not allow real criticism of the protagonist emerge. But he reveals, nevertheless, the danger if a husband takes on the role of a brutal and vicious character, and he also warns that excessive sexuality on the side of one partner can easily lead to public shaming. Overall, the search for the happily married couple ended empty-handed, and yet there is a strong message about what constitutes a constructive marriage, determined by good commitment, compromise, compassion, a strong sense of community, and care for the other partner.

Most relevant also proves to be the verse narrative "The Mayor and the Prince" (no. 4) where we observe how much rationality, reason, and prudence can contribute to establishing individual happiness both within marriage and within society. The story itself is of a rather complex nature because numerous characters interact with each other while each is pursuing a different agenda. We find ourselves in the university town of Erfurt – the university there was founded in 1379, the earliest in Germany (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Erfurt) – where a string of robberies troubles the city council. They urge the mayor to have a talk with a foreign student who suspiciously commands large amounts of money and could be the culprit. The mayor carefully orchestrates his 'interview,' which badly irritates the student who is really the

French dauphin, i.e., the king's son. In order to avoid revealing his true identity, he puts on the mask of a gigolo who visits all women in the city and receives payment from them for, as he strongly suggests. his sexual service. Of course, this is nothing but fabrication, but both the mayor and the entire city council feel deeply horrified, fearing that this young man might cuckold them all with his sexual prowess. Consequently, they simply ignore it altogether and abandon all their efforts to track down the thief (as to prostitution in the Middle Ages, see Classen 2019; paperback 2021; male prostitution, however, was hardly ever discussed in medieval or early modern literature).

Next, the mayor one day observes the student walking across the marketplace and quietly smiles by himself, imagining what he might be doing to or with the wives of the other council members. His wife notices that and forces him to reveal the reason for his reaction, upon which she voices strong moral objections to the young man's behavior. However, in reality, she feels hurt that this gigolo has not yet asked for her sexual favor, and privately she invites the student to visit her during her husband's absence. The mayor notices what his wife is aiming for and sets up a trap for both of them, pretending to go on a business travel. Soon enough, he can catch the two *in flagrante*, sitting in a bathtub together. He removes their clothes and can thus force them to stay in the bathroom.

However, instead of making this scandal public, he returns to the lovers, offers food and drink, and treats the other man as an official guest, which removes the stain of adultery. Moreover, he offers him the money which his wife would have paid for the sexual service and explains: "I will send you straight away the payment every week forever without any break, but assure me then that you will never again come personally into my house, as you have done this time" (23).

Only now does the stranger reveal his true identity, and he assures the mayor that his honor has not been hurt, that he had only lied to him, and he thanks him for his honorable treatment. Moreover, as a sign of his gratitude, he promises him that he would, to compensate him for his suffering, never have to pay toll on any of his merchandise he would purchase or sell in France, and both men thus separate without either one having lost their dignity and public respect.

The mayor feels greatly relieved that he did not hurt the prince, i.e., the future king of France, and the student is pleased to get out of this embarrassing situation without having been hurt physically or politically. The outcome is most satisfying for the two men: "Both were very happy about their agreement. Both their words and actions ended in friendship" (23). Moreover, the mayor does not punish his wife, and we do not hear anything else about her. As a conclusion, however, the narrator comments: "It is a gift of God to be graceful and to guard oneself from wrath; this is wise. A rash person ought to ride an ass" (24).

Undoubtedly, the wife is the butt of the joke here, and Kaufringer, typical of his age, regularly cast women as lustful, uncontrollable (see, e.g., "The Search for the Happily Married Couple," or "The Revenge of the Husband" [no. 13]), and gullible, such as the mayor's wife. However, the critical point of this and other stories proves to be the underlying message that rationality, calmness, circumspection, and modesty in handling one's life prove to be essential in establishing good communication, a working community, based on compassion, collaboration, and commitment. Of course, we also encounter the opposite perspective in "The Revenge" story where the adulterous wife ends up as the miserable victim badly punished for her evil actions against her husband on behalf of her lover, the priest – the husband at the end forces

the priest to bite off her tongue during a French kiss.

On the other hand, in “The Monk as Love Messenger, B” (no. 7), we are presented with an enormously skillful woman who utilizes an unwitting monk as a medium to convey her feelings of love for a young man who eventually understands her secret messages and follows her indirect instructions of how to get to her bedroom at night. She pretends to her confessor that this man harasses her with his wooing, embarrassing her in public, and she explains exactly what he had done. The monk then repeats those words to the man and admonishes him severely to abstain from this behavior. In reality, however, the latter begins to realize what she has communicated to him, so he only needs to follow her advice to enjoy a night of lovemaking with her.

There are also rather upsetting stories involving brutal violence, such as “Three Clever Women, B” (no. 11), where the husbands become miserable victims of their wives’ machinations. The outcome there is that neither communication nor community, neither compassion nor collaboration are at work, and hence the marriage collapses entirely.

But in “The Innocent Murderess” (no. 14), disturbingly filled with much sexual and other violence, we are confronted with a young woman who operates like a new Judith and overcomes her opponents with full force. Granted, her actions result in killing her enemies (a knight, a guardsman, and her own maid), but the countess is forced to eliminate them because they betrayed her trust and broke their vow of loyalty. Nevertheless, she feels great guilt and carries that with her for more than thirty years when she finally confesses everything to her husband. Astoundingly, however, once the king has learned the full truth, he embraces her and assures her that she is, at least in his mind, innocent and a worthy wife who carries no guilt: “I want to live with you forever as your loyal servant because you have suffered much on my behalf, no doubt about it. (695) Neither your honor nor my appreciation of you will ever be diminished through any punishment, either secretly or publicly, because of this story” (80).

The narrator evaluates all the killings that occur in this story and identifies the victims as responsible for their own death as a punishment for their evil deed. Of course, Kaufringer explains this with a religious reference: “God granted her His mercy. He rescued her from all dangers. She would have died from her suffering if God had not assisted her repeatedly. He does so to all who fall into danger from no fault of their own” (80). Both the contemporary audience and we today might find this explanation not quite satisfactory, but the poet ultimately refers to the problem addressed here and elsewhere (“The Hermit and the Angel,” no. 1) that human and divine justice do not coincide perfectly and often act on different planes. This insight carries significant implications for our critical responses to many of Kaufringer’s verse narratives.

## Conclusion

Many of this poet’s *mæren* provoke considerable controversies because the ethical, moral, and also religious framework seems to contradict common understanding. It is rather doubtful to assume that Kaufringer closely followed traditional Church teachings regarding marriage and adultery, for instance. We can be certain, however, that he had commonly some or all of those key aspects in mind addressed above, whether communication, community, commitment, or compassion and collaboration. There are negative and positive examples, especially because many of his narratives are predicated on

conflicts between marriage partners or individuals and other people within society. There are many ways of dealing with such conflicts, but Kaufringer consistently insisted on a rational approach as the most important *modus operandi*. Envy, lust, greed, pride, and other deadly sins regularly demonstrate their strong influence on people (see Kaufringer's treatment of those seven deadly sins in his account no. 25), but they are also parried by virtues such as compassion, commitment, collaboration, and community, such as in "The Peasant Who Was [Falsely] Accused" (no. 3).

The biggest challenge emerges in the very first narrative, "The Hermit and the Angel" (no. 1) because here the hermit has to learn that he cannot fully understand God's working in this world and must retreat to his isolated cell without wondering any longer about divine justice that works so differently than human justice. In terms of marriage, both in "The Innocent Murderess" and in "The Search for the Happily Marriage," the wife is presented as highly virtuous, brave, independently minded, and yet in danger of terrible abuse by people from her social environment she normally would be able to rely on as trustworthy and honorable.

Indeed, the list of our seven C-words offers a meaningful and productive interpretive framework to come to terms with Kaufringer's verse narratives and hence to identify specific messages contained in them that continue to matter for us today at large. Marriage, above all, works well only when both partners know how to communicate well with each other, when they pursue to establish a solid community. The latter, however, can only be achieved if there is solid collaboration, a firm degree of compassion and commitment, and all of that carried by courage and care.

The negative example would be "The Cowardly Husband" (no. 7) who pretends to be bold and strong enough to scare his wife's lover away but he in the last minute cowers in hiding and thus allows his wife to be raped. Sexuality and power struggle emerge as some of the key elements in all marital strife, a simple observation that easily applies to our modern world as well, commonly paired with the question regarding money and its proper spending ("The Search for the Happily Married Couple"). The other negative example was "Merchants in Disagreement" where self-interest and fear split the entire company asunder which then allowed the robbers to overpower the entire group and to rob them of all their properties. Significantly, Kaufringer extended his criticism also to corrupt councilmen ("The Evil and Worldly-Wise [Unscrupulous] Counselors," no. 24) and lawyers ("The Paid Lawyer," no. 20), whose selfishness and greed might destroy the sense of community, commitment, and coordination as the essential bonds holding people together.

Despite the different cultural-historical framework and despite differences in the languages (Middle High German vs. New High German), our modern reading of Heinrich Kaufringer's works does not face a major challenge because we recognize behind each story the poet's great concern with struggling human being. The protagonists presented by Kaufringer are neither better nor worse than people today – we have to be always rather careful not to fall into the trap of Romanticizing the past as idyllic or maligning it as the 'dark age.' Their experiences tend to be somewhat different from those we are going through, so it might seem, but we can recognize in these stories exceedingly useful case studies of how to build a community, how to communicate, or how to demonstrate compassion and commitment within a personal relationship. The poet's messages, slightly varying from one verse narrative to the other, invite us today to reflect on how we would react in this or that situation, and what we should avoid, which quickly would lead us to new approaches in our own lives. The past is there to inform the present and to lay the groundwork for the tomorrow.

To be sure, we could easily proceed from here and discuss Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400), the anonymous *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (ca. 1460) or Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1558/1559) through the same lens of the seven C's. This approach promises to make all those story collections most relevant for us today once again because human life with all its shortcomings and follies, joys and happiness finds excellent reflections in them. Of course, the cultural-historical background is different compared to our own modern lives, but in essence, we discover critical discussions of the topics captured well by the seven C's. Applying this methodological and theoretical approach to pre-modern literature protects us from the usual trap set up by critics of the Humanities who try to argue for its irrelevance because a degree in that field would not lead to a real job. I do not need to argue here against this false mantra, but when we accept works like the *mæren* by Heinrich Kaufringer as meaningful study material for the present generation of students because they allow the critical exploration of human happiness, then the issue of meaningfulness and importance is completely obvious.

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