

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN HARTMANN VON AUE'S *DER ARME HEINRICH*

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The present article aims at analyzing the theme of social stratification and social mobility in the central-medieval Holy Roman Empire, on the basis of a 12th century epic text, Hartmann von Aue's Der arme Heinrich ("The poor Henry"). This text, which was probably composed around 1190 A.D., narrates the story of a knight who ends up suffering from leprosy as a consequence of having neglected his Christian chivalric duties in favor of courtly love and describes how people not originally belonging to nobility could be given the opportunity to enter the superior social ordo.

The purpose of the present article is to discuss some very specific traits of German feudalism during the Central Middle Ages (11th - 13th centuries) concerning social mobility and the structure of the states (*ordines*) within the Holy Roman Empire. It is very well known that the various medieval societies of Europe were, at first glance, structured in strict and fixed layers, each one being endowed with specific consuetudinary rights and obligations. Thus, according to the traditional social representation as presented by Bishop Adalbéron de Laon in the famous *Poème au Roi Robert* (c. 1030), there were those who had the duty to pray for social conservation (*oratores*), those who were granted the right and obligation to fight for and protect social cohesion (*bellatores*) and finally those upon whom the physical reproduction of the social tissue depended (*laboratores*).

However, it should be clear that such a picture does not necessarily portray the real social conditions or historical movements of European feudal societies; it corresponds to an ideological concept and even to a Church project for those social formations, couched in symbolic terms, which clearly appeals to a transcendental conception of the universe and God's laws governing it (*Lex Aeterna*). Human realities, or earthly structures and hierarchies, were conceived as reflections of this eternal Providence. Nevertheless, social changes occurred and had an impact on mobility within the traditional layers of feudal structure.

First of all, focusing on the Central Middle Ages, we see knights break through into the noble order. Having been soldiers or the protectors of castles and fortresses during the late Carolingian period (9th century), knights were to become marginal elements by the time of the Carolingian decline and the consolidation of the First Feudal Period (here we follow the terminology proposed by Marc Bloch).¹ Knights were actually reduced to the status of servants and were often made to survive by theft and the slaying of travellers on roads and bridges and in passageways. This new peasant condition is evident if we compare the English word *knight* to the German term *Knecht*, meaning exactly *servant*. Notwithstanding their inferior position during the High Middle Ages (9th - 11th centuries), knights would later be converted into the lowest layer of the noble, acquiring the right to marry the daughters of prominent feudal lords.

Jousts and tourneys entailing knights were swiftly turned into opportunities to meet girls of noble birth and arrange a proper wedding. A further indication of their

impact is the fact that nobility has long incorporated the chivalric image and *ethos* in their own self-representation. It is known that feudal rights could, in theory, only be inherited by the first-born sons of feudal lords, while the second-born sons were destined to enter the Church. Since they were excluded from feudal heritage, third-born sons began to be ordained as knights, being granted the chance to acquire celebrity and fortune in tourneys or jousts and even to become vassals of feudal lords, thus taking part in the feudal structure through marriage with noble girls and the possession of a new *dominium* over a piece of land or the right to collect taxes for passage across bridges and through tollgates on roads.

Our primary source in this study is a German medieval narrative poem called *Der arme Heinrich* ("Poor Henry"), composed by a literate member of the low nobility of the region of Swabia, having probably been a *ministerialis* (*Dienstherr*) at the beck and call of some local Alemannic lord. His name was Hartmann von Aue (c. 1160–1210). The text dates back to c. 1190 and is part of a rich variety of chivalric romances from the same scribe, who was one of the first Germans to adapt Arthurian and Grail themes to the literate layers in the Holy Roman Empire or and to prompt the use of supporting parchments for courtly declamation or recitation. Among the relevant works ascribed to Hartmann von Aue, one could point to the German version of *Eric et Enide*, of Chrétien de Troyes (*Erec*), along with *Iwein*, the German version of *Iwain ou Le Chevalier au Lion*.

In line with the historiographical nature of this essay, the romance should be regarded rather as a *rhetorical genre*, which implies that the contents were believed not to be as entirely fictional as they appear to us nowadays. Medieval writings, as far as we can deduce from the survival of ancient myths and narratives such as King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table and the Holy Grail, may be described as persuasive speeches aimed at convincing an audience of the eternal truths of the Christian faith. Thus, we can read *Der arme Heinrich* as an atypical form of *exemplum*, which portrays the trajectory of a knight who commits the sin of setting apart his duties as a *Miles Christi* (soldier of Christ) and the required adoration of God and the service of the Church. His punishment came in the form of leprosy, a disease attributed to being the offspring of parents who had a sexual relationship during a forbidden time, such as Lent or other religious period.

Since the romance is here considered a historical document, we are able to scrutinize social relationships, conflicts and structural features concerning the German medieval society through a record couched in poetic language. Our purpose is to investigate changes in the feudal law within the specific frame of the Holy Roman Empire. A first reading already reveals another character, together with the Knight Heinrich, whose name is not mentioned, though he plays no lesser a role in the plot. It is that of the free farmer (*freier Bauer*) who works on Heinrich's property and whose daughter the knight is going to marry at the end of the story.

Most like the *Fisher King* in the Arthurian tales, whom Persival finds wounded by a spear as heavenly punishment for having neglected his mission as keeper of the Holy Grail and having devoted himself rather to courtly love, Heinrich suffers from leprosy. Searching for a physician who can heal him, Heinrich comes across a very wise man in Salerno, a city which used to be renowned as a medical centre. There he is told that only the heart blood of a maiden who would agree to sacrifice her own life for him will suffice. At first, the knight does not believe that he will find such a damsel and makes

his way to his realm, having given away his remaining patrimony. On the piece of land left to Heinrich lives the free farmer, his spouse and children.

Among the farmer's offspring, only one daughter does not shun the landlord and even enjoys being with him. Heinrich then begins to call her *his Bride*. Hidden in his house, she hears him telling her father about his bane and his wish to wait for death from leprosy, for no hope is left. The maiden hears that only a sacrifice highly unlikely to happen can bring about a cure for the landlord. No sooner does she learn of this than she decides to offer herself as such a sacrifice, although her parents attempt to dissuade her. Her most apparent concern has to do with the landlord's well-being, yet she also has another reason for this very noble act of self-offering; namely, her fear is that her parents could fall under the jurisdiction of another lord, who might not be as forgiving and benevolent as Heinrich.

After a long night of discussions with her parents, the damsel is successful in convincing them of the need for her sacrifice. Her next task is to cajole the landlord, which does not come about immediately. However, hardly has she gained his acquiescence when they set out together to Salerno in order to meet the medical master again and perform the sacrificial rite. As the physician is about to cut out the girl's heart, Heinrich sees her through a chink in the door, naked and bound to the operating table and intervenes at the last minute, becoming aware of the monstrosity of their undertaking. In this sudden change of heart he accepts his leprosy as the will of God. On their return journey Heinrich is cured miraculously by God's providence and back home they eventually get married.

With this very brief glimpse of the plot, we are now able to come to a deeper level of analysis, thus really performing the task of history. In as much as the romance is seen here as a historical document, one first preoccupation should be to trace the rhetorical circuit of its production and reaching a courtly – and maybe also not courtly – audience. The source itself grants us some primary data on the composer:

Ein ritter sô gelêrt was,
Daz er an den buochen las,
Swas er dar an geschriben vant;
Der was Hartman genant.
Dienstman was er ze Ouwe.²

Thus, the narrative focus claims an identification with a *Ministerialis* (a *dienstman*), who turns out at once to be literate and very fond of reading. His name appears as *Hartman* (nowadays in German *Hartmann*), who offered his loans to some feudal lord dwelling in the German region of *Aue* (the modern German for *Ouwe*). Light is already shed on perhaps a discrete synonymy between the predicates employed to describe the compiler: *Hartmann von Aue* is simultaneously called *gelehrter Ritter* (an educated knight) and *Dienstmann/Dienstherr* (one sort of post-Carolingian *major domus*). As the plot unfolds, as already pointed out, we discover he possesses feudal domains, from which he chooses one in which to spend his supposedly last days. Therefore, it is possible to infer that both social categories, *Ritter* and *Dienstmann*, certainly belong to the noble order. Notwithstanding the presence of this first narrative *persona*, there appears a second – and more important – reciter: the tale itself. At this point a new look of the source is necessary:

Er nam im manige schouwe

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An mislichen buochen;
Dar na begunde er suchen,
ob er it des funde,
da mite er swaere stunde,
möhte senfter machen,
Und von sô gewanten sachen,
Das gotes êren töhte,
Und da mite er sich möhte,
Gelieben den liuten.³

Much as the first narrator seeks amusement in reading, his most profound desire is connected to the adoration of God (the search for His honour) and to a social role he believes must be played by those able to read and tell stories. Thus:

Nu beginnet er iu diuten
Ein rede die er geschriben vant.
Dar umbe hât er sich genant,
Daz er sîner arbeit,
Die er dar na hât geleit,
Iht âne lôn belibe,
Und swer nâch sînem libe,
Sîo hoere sagen oder lese,
Daz er im bittende wese,
Der sêle heiles hin ze gote.⁴

In the first place, the second narrative *persona*, the tale itself, justifies why the educated knight intends to tell the story. His purpose is related to saving the soul of every potential reader or listener of the story, which implies the aforementioned rhetorical character of the source. In such a context, when the tale affirms that the Knight of Aue has found a written source of the story, we witness a typical medieval strategy to endow a certain discourse with veracity: this is called *Auctoritas*. Looking at the speech of Hartmann von Aue as an instance marked by what we can designate as a *rhetorical convention of verity* – both reciter and reader/listener agree that the contents are to be held true – we find the key to decode aspects of historically real feudal law in the Holy Roman Empire during a period of metamorphosis. Thereafter, at the time the tale clarifies that the knight intended to recite the plot before the Swabian court is believed to have forgotten all aristocratic virtues (*tugenden*), what is in fact implied is the rhetorical nature of the whole declamation.

Almost immediately after the tale announces the moral purpose of the speech, the chivalric virtues and the self-isolation of the noble order necessary in order to be subject to clerical discipline are clearly described:

(...) an dem enwas vergezzen
Deheiner der tugende,
Die ein ritter in sîner jugende
Zu vollem lobe haben sol.
Man sprach dô niemen alsô wol
In allen den landen.
Er hatte ze sînen handen
Geburt und dar zuo rîcheit:
Ouch was sîn tugent vil breit.
Swie ganz sîn haben waere,
Sîn geburt unwandelbaere,
Und wol den fürsten gelich,

Doch was er unnâch also rich,
Der geburt und guotes,
So der êren und des muotes.⁵

This quotation bears a close resemblance to many others like it entailed in such aristocratic knightly romances. It allows us to contemplate the ideal contained in the ideological self-representation of the noble order. In fact, aristocracy ought in principle to be a hermetic social layer, not prone to receiving newcomers graced by monetary wealth. At this point, the classic address of Max Weber in the noted book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (“Economy and Society”), dating to 1919/1920, can provide clarification:

Die so sehr häufige Disqualifikation des “Erwerbstätigen” als solchen ist, neben später zu berührenden Einzelgründen, eine direkte Folge des ‘ständischen’ Prinzips der sozialen Ordnung und seines Gegensatzes zur rein marktmäßigen Regulierung der Verteilung von Macht. Der Markt und die ökonomischen Vorgänge auf ihm kannte, wie wir sahen, kein ‘Ansehen der Person’: ‘sachliche’ Interessen beherrschen ihn. Er weiß nichts von ‘Ehre’. Die ständische Ordnung bedeutet gerade umgekehrt: Gliederung nach ‘Ehre’ und ständischer Lebensführung und ist als solche in der Wurzel bedroht, wenn der bloße ökonomische Erwerb und die bloße, nackte, ihren außerständigen Ursprung noch an der Stirn tragende, rein ökonomische Macht als solche jedem, der sie gewonnen hat, gleicher oder – da bei sonst gleicher ständischer Ehre doch überall der Besitz noch ein wenn auch uneingestandenes Superadditum darstellt – sogar dem Erfolg nach höherer ‘Ehre’ verleihen könnte wie sie die ständischen Interessen kraft ihrer Lebensführung für sich präntendieren.⁶

This is why the narrative focus places emphasis on the fact that the Knight Heinrich depends in no way on fortune or goods, since he belongs to nobility. However, the factors determining this membership were, as the fragment states, honour and courage, both obvious virtues of the chivalric order.

Another specificity of this – in principle – close circle of nobles was *Courtly Love* (*fin’amor*), which involved, in the German case, the *Minnesang* (the troubadour’s typical poem intended for recitation), the vehicle for *love vassalage*, one form of stylized affirmation of feudal–vassal relationships. It enters the scene in our novel when the narrator states that Heinrich used to be very wise in terms of counselling (*consilium*) and virtuous in courtly declamation (*er was des râtes brücke und sanc vil wol von minnen*).⁷ In this way, he is worthy of all worldly laud and praise (*alsus kund er gewinnen der werlt lop unde prîs*).⁸

Nevertheless, the same impersonal narrator then damns the fate of Heinrich for having turned so much to wordly pleasures and rewards, ascribing his leprosy to a curse cast by God. His bane is even linked to that of Absalom, the rebel son of King David in the Bible. Such a comparison is made here to ascribe to the tale the irrefutable nature of an *exemplum*. Almost in the same paragraph, the same second narrative *persona* compares the sort of life based upon earthly bravery and eagerness to acquire fortune or fame with a non-governed state or city, obviously as a result of the absence of Christological ruling, always mediated by His *Corpus Mysticum* on earth, the Church. Thus:

Dô der arme Heinrich
Alrêst verstuont sich,
Daz er der werlte widerstuont,
Als alle sîne gelîchen tuont,
Dô schiet in sîn bitter leit

Von Jôbes geduldikeit.
Wan ez leit Jôb der guote
Mit geduldigem muote,
Dôz ime ze lidenne geschach,
Durch der sêle gemach,
Den siechtum und die smâcheit,
Die er von der werlte leit:
Des lobet er got und fröute sich.
Dô tet der arme Heinrich
Leider niender alsô:
Wan er was trûrec unde unfrô.⁹

Hereafter, unlike the holy and patient Job of the Old Testament, the protagonist of our novel cannot find any solace in his new sick condition, as pride and ambition for glory, fame and bravery have removed Job's attribute of humility from Heinrich; from this stems his damnation according to the moral discourse of the tale. We can now conclude that there is some convergence between the aristocratic ideal of the knightly *ethos* and canon law applied to this way of being. The point of divergence presents itself when humility and service to God are, to a large extent, negated by the search for worldly chivalric adventure and military glory. At this moment, the tale brings to the limelight the power dispute in the sphere of culture and ideology between the ideal of a *Miles Christi*, a knight most likely to devote his battles to the praise and service of God, according to the conception developed by Saint Bernhard of Clairveaux in the treatise *De laude novae militiae* (c. 1130) and, on the other hand, the self-representation of the chivalric warlord as the model for aristocratic behaviour and courtly sociability.

It must be mentioned that, being composed within the last decade of the 12th century, *Der arme Heinrich* must have been immersed in the political strife between the so-called Gregorian Reform (an attempt to redraw canon law and instil stricter discipline over the clergy as a pathway back to what primitive Christian communities were thought to have been) and the efforts of the Hohenstaufen emperors to centralize the Holy Roman Empire. There is evidence for this. In 1140, the Benedictine monk and doctor Gratian compiles a huge number of ecclesiastical rules and produces *Corcordantia Discordantium Canonum* (also called *The Decree of Gratian*) on the side of the Curia legalists and, on that of imperial chancelleries, the *Confoederatio cum principibus ecclesiasticis* (1220) and *Statutum in favorem principum* (1231/1232).

At this point, attention should be drawn to the figure of the free farmer at the disposal of the diseased Knight Heinrich and once again, voice is given to the impersonal narrator, called *maere* in Middle High German, in alluding to the remaining *dominium* of Heinrich:

Der ê ditz giriute
Und der ez dannoch biute,
Daz was ein frîer bûman,
Der vil Selten ie gewan,
Dehein grôz ungemach,
Daz anderen gebûren doch geschach,
Die wirs geherret wâren,
Und si dô niht verbâren,
Beidiu mit stiure und mit bete.
Swaz dirre gebûre gerne tête,
Des dûhte sînen herren gnuoc.
Dar zuo er in übertruc,
Daz er deheine arbeit

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Von fremedem gewalte leit.
Des was daheiner sîn gelîch
In dem lande alsô rîch
Zu dem zôch sich,
Sîn herre, der arme Heinrich.¹⁰

This excerpt portrays German free farmership within the feudal frame in the transition between the 12th and the 13th centuries, in which we can detect the social uprising of the *Ministeriales*. Exactly like the peasant about to become Heinrich's father-in-law, there were in the Holy Roman Empire the so-called *proprii*, or *proprii iuris*. Although they were servants in the landlord's court or house, they gradually moved closer and closer to their lord and ended up imposing their presence within the sphere of feudal nobility.

In this context, it may be useful to analyse, following the research of Otto Brunner, Karl Bosl and Theodor Mayer, the differences between what was happening in the bosom of the German noble order compared to the French nobility. By the time of what Marc Bloch named the First Feudal Age, just after the fragmentation of the Carolingian empire (which can be dated to the Treaty of Verdun in 843), the former proprietaries of the *allodia*, legally called *liberi* (which means they were granted some rights and liberties) and the *servi glebae* had evolved into a single social layer of *clientes*. In the case of what was to become *Francia Occidentalis*, since the Roman institution of the colonate had left almost no free farmers to the Frankish conquerors, the *servi adscripti* passed to the hands of the new Germanic elite together with the pieces of land they inhabited and which they cultivated. Karl Bosl justly claims that, during the Merovingian and Carolingian times, the social ascent of the *servii* and descent of many *allodium* owners took place, thus shaping a single intermediate layer under the jurisdiction of the Church or feudal lords.¹¹

Nevertheless, the social distinction between the *servi glebae* and the *prebendarii*, or *stipendiarii*, in *domo manentes et deservientes* – released from some typical peasant obligations such as the *formariage* or the *corvee* and the *banalities* – remained for much longer in the German context. These *proprii iuris* would give rise to the *Ministeriales*, directly charged with the administration of the landlord's *mansum*, sometimes even dwelling in the same castle as their patrons. This social dynamic actually made the adage *Luft macht frei* or *Luft macht eigen* concrete. In concluding, it seems appropriate to state that the phenomenon of the social ascent of the *dienstherren* to the noble order is precisely that poetically described and rhetorically recognized by the marriage of the Knight Heinrich and the free farmer's daughter.

As Karl Bosl pointed out,¹² the available sources on the free farmers in the Holy Roman Empire tend to be vague and uncertain in terms of legal terminology about these (swiftly) moving sectors of the social tissue. This is neither pure coincidence, nor a mere detail or flaw in the sources; rather, it is a stamp, an index (in the very sense of *indicium*) of the social avatars prompted in the Central Middle Ages, to which both legal and cultural historians should pay great attention.

In the 12th century, the word *liber* ("free") only applied correctly to the traditional nobility (in German, the so-called *Hochadel*), able to possess the *praedium libertatis* (property entirely devoid of feudal taxation and simultaneously released from vassalic obligations, named *hantgemal* in Middle High German) and to exert suzerainty.

Bosl also states that central-medieval liberty ought to be regarded as a social function, rather than any kind of nobility's group attribute, having always been at

stake.¹³ As already mentioned, this duty corresponded to protection and the defence of social structure, which naturally implied a specific way of life (Weber's *Lebensführung*). Initially, the feudal definition of freedom (*propria libertas*) cannot be comprehended without resorting to the ancient Germanic consuetudinary institution of the *Gefolgschaft*, which the Romans were to designate as *comitatus*. It entailed one sort of freedom that depended strictly on the chieftain for preservation. Another contribution came from the Celtic – and also to some extent Roman – vassalage (*Vassalität*). The Celtic word *Gwas*, not easily rendered in English, may most closely be approximated as “boy”, meaning a man whose liberty depended on his patron and the price of which was the fulfillment of loyalty and duties in favour of the chief. The latter was supposed to grant the vassal complete protection, which involved, amongst Germanic peoples, the security of the household, crops, kin and the person. Therefore, what would have existed and given rise to the ascent of *Ministeriales* to the nobility, having formerly been servants (*skalk*), was a “non-free freedom” in the proper terms of Karl Bosl (*unfreie Freiheit*).¹⁴

Hence, the concept of the state (*Stand*), as postulated by Max Weber in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1919–1920)¹⁵ and indirectly recognized in the later works of Karl Marx (especially in the *Grundrisse der Politischen Ökonomie*, 1859),¹⁶ emerges as a proper measure of social mobility, pinpointing certain unstable conditions involving medieval German society. The notion of *state* implies some sort of closing up of membership in the social group by the sharing of specific traits, like the monopoly of medieval warfare in the hands of the noble order. Yet it does not achieve the rigidity of caste, as appears in the Hindu social frame, whilst being, at the same time, far from the typical flexibility of our class societies in the modern capitalist era.

Notes

- ¹ Marc Bloch, *La société féodale*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1994, pp. 97–110.
- ² Hartmann von Aue, *Der arme Heinrich. Mittelhochdeutscher Text und Übertragung*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Fischer Bücherei, 1967, p. 6.
- ³ *Der arme Heinrich*, p. 6.
- ⁴ *Der arme Heinrich*, p. 6.
- ⁵ *Der arme Heinrich*, p. 8.
- ⁶ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Paderborn, Voltmedia, 2005, pp. 1028–1029.
- ⁷ *Der arme Heinrich*, p. 10.
- ⁸ *Der arme Heinrich*, p. 10.
- ⁹ *Der arme Heinrich*, pp. 14–16.
- ¹⁰ *Der arme Heinrich*, pp. 24–26.
- ¹¹ Karl Bosl, “*Freiheit und Unfreiheit. Zur Entwicklung der Unterschichten in Deutschland und Frankreich während des Mittelalters*”, Günther Franz (edited by) *Deutsches Bauerntum im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, pp. 98–100.
- ¹² “*Freiheit und Unfreiheit*”, p. 77.
- ¹³ “*Freiheit und Unfreiheit*”, p. 80.
- ¹⁴ “*Freiheit und Unfreiheit*”, p. 82.
- ¹⁵ *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, pp. 1017–1034.
- ¹⁶ Karl Marx. *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1974, pp. 19–21.

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