

Literature as a Testing Ground: Communication and Miscommunication in Medieval Literature, with an Emphasis on Marie de France and Heinrich Kaufringer



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Even though many people consider literature simply as a medium for entertainment, we can easily recognize its much more powerful relevance for human existence. Within a fictional framework, all the critical issues in human life, such as vices and virtues, communication and miscommunication, love, the concept of death, of God, the issues of hatred and violence, have been explored throughout time. A good literary text thus proves its quality and value when the reader/listener is empowered to reflect on fundamental concerns affecting all of us. My focus here will rest on the ambivalent function of human language within a communicative context. It might be an almost banal notion that all human existence is determined by the effective use of language, since we constantly engage with each other through words or communicative signs (including gestures, mimicry, sounds, etc.). Nevertheless, the critical need to investigate what is wrong with our society does not abate even today; on the contrary.

Here I propose to turn to two major medieval authors, twelfth-century Anglo-Norman Marie de France (Lais) and late fifteenth-century German Heinrich Kaufringer (maeren) who both offered a fairly large body of entertaining texts. In both cases, however, we discover quite easily the profound concern these writers share regarding the dysfunctionality of communication. Misunderstanding, conflicts, even aggression regularly surface and threaten to destroy the cohesion of society – very much a problem of the postmodern world as well. By way of looking at the central issue through a literary-historical lens, we gain fascinating insights into the importance of fictional texts in which basic human conflicts are presented and discussed. We can recognize in the texts by Marie de France and by Kaufringer extraordinarily effective narrative mediums to explore and learn about communication and miscommunication, how to identify the problems and how to approach them productively.

Biography:

Dr. Albrecht Classen is University Distinguished Professor of German Studies at the University of Arizona and has published, currently, 119 scholarly books and ca. 820 articles. He is focused currently on topics of 'the secret in medieval lit.' (book to appear in Sept. 2022), on globalism in the pre-modern world (maybe June 2023), and has explored many other fundamental issues in his work. He is the editor of the journals *Mediaevistik* und *Humanities*. He holds the rank of knight since 2017.