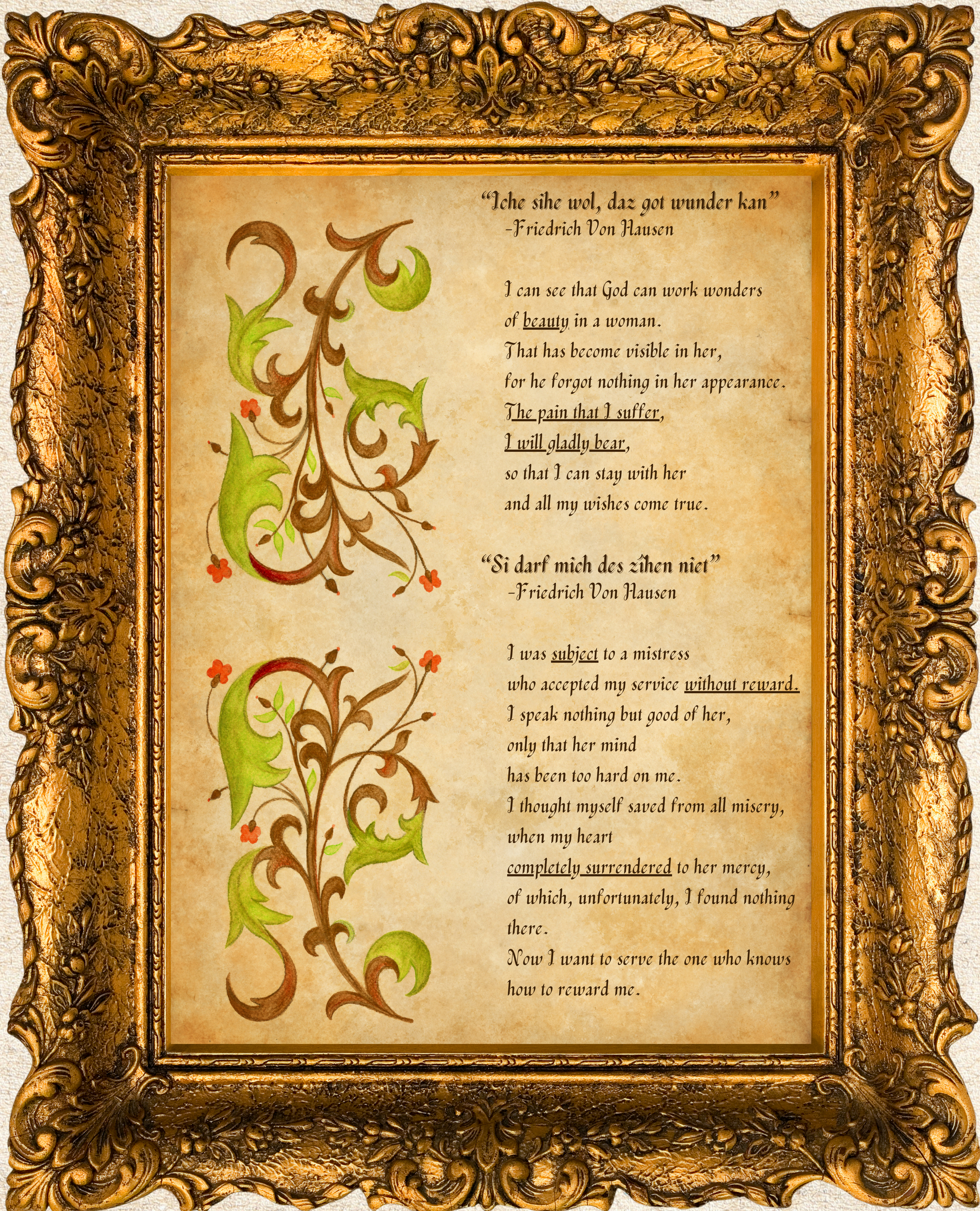


THE LADIES OF MINNESANG: FEMALE AGENCY IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

BAILEY UNDERWOOD AND LAURA BIAGI



“Iche sihe wol, daz got wunder kan”
-Friedrich Von Hausen

I can see that God can work wonders
of beauty in a woman.
That has become visible in her,
for he forgot nothing in her appearance.
The pain that I suffer,
I will gladly bear,
so that I can stay with her
and all my wishes come true.

“Si darf mich des zihen niet”
-Friedrich Von Hausen

I was subject to a mistress
who accepted my service without reward.
I speak nothing but good of her,
only that her mind
has been too hard on me.
I thought myself saved from all misery,
when my heart
completely surrendered to her mercy,
of which, unfortunately, I found nothing
there.
Now I want to serve the one who knows
how to reward me.

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INTRODUCTION

Troubadours of the medieval period composed songs of love, pulling on the heartstrings of their audiences with tales of romantic conquest, unrequited relationships, and an all too modern theme: the girl that got away. Minnesang lyrics, written in Germany from the 12th to the 14th century, developed as a subgenre within the medieval period. In these songs popularized by writers like Walther von Vogelweide and Heinrich von Hausen, love is characterized as an externally powerful and violent, or “gewaltic,” force often personified by a female entity: Lady Minne. Singers grapple with Lady Minne as she coerces them into a relationship with a cold woman and into the trap of eternal heartbreak. In many Minnesang lyrics, men engage in raging fantasies and develop lifelong vendettas, which are sometimes as perilous as feudal German blood feuds, against both Lady Minne and their frigid lover. Although these relationships have their problems, they demonstrate female characters claiming agency over their suitors. These women have overwhelming beauty that is often ordained by God himself. They possess the object of sexual gratification that the singers desire. They are associated with supernatural abilities that baffle and frighten their suitors; this is the case especially with Lady Minne. I have pieced together several findings in this subject area, where many scholars of today explore the violence and power of love in Minnesang lyrics, to develop gender-specific concepts concerning women’s empowered roles in a medieval, patriarchal setting.

METHODOLOGY

As I studied Minnesang poetry and the power dynamics of romantic medieval relationships, I collected lyrics by Walther Von Vogelweide, Friedrich Von Hausen, and Heinrich Von Morungen. I relied on medieval scholars to translate these lyrics from Middle or High German to Modern German, then translated them into English using the Deepl translation service. From the FSU Library, I obtained and read peer-reviewed academic articles which discussed these lyrics, medieval German literary concepts and tropes, and the realities of medieval living. Over the course of my research project, I wrote summaries and analyses of these articles for my collaborators and synthesized connecting ideas on a shared Google Doc. I also provided my collaborators with MLA Citations using the Purdue Owl Guide and compiled PDFs of my sources in a shared folder for further reference. Discussions with and feedback from my project partner, Victoria De Jorio-Koegler, and my mentor, Laura Biagi, supported the formation of my personal thoughts, ideas, and results and refined my presentation.

RESULTS

Medieval literary women are often sorted into archetypes, one being the courtly ‘cansu domna,’ who is defined by medieval scholar Gale Sigal as a heavenly beauty and remains quiet, submissive, and obedient to her lover. However, women featured in German Minnesang poetry break free of these archetypes by developing agency through their romantic and sexual relationships in three main ways: utilizing an inherently feminine standard of beauty to hold power over male suitors, providing or refusing the sexual reward of “lon,” and using supernatural and violent forces to influence the nature of their love.

Minnesang lyricists like Heinrich Von Morungen and Walther Von Vogelweide used an “affective image of femininity,” coined by Jane Dewhurst, to ensnare the attention of their readers with the portrait of an irresistibly beautiful woman. This woman is so captivating that the male suitor cannot turn away from her, no matter how cold or cruel she may be. He will risk heartbreak before he denies the embodied work of art before him. Many lyricists credit female beauty to God himself, but the woman’s beauty becomes a form of power over the suitor.

Friedrich Von Hausen writes upon the concept of “lon,” translating to “reward” in English. Once the knight performs acts of noble service for the female love interest, she is expected to provide him with sex as a reward. However, she (not he) has the power to deny him this reward. These two conflicting forces, the expectation of “lon” and the woman’s act of choice, speak to the presence of female agency in Minnesang lyrics, as scholar Will Hasty observes.

Finally, scholars note a supernatural element bleeding into the construction of female characters in Minnesang lyrics. Hasty finds that Lady Minne operates in a supernatural fashion as a third character, using violent force to orchestrate the woman and male suitor’s relationship. The suitor feels overtaken by this force, unable to break free from its suggestions. He tries to resist by crafting vengeful fantasies of retribution in his head, begging his successors for help in avenging him through the feudal code of vendetta, but he cannot overcome the “gewaltic” force upon him or the distinctly female-aligned agency embodied by Lady Minne.

Relatedly, in Morungen’s lyric “Narzisslied,” Dewhurst remarks that the love interest is described as dreamlike, surrounded by a light emanating from an unknown source. Her presence is both elating and fearsome; she seems to pass through walls and transport the singer’s body from place to place. This woman is not of the same presence as the male suitor- she has somehow ascended to a higher power much like Lady Minne. This puts him in a vulnerable position beneath her, fearing her as much as he would fear a beautiful demon or apparition. Although this is a quite obvious display of her agency, there are certain risks involved that she must take into account. If she does have sex with this knight, she risks the ‘exile of a whore’ from her community. She may be seen as a lascivious woman performing sexual acts for another out of wedlock. If she doesn’t provide “lon,” she could receive the ‘exile of a prude’ from her community as well. She has just cheated a brave, kind, and honorable knight out of what he is due. It is important to remember in this study that female agency now has a different meaning than it did in previous time periods. Although these may seem like baby steps, the fact that the woman is represented in Minnesang literature as a character with a choice is groundbreaking in its socio-political context.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the reserved stereotype of the medieval literary woman, Minnesang lyrics demonstrate a development of agency by women that likely contributed to the gradual acquisition of female power over time. We may find these methods of acquisition unimpressive as a modern audience, but it is important to place them in their socio-political context. Readers of today likely view the gift or refusal of “lon” as a false choice, considering women face two distinct social consequences: the social death of the unchaste woman or the exile of the prude. However, choice in itself was a major step towards progress in medieval society. My audience will find compelling comparisons between the roles of modern women and those of medieval women in historical and contemporary feminized forms of power, such as the establishment of the female gaze in beauty standards, the utilization of sex work as an income source, and the rise of female voices in acts of anti-patriarchal rebellion.

