

## Why We Need a Medieval Narratology

### A Manifesto

In the wake of the growing interest in diachronic approaches and the historicizing of narratology, a medieval narratology is called for which systematically scrutinizes medieval forms and functions of narration. In the first part of the article, the problems of applying classical narratological theories to medieval literature are sketched, as well as the reasons for the relative invisibility of the narratological studies already conducted by medievalists. In the second part, the main parameters of a medieval narratology are outlined by means of selected sample analyses across a range of genres. A medieval narratology, it is argued, requires necessary shifts and modifications of existing theories, but also an open dialogue between the disciplines. Both narratologists and medievalists can profit from such an endeavor, which does not reject classical and post-classical theories. Rather, it is based on an informed understanding of the historical grounding of narrative forms and their place in the history of literature. The essay rounds off with a proposal of “Ten Theses for a Medieval Narratology”.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, dating to the late fourteenth century, are a *tour de force* of medieval genres and forms of narration: romance, fabliau, saint's life, beast epic, allegory, sermon, *de casibus* tragedy; the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury offer a representative overview of the generic richness medieval authors could rely on and handle creatively. The pilgrims' divergent reactions to the tales demonstrate that the evaluation of narratives is strongly subject to matters of taste. The Knight's Tale, for instance, is received with appreciation by the whole company (Chaucer, I, 3109-3113), the Miller's Tale ends in laughter with only the Reeve being displeased as his profession (he is a carpenter) was mocked (ibid., I, 3855-3862), and Geoffrey's Tale of Sir Thopas is interrupted by the Host for its “lewednesse” (“crudeness, foolishness”) and “drasty rymyng” (“crude rhyming”; ibid., VII, 921 and 930). It is a truism that taste varies, yet it is important to bear in mind that literary taste – that which counts as literature – is not historically indeterminate, but deeply embedded in the historical and cultural context of narrative practices. Interpreting the pilgrims' evaluations of their stories as a double act requires our awareness of the historical circumstances in and against which the *Canterbury Tales* were composed as much as our awareness of scholars' intermediate role in analyzing the texts as historical narrative practices. It is one of the great promises of narrative theory to do justice to these complexities: with its focus on forms and functions, narratology – particularly in its post-classical vein – can help to improve our un-

derstanding of narrative elements both in and across literary periods (for post-classical narratology, see Alber / Fludernik 2010).

More than a decade ago, Monika Fludernik in her seminal article “The Diachronization of Narratology” declared that “a reorientation of narratology in the direction of diachronic inquiry is now on the cards – no longer as a weird antiquarian interest but as a vital and exciting new area of research” (Fludernik 2003a, 332). Fludernik’s sample analysis traces the development of scene shifts signaled by a meta-narrative formula, which is, as she asserts, a very basic feature. She ends her article with a programmatic vision:

The example of the scene shift was chosen for its very mundaneness. If even such basic features of narrative have so far remained unanalyzed from a diachronic perspective, it becomes self-evident how many questions there still are to be answered, how much there is still to be done in narrative studies, particularly from a diachronic perspective. If such historical analysis is taken into account, the field of narratology could be on the brink of a major revolution. These questions will keep professors busy for at least a few decades and will provide ample opportunities for dissertations. The train has started in Europe. The motto is ‘West-ward Ho!’ (Fludernik 2003a, 344)

Since 2003 this train has indeed moved, but not quite alongside as revolutionary a track as Fludernik envisaged. Undoubtedly there has been a historical shift and the very phrase ‘diachronization of narratology’ has become one of the buzz terms in the field (for a discussion of the new paradigm, see e.g. Martínez 2012, Nünning 2000). To be diachronically oriented or engaged in historicizing narratology has turned almost into a *sine qua non* of thorough post-classical narratological approaches. Yet, upon closer inspection, ‘historical’ in practice still often means post-sixteenth century, or in a huge historical leap backwards, antiquity. In fact, the literature from antiquity is probably the most successful area in the diachronization of narratology so far. From Irene de Jong’s narratological work on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to Jonas Grethlein’s analysis of expectation and experience in ancient historiography, narratology is firmly situated within classical studies (cf. de Jong 2001, 2004, 2014, Grethlein 2013). Even though scholars’ awareness of the historical potential of narratology has been raised, we are still lacking a truly wide-reaching diachronic narratology that does not neglect whole periods in its surveys. A central role here could (and should) be assigned to a medieval narratology. By this I do not mean a theory of narrative that is (re)constructed from medieval discussions about how to compose and structure texts, but rather a narrative theory that seeks to explain the forms and functions of medieval practices of narration.

Why a *medieval* narratology in particular? For one, the Middle Ages are notoriously underrepresented in the process of diachronizing narratology. It seems as if the early modern period, in the wake of humanism, can be effortlessly aligned with the parameters pertaining to the classical texts themselves, so that antiquity and the early modern humanist agenda form a natural frame that brackets the Middle Ages also in terms of their narrative practices. In the *Living Handbook of Narratology*, notably one of the most up-to-date resources for the current state of narratology, the keywords “medieval” and “Middle Ages” occur twenty times in total.<sup>1</sup> This is a poor result given the diachronic widening

of narratology in the course of post-classical theories, and it is a poorer one if we consider that the Middle Ages actually span one thousand years of narrative, more years in fact than have passed since the Renaissance until today. Yet paradoxically, set in relation to the amount of literature published in the field of narrative theory, these one thousand years of narrative tend to be a footnote in scholarly debates. Outside of the field of medieval studies, the Middle Ages seem to be useful predominantly as a demarcation: they are evoked as a point of contrast for narrative forms not yet developed (compared with the early modern, modern, or postmodern period), or those fallen into obsolescence (compared with antiquity).

A further complication can be identified within medieval studies itself, where the distinctions and finer points of narratological analyses are discussed with respect to many detailed examples. Yet due to their particularity, they often do not reach beyond the discipline's specialized discourse. The problems are obvious: a period of a thousand years is inevitably highly heterogeneous, and to come to terms with the sheer mass of narrative – both from within and outside medieval studies – appears to be a Herculean task indeed. However, in an era in which medievalism and post-medievalism flourish, as popular TV series and historical novels, as well as re-enactment societies and medieval fairs demonstrate, it seems all the more crucial to scrutinize the intricacies of medieval narration both in their immediate context and in their impact on literary history. In what follows, I am going to sketch the framework for such a 'medieval narratology' tracing the history of the dissatisfying status quo and outlining the parameters we as scholars and literary critics need to turn our attention to.

### **Why (Not) the Middle Ages?**

The idea that the Middle Ages, the period unhappily couched between antiquity and the Renaissance, is somehow inferior to its preceding and subsequent periods has become a much reiterated prejudice that even in the twenty-first century can meet with the approval of influential academic institutions: Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve* (2011) on the rediscovery of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (1st century B.C.), the winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction as well as the MLA's 2012 James Russell Lowell Prize, is perhaps the most prominent recent example, much to the dismay of the medievalists' community (cf. Hinch 2012, Cohen 2012). Yet, we should not forget that humanism arose directly from the medieval period, and the renewed interest in classical literature was shaped by the omni-present influence of ancient literature in the Middle Ages. Thus, the inevitable question is: why should one *not* pay careful attention to the medieval period? If one conceives of the medieval period not only as the filter, but the trigger that gave rise to the humanist movement, the literature of the period must be dealt with as an achievement in its own right. In addition, it is worth pointing out that periodization is a construct in the first

place: the Italian Renaissance and the Northern Renaissance differ temporally; there are traces of an emerging humanism well before the Renaissance; and early modern writers may strike us as being deeply invested in medieval thought. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is a case in point: often claimed to be a cornerstone of humanism, the work is also very much indebted to medieval thinking; from the satiric *Land of Cockaigne* (c. 1320) and medieval travel narratives such as John Mandeville's *Travels* (c. 1365) to the monastic backdrop of the Utopian society.

For medievalists, these issues hardly need reminding.<sup>2</sup> There is clearly a gap between what is taken for granted within the field of medieval studies and what requires justification and clarification for non-medievalists. Apart from the problems of visibility and making the specialized results available to a broader audience, there are at least three further reasons for the neglect of the medieval evidence within narratology. One is the difficulty of using a set of theories that is almost exclusively based on post-seventeenth century novels and created for describing and analyzing these very texts. In other words, narratology is biased both temporally (by focusing on post-seventeenth century texts) and generically (by privileging the novel). While some of the theories are undoubtedly also pertinent to the medieval corpus, others are not. Armin Schulz usefully summarizes the main difficulties modern readers face when reading and interpreting medieval narrative: apart from the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between author and narrator, and the peculiar distribution of knowledge between characters and narrators (in favor of the former), he mentions the fact that medieval narration often contains too little or too much information, that characters lack a discernible 'character', that logical breaks and ruptures constitute a significant plot element, and that meaning is created in retelling and varying traditional stories, plot elements, and subject matters (cf. Schulz 2012, 1-2). Most of these aspects are not covered at all by classical narratological theories, which, because they were created for a quite different set of texts, privilege other features, such as the intricacies of perspective.<sup>3</sup> With respect to medieval literature, the result is either a list of negatives (features that are not yet present in the corpus), or the insight that a theory may be ill-suited to the text in question. Once again, the loophole here seems to be the establishment of a medieval narratology that seeks to overcome these difficulties by reconciling useful methods with the textual evidence.<sup>4</sup>

The second reason why medieval narratives are often excluded from narratological debates lies in the structuralist heritage of narratology, which, due to its ahistorical focus and exclusion of context, has not been very attractive for medievalists who want to go beyond the isolation of structural elements based on a grammatical model. Tzvetan Todorov's classical study on the *Decameron* (1969) is a prime example. In 1989, Evelyn Birge Vitz conducted a number of case studies applying classical narratological approaches, among them Todorov's 'syntactic' model and Algirdas Julien Greimas's actantial theory, to representative examples from medieval French literature – *La Vie de saint Alexis* (mid-11th century), Abelard's *Historia calamitatum* (c. 1130), Marie de France's

*Lais* (c. 1160-1170), the *Roman de la Rose* (c. 1230), and *La Fille du comte de Pontieu* (mid-13th century), among others. From the onset, Vitz is “at least as interested in seeing how various models [of classical narratology, E.v.C.] *do not* work, and why, as how they do” (Vitz 1989, 5, emphasis in original). Indeed, the most important conclusion to be drawn from her studies is the rift she unveils between the theories and the medieval texts. Her conclusion is, predictably, that the theories cannot do justice to the medieval evidence, but that they help us see their alterity more clearly: “The success of these models was [...] in their failures: what they *failed* to account for in medieval literature was thrown into sharper relief” (ibid., 222, emphasis in original).

In recent years, post-classical narratology has tried to make up for these at best *ex negativo* successes of its classical narratological heritage. Yet these comparably new movements, which actively encourage historical and contextualist theorizing, have not caught on in the field, at least in the Anglo-American tradition. Here, medievalists who explicitly situate themselves within a narratological tradition are rare. Notable exceptions in the Anglo-American context include A.C. Spearing’s most recent work, which is devoted to the analysis of voice and subjectivity in a range of genres (cf. Spearing 2005, 2012), as well as a number of articles, for instance by J.D.W. Crowther on Mary of Egypt (1984) or Ruth Waterhouse on the *Life of Saint Cuthbert* (1987). The case is entirely different when it comes to German medieval studies, which I will discuss below in more detail. That the most comprehensive narratological theory to date including medieval English literature also originates in Germany is hardly a coincidence. As part of her diachronic overview in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996), Monika Fludernik analyzes selected examples from several medieval genres such as verse and prose romance as well as hagiography, putting her four-tier model of the cognitive parameters “telling”, “viewing”, “experiencing”, and “acting” to the test. Likewise, Jan Alber’s diachronic approach of ‘unnatural narratology’ (2011) also includes selected examples from medieval literature in its corpus of texts.

Indeed, in Germany there is a strong narratological tradition within medieval studies, that is, within medieval German studies in particular.<sup>5</sup> In the last decade or so, a number of important studies have been published, among them Gert Hübner’s analysis of focalization in courtly romances (2003), Uta Störmer-Caysa’s work on time and space in medieval narrative (2007), Matthias Meyer’s book on fictionality and Arthurian romance (1994), and Armin Schulz’s work on contingency and coherence in medieval narrative (2010). A noteworthy edited collection is Florian Kragl and Christian Schneider’s (2013), which next to a corpus of medieval German material also contains examples from late antiquity and the Romance languages. Likewise, Harald Haferland and Matthias Meyer’s collection of essays brings together scholars working on narratology and medieval German, French, and English literature respectively (2010a). The sixteen articles explore such crucial topics as character depiction, causality, narrative schemata, consciousness, and first-person narrators. In ad-

dition, the survey of narratological theories in relation to medieval German literature by Armin Schulz (2012) is a highly useful work that shows both the limits and the potential of a medieval narratology by presenting a wide spectrum of key theories and sample studies.<sup>6</sup> Last but not least, there are several on-going projects in Germany that explicitly impel historical narratology, such as the *Center for Narrative Research* (CNR) at the University of Wuppertal, the *Zentrum für transkulturelle Narratologie* at the University of Bonn, and the newly established interdisciplinary network “Medieval Narratology”.<sup>7</sup>

A major impediment inherent in many of these laudable efforts, however, is their lack of outreach: due to the language barrier, many studies in German have little, if at all, been received by an international audience, thus undeservingly being marginalized. Part of the problem is clearly also the fact that even within the German tradition, the various available approaches, because of their specificity, remain isolated islands of narratological scrutiny. As Haferland and Meyer note in the introduction to their collection, a discussion that brings together the different approaches, or only differentiates between them, is still lacking, even though a historical dimensioning of narratology is undoubtedly called for (Haferland / Meyer 2010b, 7).

Furthermore, another obstacle is the relative scarcity of interdisciplinary exchange, again due to the specific nature of many a study. The German medievalists’ output, because it concentrates on German texts, often does not reach scholars working on medieval English, French, or Scandinavian texts, and vice versa. Many of the aspects I have mentioned bear a striking similarity to the factors Matías Martínez identifies as causing “discontinuities in the field of narrative research” (Martínez 2012, 135) more generally: language barriers, barriers due to the variety of disciplines, due to corpora, to different generations, and to academic practices. The status quo of a specifically medieval narratology is hence symptomatic of the broader tensions and developments in the field of narrative theory.

In conclusion, a medieval narratology does not yet exist for an array of reasons – the structuralist heritage of narratology, the unsuitability of many existing narrative theories, the bias of the Middle Ages as an inferior period, the lack of medievalists invested in narratology, the alterity of medieval literature that poses a problem to non-medievalists, the difficulty of making medievalists’ findings available and useful for further narratological studies, the German-centredness and relative exclusivity of medieval German studies, and, finally, too little interdisciplinary exchange between the various medieval studies in and beyond Germany.

Even though this list may appear daunting, the situation is not as desperate as it may sound. Rather, I believe we are on the verge of witnessing a powerful change in historical narratology. Never has the creation of a medieval narratology been as emergent as now. What is needed is a collective effort of narratological exchange. A medieval narratology could fruitfully start this dialogue, for several reasons: for one, the ultimate aim is shared by medievalists and non-medievalists alike – the analysis of narrative elements and their functions. What

is more, the parameters of analysis, at least the very broad categorizations (author, narrator, point of view, time, space, plot, and so forth) converge as well. Finally, a diachronic, culturally oriented interest lies at the heart of post-classical narratology, hence providing a further joint interest across fields. Put differently, the means are at hand; all that is needed is a systematic way of, first, accomplishing a medieval narratology – from within the field – in order to bring the results in dialogue with general narratological discussions beyond medieval studies. In this way, medievalists' expertise on texts and narrative practices can be relied on most thoroughly while at the same time allowing non-specialists to be invited to actively partake of debates concerning historical narratology. In joining our forces as medievalists and starting an open dialogue with other narratologists, we can not only address a major lacuna in the field of (post-classical) narratology, but also make a significant contribution to the history and the development of narrative genres, forms, and functions.

## **Towards a Medieval Narratology**

### **Texts and Tensions**

In the conclusion of her study, Evelyn Birge Vitz concedes that narrative analysis can be valuable “just so long as we keep revising our theories and paradigms to fit the data (the works, the culture) and not, as is so common, the other way around” (Vitz 1989, 222). Hence, it stands to reason to begin with a synchronic approach in which the texts themselves take precedence in identifying and developing a useful and flexible set of narratological tools. In a second step, one can then incorporate these findings into a diachronic framework. Put differently, I propose that a medieval narratology commences synchronically by firmly keeping the diachronic extension, which is indispensable, in perspective. The most urgent lacunae in historicizing narratology are possibly the roles and functions of the narrator, the underlying logic of the plot as well as the difficulty of translations, which in medieval contexts means adaptations rather than faithful renderings into the target language. In these cases, we are confronted with substantially different configurations from those pertaining to the modern novel or short story. Yet, character, the representation of consciousness, perspective and ideology, as well as time and space are likewise crucial and deserve our attention. The following outline does not claim to be exhaustive – it is meant to be illustrative, providing a first step towards the ramifications of a medieval narratology. As always, the parameters do not constitute distinct fields of analysis, but overlap in their boundaries.

**Author / Narrator**

*The* narrator is of course as much a fiction as the existence of *the* medieval narrative – narratives are practices and therefore always idiosyncratic because of their embedding in specific contexts and their dependence on the historical and cultural circumstances in which they are meaningful. Narrators in medieval narrative texts tend to be overt, sometimes obtrusive even, and take considerable influence on the narration in the form of comments, interruptions, digressions, and additional explanations. In dream visions, to give but one example, the dreamer / narrator and the author converge to such a degree that they collapse into one. In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (late 14th century), the God of Love accuses Chaucer of not having represented women in a favorable light in his translation of the *Roman de la Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385) (cf. ll. 253-266). In her defence, Queen Alceste praises Chaucer's other works from the *Book of the Duchess* (c. 1368-1372) to the lost sermon on Mary Magdalene (cf. *Legend of Good Women*, ll. 405-420). Hence the dreamer, who encounters Cupid and Alceste in the poem, is clearly identified with Chaucer the poet. In more general terms, one may legitimately question the existence of a narrator figure in the first place. Harald Haferland (2007), for instance, argues that a fictional narrator emerges only towards the beginning of the early modern period in the works of authors like Georg Wickram, and A.C. Spearing (2012) contends that the narrating 'I' in many medieval narratives is an empty space that can be filled by any reader.

There are many different roles the narrator takes on, ranging from authoritative teacher and adviser to the first-person narrators of dream visions and mystical experiences. Inevitably, questions of authority as well as the dialogic nature of many a medieval narrative fall under this category, too. In the fifth book of the *Life of Saint Katherine* (mid-1440s), for instance, John Capgrave assures his audience that the miracle of Katherine bleeding milk after her execution is true:

On was in tokyne of virginall clenness:  
 In stede of blood, mylke ran at hir necke,  
 Whech of hir purité that tyme bare wytnesse.  
 Ther myth non othir thing ren at that becke  
 Than swech as was befor in the secke –  
 I mene thus to put you oute of doute:  
 Swech thing as was in hir, swech thing ran oute.

It ran so plenteuously, it wattered all the grounde  
 That lay aboute hir. O most mervelous welle:  
 Here is the hede, the mylke aboute all rounde.  
 What shulde I more of this myracle telle?  
 Save Mari alone, of maydenhode she hath the belle –  
 That witnessith wele this present vision  
 Whech may no wey be called illusion.  
 (John Capgrave, ll 1898-1911)<sup>8</sup>

Capgrave twice emphasizes the truth of the episode (cf. ll. 1903-1904 and 1911). In addition, he directly addresses his audience "I mene thus to put *you* oute of doute" (l. 1903, emphasis mine), and imagines the scene as if he was an

eye-witness in apostrophizing the ‘well’ of milk and describing its dispersion (ll. 1906-1907). These and similar short narratorial intrusions permeate medieval literature. Recent work by Monika Fludernik and Ansgar Nünning has focused our attention on metanarrative (cf. Fludernik 2003b, Nünning 2001, 2005). A classification of these metanarrative instances with respect to their functions could usefully illuminate our understanding on how medieval narratives shape and guide the reading experience. In saints’ legends, longer metanarrative insertions, turning into full-fledged digressions, may be used to provide additional information on selected aspects (natural history, theology, historical background), but also as a playing ground for the poets’ self-fashioning as writers.<sup>9</sup>

Another potentially difficult question is how to conceive of medieval narrators from a theoretical perspective given that medieval narration is strongly imbued with oral features or to varying degrees indebted to them. Ursula Schaefer (2004) introduced the useful term “Vokalität” (‘vocality’) to describe the oral background of medieval literature and its uses as a literary topos, which can be conceived of as ‘secondary orality’.<sup>10</sup> This type of orality is linked with the emergence of a fictive narrator figure, distinct from the author, but without idiosyncratic features – it is the voice that mediates the discourse. Here Paul Zumthor’s concept of vocality (1988), which takes notice of the performative aspects of a text, is relevant as well. The many anonymous medieval works and the question of textual authority further complicate the author / narrator conundrum. Ultimately, all of these questions can be linked with the communicative model that underlies our understanding of medieval narration and that requires close examination. Not only are the voices in a narrative potentially ambiguous, the divergent textual transmissions – particularly the variant readings in different manuscript witnesses of the same text – introduce yet another complication. This absence of the one authoritative text has been described in terms of ‘mouvance’ by Zumthor (1972) and later on in terms of ‘variance’ by Bernard Cerquiglini (1989), concepts that suggest themselves for narratological debate.

### **Plot Structure and Motivation**

In this section, I will inquire into narrative logic, episode structure, and sequencing; in other words, how medieval narratives are formed, how they proceed and develop, how scenes and episodes are internally structured and connected, and which superordinate rules of motivation they follow. Circularity, causality, finality, and teleology are central aspects of inquiry, just as ruptures and lacks of coherence, contradictions, and unlikely and unreliable scenarios. In the Arthurian tradition, for instance, logical breaks and unexplained motivations are particularly noteworthy. In the words of Terence McCarthy about the *Morte Darthur* (c. 1470), the text

is dominated more by action than by consequence, more by story than by plot. What is happening is more urgent than what is going to happen *next*. [...] We will have taken our first step towards an understanding of the *Morte Darthur* when we realise that the road to Camelot is long and adventurous. If there were signposts along the way, the most frequent would no doubt be ‘detour ahead’.  
(McCarthy 1991, 2, emphasis in original)

Likewise, a virgin martyr’s legend follows a predetermined pattern of generic logic: it usually begins with a few sentences about the young woman’s background and upbringing before her meeting with the anti-Christian representative of the Roman Empire is recounted. They have a heated discussion about the truth and falsehood of their beliefs, upon which she is tortured and finally beheaded. The structure is strictly chronological and, after the huge initial jump, moves directly towards her death, the ultimate aim and success of the story. Yet this is not the endpoint of the story: the martyr is elevated to the status of a saint and enters heaven, thereby becoming a model for all good Christians. In romances, we find cyclical, iterating, or mirrored narrative patterns as well as a number of symbolisms (three tasks / tests, three enemies, etc.). These patterns were central to classical narratologists, most notably Brémond (1973) and Greimas (1966). The Genettian parameters of order, duration, and frequency provide useful cornerstones in this context, too. Metalepsis, among others, is a common feature; its analysis can shed light on the conceptualization of narrative levels and their permeability. The main desideratum may be the narratological description of the disruptions, tensions, and logical flaws in medieval narratives: what exactly is ‘narrative logic’ in the medieval context and how is it realized (affirmed, violated, questioned, explored, etc.)? Important approaches in this area come from German medievalists: Clemens Lugowski’s 1932 study on Wickram in which he introduces the concept of “Motivation von hinten” (‘motivation from behind’) is an early precursor<sup>11</sup> as well as the more recent trends of paradigmatic narration (cf. e.g. Warning 2001, 2003), schema poetics (cf. Kuhn 1973, Strohschneider 1997), and script-based, metonymic, approaches to narrative sequences and episodes (cf. Haferland 1989, 2005a, 2005b).

## Character

It is a commonplace that in many medieval narratives characters are one-dimensional and conform to a set of recurrent features, such as the chivalrous knight, the virtuous saint, the beautiful lady, and so forth, or represent abstract concepts on an allegorical level (Prudence, Philosophy, Everyman). Such a view fits very neatly in with the paradigm going back to Jacob Burckhardt according to which the birth of the individual can be located in the Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as Matthias Meyer (2001) reminds us, if we regard individuality – that is, an individual’s self-consciousness about his personal history and the roles and functions in society – as an evolutionary fact, then of course individuality was prevalent in the Middle Ages and of course medieval characters can exhibit

individual traits. The representation of these traits follows specific rules which require our attention. The characters' two-dimensionality need not be inherently negative, but ought to be read against their function for the story, their impact on the reader, and the medieval aesthetics of narrative more generally. A typical example is the following, taken from the Breton lay *Emaré* (late 14th century), which falls into the category of the so-called 'Constance-saga' prevalent in late medieval literature:

[...]  
 Of a lady fayr and fre,  
 Her name was called Emaré,  
 As I here synge in songe.

Her fadyr was an emperor,  
 Of castelle and of ryche towre,  
 Syr Artyus was hys nome;  
 He hadde boþe hallys and bowrys,  
 Frythes fayr, forestes wyth flowrys,  
 So gret a lord was none.  
 Weddedde he had a lady,  
 That was both fayr and semely,  
 Whyte as whales bone:  
 Dame Erayne hette þat emperes,  
 She was full of loue and goodnesse,  
 So curtays lady was none.  
 (*Emaré*, ll. 22-36)<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly *Emaré*'s parents are described in superlatives: her father is the greatest lord, her mother the most courteous lady. Hence it is small wonder that *Emaré*, too, is beyond comparison: going through a long list of trials and tribulations, the heroine bears her fate like a saint and is indeed the epitome of goodness. Serving as the positive foil against the bad characters that seek to do her harm, *Emaré*'s straightforward and non-developing character fulfills clear moral functions and must be understood in its generic context in which it forms the integral part of a web of characters in marked opposition.

The lack or very limited degree of character development and psychological depth have obscured the fact that, depending on the genre, there is actually a range of ways to represent consciousness (thoughts and thought processes as well as emotions), which calls for further and nuanced discussion. The creative exploitation of a character situated between the levels of *histoire* and *discours* is particularly pertinent in this context (cf. Stock 2010). Monika Fludernik (2010, 2011) asserts evidence for seven categories of representing mental activity in medieval literature, ranging from descriptions of behavior indicative of emotional states and direct discourse to narratorial empathy and virtual direct speech. Even though the representation of 'social minds' *sensu* Alan Palmer (2010) seems to be largely absent from the medieval period, much work on consciousness as a category of character depiction lies ahead.<sup>14</sup> James Phelan's three-fold model of character (1989) may offer a viable starting-point for the analysis of character: Phelan argues that character is a combination of a synthetic (constructed), a thematic, and a mimetic dimension. Using this model, one may come to see medieval characters as being calibrated in thematic and

synthetic terms rather than mimetic ones, which is not inherently deficient but simply a different conceptualization of what a character is and should be. Applying Phelan's model, Meyer (2001) has demonstrated that medieval characters can undermine and complicate readers' expectations of coherent and consistent actions. Similarly, characters in Arthurian romance are granted a level of independence and relevance that point to an anthropological dimension of character depiction – a dimension that is beyond the scope of structuralist approaches (cf. Meyer 1999). Here the influence of Vladimir Propp's typological model needs to be questioned, which has had considerable impact on medieval studies, in particular on the analysis of saints' legends and Arthurian romance (cf. Propp 1968).<sup>15</sup>

### Perspective

I use 'perspective' rather than 'focalization' because the latter, in Genette's terms (1980), refers to the distribution of and access to knowledge and therefore can be regarded as one instance of a much broader understanding of perspective. The medieval indebtedness to tradition and convention requires a realignment of perspective and focalization; indeed, a central aspect of a medieval narratology must be the strategic and creative employment of conventionality. There are multiple ways of imposing a particular perspective on the text or inscribing it in the discourse. The perspective(s) and point(s) of view selected for a particular episode or whole story crucially shape the reading experience and understanding of a text. Hence perspective also comprises the choices made by the author and communicated by the narrator, in terms of the selected scenes, the distribution of direct discourse and descriptions as well as (narratorial) attitudes and traces of ideology. The last two aspects roughly correspond to what Seymour Chatman has called "slant" and "filter" respectively (1986). An important study on the various manifestations of focalization in medieval narrative is Gert Hübner's (2004) adaptation of the concept of focalization to the particularities of twelfth- and thirteenth-century narration and in which he shows, among many other detailed findings, how strategies of focalization can function as a generator of subjectivization.

A useful example of how a conventional episode is reimagined by means of shifts in perspective is the following extract from the legend of Julian the Hospitaller in the *South English Legendary* (mid-13th century). In a plot that borrows freely from the Odysseus story, Julian is foretold that he will slay his parents, a fate he tries to evade by leaving his home country. He wins a foreign king's favor and marries his daughter. One day, after Julian spend the day away from home, the following incident happens upon his return:

Ac sein Iulian him com hom • in þe morunyge sone  
 & to chambre drou toward bedde • as is wone was to done  
 þo hurde he wel softe slepe • and sei þer inne tweie  
 As men and wymmen ofte doþ • þat weri beoþ of weie  
 He 3eode ney & isei þer ligge • man and woman also

3e þoʒte he þis is mi wif • and a gering þat comeþ hure to  
 Nou ich ise[o] wel þe hore • is iwoned to misdo  
 Ne ssolleþ hy neuere ete mete • ne me ssende so  
 He slou is fader and is moder • mid is swerd riȝt þere  
 And wende by hom þat is wif • & hure horling it were  
 Wonderliche it farþ bi wate • as me may here ise[o]  
 þe þing þat is a man yssape • he ne may neuere vle[o].  
 (*South English Legendary*, ll. 41-52)<sup>16</sup>

At first we follow Julian's limited perspective (which corresponds to that of the audience) who does not know who is actually lying in the bed. In Genettian terms, we are concerned with an instance of internal focalization. Julian jumps to the conclusion that his wife committed adultery (cf. l. 46) and kills the couple blind with rage. Surprisingly, the description of the slaying reveals the actual identity of the two victims – Julian's "fader and is moder" (l. 49). Here the narrator switches to zero focalization, anticipating the explanation that is provided in the next couple of lines. Julian's wife appears and explains that his parents had come for a visit and, wary from the long journey, she arranged for them to sleep in their marital bed (cf. ll. 55-65). Retrospectively, we can now read the casual reference to people going to bed after a long journey ("as men and wymmen ofte doþ • þat weri beoþ of weie"; l. 44) as a foreshadowing of the true identity of the couple who rests after their journey. Both in terms of perspective and in terms of plot structure this passage is noteworthy, not to mention the metanarrative in the final two lines of the quotation. More generally, it seems pertinent to also consider how the audience is influenced by various perspectives and ideologies and / or involved in the narrative process (suspense, surprising turns, raising expectations etc.). The latter aspect clearly overlaps with more general questions of reader response and reception, questions which loom in the background of any narratological analysis anyway and should not be underestimated in their impact.

## Time and Space

Time (temporality) and space (spatiality) are taken together because they are intimately linked. They are markedly different from time and space in the novel and bring to the fore the limits of narratological theories created on the basis and for the analysis of one specific modern genre. The Christian worldview, which underlies all writing in the medieval West, is taken for granted in every literary product and comes with a set of presuppositions and basic assumptions that have a fundamental bearing on the spatial and temporal configurations of a narrative. With respect to courtly romances in the medieval German tradition, Uta Störmer-Caysa (2007) has demonstrated that medieval conceptions of time (and space) in narrative texts are characterized by an alterity that is worth considering in greater detail. Although Störmer-Caysa's findings are specific to the genre she focuses upon, she aptly shows that it is worthwhile analyzing temporal structures in medieval narratives because of their symbolic meaning,

their bearing on narrative development, and their various manifestations of ‘time’ (e.g. the time of adventure, of fight, of wonders, etc.).

What is more, time and space, because of their religious investment, are also inextricably connected with people’s everyday experiences. The most prominent example is perhaps religious space (and spaces) in which temporal categories converge, ranging from religious houses, churches, and pilgrimage sites to the presence of the saints as well as heaven and hell. In secular genres, too (which are never fully exempt from the religious), time and space are conceptualized differently again, for instance in the fairy world of romance. Often time and space are meaningful on both a literal and a metaphorical level: in saints’ legends, but also in romances and travel narratives, references to biblical sites and other locations of significance in the history of Christianity have both symbolic and metaphorical meaning for the audience, a meaning that is heightened by the fact that pilgrimage sites can be visited and hence re-experienced by the audience. In these cases, the interweaving of historical and / or Christian context and literary conventions is of paramount importance. However, in a number of genres, such as exempla and fables, time and space play only a marginal role. Likewise, the function of the didactic mode is crucial, and is enmeshed with the ethical dimension of medieval narrative.

## Conclusion

A final example that brings together several problems and challenges I have outlined above is the following Middle English version of one of the most famous stories from antiquity, notably in the version by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*:

Bifor þe king he sat adoun  
 & tok his harp so miri of soun,  
 & tempref his harp as he wele can,  
 & blisseful notes he þer gan,  
 Ðat al þat in þe palays were  
 Com to him forto here,  
 & liggef adoun to his fete,  
 Hem þenkeþ his melody so swete.  
 Þe king herkeþ and sitt ful stille;  
 To here his gle he haþ gode wille.  
 Gode bourde he hadde of his gle;  
 Þe riche quen al-so hadde he.  
 When he hadde stint his harping  
 Ðan seyð to him þe king,  
 “Menstrel, me likeþ wel þi gle.  
 Now aske of me what it be,  
 Largetich ichil þe pay:  
 Now speke, & tow miȝt asay.”  
 (*Sir Orfeo*, ll. 435-452)<sup>17</sup>

Obviously the singer is Orpheus – the passage is taken from the romance *Sir Orfeo* (c. 1330-1340). However, the story does not quite follow the Ovidian model: not only is the text heavily adapted to the romance discourse (“Sir”

Orfeo, a medieval courtly setting, Eurydice / Heurodis is captured by an Otherworld king etc.), but the plot, too, has been altered dramatically. Heurodis is informed about her abduction to the Otherworld in a dream, which she recounts only after her distraught reaction has been described – that is, the reaction that is visible to outside observers, notably to Orfeo (cf. ll. 75-174). The audience share Orfeo’s limited, internal view on the events so that Orfeo’s distress becomes a mirror and model for the audience’s reaction as well. The temporal and spatial parameters are also affected by the changes: Heurodis’s abduction under the symbolic “ympe-tree” (ll. 70, 165), which is brought about by magical “fairi forþ” (l. 193); Orfeo’s performance of mourning that takes the form of living as a hermit and alludes to the temporal otherness of the saintly living; and the convergence of fairy time and Orfeo’s time as he by chance sees his wife one day and finds the fairy king’s castle, which bears but a faint likeness to Hades in its astonishing splendor and the zombie-like enchanted inhabitants (cf. ll. 355-404). The most substantial change concerns the ending: there is no condition attached to Orfeo leading his wife back to the real world and Heurodis does not die but returns safely with the former to his castle. Before they resume their position as king and queen and an additional episode is introduced in which Orfeo tests his steward’s loyalty (who passes without difficulty).

The mixture of the classical mythological story, romance motifs, folklore elements, as well as the sudden, unexplained, and seemingly unnecessary turns in the plot we find in *Sir Orfeo* brings to the fore the alterity of medieval narration that deserves our closer and more attuned attention. It is but one example of so many texts and genres which cannot be fully explored within the scope of this essay. Constraints of space have also required that I give a more cursory account of both the theories that one could put to the test (except for a few tentative suggestions) and the actual framework of a medieval narratology. Moreover, I do not wish to prescribe how such a realignment of narrative theory should be conducted. This is explicitly *not* a ‘how to create a medieval narratology’. Rather, my aim has been to draw our attention to the more general phenomena in need of modification and to make suggestions of how the project – a decidedly joint project – could be accomplished. What is more, it should be borne in mind that my examples are all taken from the late medieval period, hence from a fragment of the period as a whole. I have omitted Old English and early Middle English, which are characterized by specific narrative forms and rules and are influenced by a different set of traditions. The Christianization of England, for instance, is central, as are theological issues triggered by Old Testament narratives, the tradition of Germanic warrior culture, and the highly metaphorical, yet conventionalized language. It cannot be stressed enough that in order to comprise the whole Middle Ages, medievalists have to unite, whilst also traversing traditional boundaries of disciplines and of periodization. Both narratologists and medievalists can profit from a medieval narratology that does not reject classical or post-classical theories but is based on an informed understanding of the historical groundings of narrative forms

and their place in the history of literature. I conclude with ten theses which may be taken as the guiding principles for what I envisage as the future of historical narratology. I am confident that these are beginning to burgeon.

### **Ten Theses for a Medieval Narratology**

1. Exploring the narrative forms and functions of the Middle Ages is essential for an informed literary history of narrative.
2. Narratology is historically biased and prioritizes, almost exclusively, post-seventeenth century literature as well as the novel as its prime example. As a result, many theories are removed from the reality of the medieval evidence, which does not always conform to modern parameters of narration.
3. Existing narratological theories are not rejected from the start, but will be tested for their usefulness against the medieval texts in order to determine whether, or to what extent, they may require a careful and nuanced realignment.
4. Post-classical narratology offers an open, non-biased framework that can do justice to medieval narratives. It is within this area, interested in cultural and historical contexts, that a medieval narratology must be incorporated.
5. A number of scholars, especially those trained in the German narratological tradition, have already done important groundwork, which can provide the cornerstones of a general medieval narratology.
6. Medievalists working in the field of narratology should be encouraged to collaborate, not only within, but emphatically also beyond and across disciplines, in order to bring together their theoretical expertise and establish a set of methodological tools that can be of use beyond the narrow issues of a particular field.
7. Medievalists of all disciplines need to make their specialized findings available to a general audience of narratologists and literary scholars, in such a way that non-medievalists can get an informed idea of the narrative practices and strategies pertinent to the medieval context and are invited to use the findings for further diachronic studies.
8. A medieval narratology should at least contain the following parameters: author / narrator; plot structure and motivation, character, perspective, time and space.
9. The medieval texts themselves should provide the basis for the analysis: a medieval narratology requires close reading as well as the inclusion of the historico-cultural context. The texts, as objects in a specific time and space, lead to the theoretical and descriptive apparatus (and not the other way round).
10. Be open – go and explore the fascinating world of medieval narration which can profit from a thorough narratological analysis and make a lasting impact on medieval studies and on literary studies more generally.

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<sup>1</sup> This count excludes a handful of secondary sources that contain either term in the title.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce Holsinger for criticizing the bias of the Middle Ages: the "enduring notion of the Renaissance as the birthplace of the modern continues to lead many contemporary critics into a glib homogenization of the medieval epoch, their teleologies entirely unaffected by the last fifty years of medievalist scholarship" (Holsinger 2005, 13-14).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ursula Kocher's (2010) criticism of Genette, which she nevertheless considers to be a good starting-point for a historical narratology.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan M. Newman in his entry on narrative theory in the 2010 *Handbook of Medieval Studies* misses the point when he enthusiastically declares that "in a process of mutual enrichment, medievalists have fixed cultural and historical horizons constraining supposedly universal narrative structures, while the analytical approach of narratology illuminates new aspects of medieval texts" (Newman 2010, 990). It turns out that Newman subsumes 'narratology' under literary theory more generally, as the bibliography reveals, which comprises (among others) rhetorics, stylistics, and reader-response theory.

<sup>5</sup> In a recent article on the fruitful conjunction of philological approaches and hermeneutical analyses of texts within medieval studies, Ursula Peters stresses the importance of narrative theory as one of the prime fields of activity in particular (2011).

<sup>6</sup> For a balanced review of Schulz, see Putzo (2014).

<sup>7</sup> "Medieval Narratology" is a scientific network funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) that brings together thirteen medievalists from five different disciplines and aims at scrutinizing the forms and functions of medieval narrative from the perspective of narrative theory.

<sup>8</sup> Edition used: Winstead 1999. "One [*miracle*] was a token of virginal cleanness: / Instead of blood, milk ran down her neck, which bears witness of her purity at that time. / Nothing else may run down in that stream other than that which was therein beforehand – / I mean thus to put you out of doubt: / Such thing as what was in her, such thing ran out. / It ran so plentifully, it watered all the ground / around her. O most marvellous well: / Here is the head, the milk everywhere around it. / What should I more of this miracle tell? / Except for Mary alone,

who is the first in maidenhood – / that she may witness well this present vision / which may in no way be called an illusion.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

<sup>9</sup> For the former case, the *South English Legendary* provides ample evidence (cf. Thompson 2003). For the latter, the *Scottish Legendary* is a prominent example (cf. von Contzen forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> The functions of the narrator in the trajectory of ‘secondary orality’ have been analysed, for instance, by Curschmann (2005) and Reuvekamp-Felber (2001).

<sup>11</sup> See Martínez (1996) for a critical appraisal of Lugowski’s work.

<sup>12</sup> “Im Mittelalter lagen die beiden Seiten des Bewußtseins – nach der Welt hin und nach dem Innern des Menschen selbst – wie unter einem gemeinsamen Schleier träumend oder halbwach. Der Schleier war gewoben aus Glauben, Kindesbefangenheit und Wahn; durch ihn hindurchgesehen erschien Welt und Geschichte wundersam gefärbt, der Mensch aber erkannte sich nur als Race, Volk, Partei, Corporation, Familie oder sonst in irgend einer Form des Allgemeinen” (Burkhardt 1860, 131).

<sup>13</sup> Edition used: Rickert 1907, 1-2. See Gough (1902) and Isaacs (1958) for more details. For Chaucer’s adaptation of the material, see *The Man of Law’s Tale*. “Of a lady fair and free, / Her name was Emaré, / I here sing in (my) song. / Her father was an emperor, / Of fortresses and mighty towers / Sir Artysus was his name. / He had both halls and bowers, / fair woodlands, forests with flowers; / So great a lord was none. / He had wedded a lady / who was both fair and pleasing, / white as a whale’s bone: / Dame Erayne was that empress called; / she was full of love and goodness; / so courteous a lady was none.”

<sup>14</sup> I am currently completing an article on social minds in medieval literature.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. on saints’ lives Elliott (1987), Feistner (1995), Lensing (2010); and on Arthurian romance Burkert (1996), Nolting-Hauff (1974), Simon (1990).

<sup>16</sup> Edition used: D’Evelyn / Mill 1956, 33-34. “And St Julian came home soon in the morning / and went to his chamber towards his bed, as he was wont to do, / though he heard (the sounds of) soft sleep and saw therein two people, / as men and women often do that are weary of their way. / He came closer and saw a man and also a woman lying there. / He thought, ‘This is my wife and a lecher who has come to defile her. Now I see well how the whore is accustomed to act. / They shall never eat nor shame me in such a way.’ / He slew his father and his mother with his sword right there / and believed by himself that it were his wife and her lover. / Fate proceeds in strange ways, as we may here see: / that which man tries to escape from he can never flee.”

<sup>17</sup> Edition used: Bliss 1961, 37-38. “He sat down in front of the king / and took his harp so merry of sound, / And tunes his harp, which he knows how to do, / and blissful notes he began (to play) / so that all that were in the palace / came to him in order to listen, / and lie down at his feet – / they deem his melody so sweet. / The king listened and sat still; / to listen to (Orfeo’s) music he had goodwill. / Great pleasure he had of his music; / the mighty queen likewise. / When he had finished his harping, / the king said to him: / ‘Minstrel, I like your music very much. / Now ask of me whatever you wish, / generously I will pay thee; / now speak, and thou will find out.”