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Cover design: Nasia Demetriou

Cover Image: Mirror Case with Lovers, French, second quarter 14th c.
The work has undergone a digital recreation by Nasia Demetriou.

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Rituals of Female (Dis)Empowerment: Baptism in the Context of Conversion in Medieval German Literature

Abstract

This article focuses on the interplay between and the ambiguity of female empowerment and disempowerment in female conversions to Christianity in Middle High German literary texts. With regards to gender, the ritual of baptism is of interest in several respects. Gender and genderlessness, sexuality, and desire, as well as nudity and shame, play a crucial role in baptism, as the ceremony is linked to the Fall of Man and involves ritual nudity. Although the conversion to Christianity by means of baptism in biblical terms (Gal. 3:27–28) erases gender, race, and social status, the Christian practice of baptism is asymmetrical regarding gender because usually only men administer the sacrament, whereas women merely receive it. Moreover, in medieval German literature, male power or romantic interests are often the driving force behind women's conversions. By examining different versions of Saint Thecla's legend, the conversion of Arabel-Gyburc to Christianity in Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel*, conversion as temptation in Rudolf von Ems' *Barlaam und Josaphat*, and the juxtaposition of two female conversions in *Salman und Morolf*, it becomes clear that female agency and lack or loss of power often go hand in hand and are, in fact, inseparable in literary representations of conversions. From the perspective of gender, the baptism ritual is hence characterized by ambiguity and figures as a ritual of female empowerment and disempowerment alike.

Keywords

baptism; christening; gender; ritual nudity; shame; temptation; desire; Middle High German



Introduction: The Ritual of Baptism

1. “For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The Latin Bible quotations here and below are taken from Jerome’s *Vulgate* (Hieronymus, *Vulgata*). The English translations are taken from the *Douay-Rheims Bible*. This English translation was chosen because it is based on the Latin *Vulgate*.

2. The following account is intended as an overview of the baptismal ritual and its structure. For the development of Christian initiation in the Western Middle Ages and the baptismal liturgy in detail, see Wahle.

3. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

Based on its understanding of baptism, which is open to all people regardless of their race, social status, or gender, Christianity appears to be an egalitarian and accessible religion (Angenendt, *Religiosität* 463). This levelling function of Christianity is best exemplified by the well-known Bible passage: *quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis Christum induistis. non est Iudaeus neque Graecus | non est servus neque liber | non est masculus neque femina | omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu* (Gal. 3:27–28).¹ However, in contrast to the unity in Christ that is to be achieved through baptism, religious, ethnic, social, and gender differences, as well as issues of power and violence, are certainly relevant to baptism as a religious practice, especially with regard to conversion and missionary work. Gender issues are particularly delicate in the context of baptism, as the necessity of redemption arises from the Fall of Man: despite the idea of spiritual purification and genderlessness, the baptismal ritual does not allow a return to the prelapsarian state and cannot undo the original sin – and with it the knowledge of gender difference and the sexual desire of man. Before I elaborate my research question – female agency in the depiction of women’s conversions in medieval German literature – in more detail, I will outline the biblical and theological foundations and the history of the baptismal ritual up to the Middle Ages. I will focus on the relevance of faith and voluntariness in conversions as well as on the symbolism of water and of the baptismal garment, which are of special significance from the perspective of gender considering the Fall of Man and ritual nudity.

In the early church, baptism was first and foremost a rite of conversion that required a conscious decision and a confession of faith (Angenendt, “Taufe” 35).² The Gospel of Mark 16:16 puts it this way: *qui crediderit et baptizatus fuerit salvus erit | qui vero non crediderit condemnabitur*.³ The process of baptism consists of two parts: first, a ritual washing that indicates the deliverance from sins; second, an anointment that endows the neophytes with the Spirit of God and makes them children of God (Angenendt, “Taufe” 35). At the same time, baptism is a ritual of initiation that integrates the neophytes into the community of all those who have already been baptized and into the community of Saints. The ceremony is structured by the following three questions: (1) “Do you believe in the Father?”, (2) “Do you believe in the Son?”, (3) “Do you believe

4. "Going therefore, teach ye all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19).

5. This was legally regulated in paragraph 8 of the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* (69): *Si quis deinceps in gente Saxonorum inter eos latens non baptizatus se abscondere voluerit et ad baptismum venire contempserit paganusque permanere voluerit, morte moriatur* ("Anyone who wants to remain a pagan and hides among the Saxons in order not to be baptized or refuses to be baptized shall die"). This translation from Latin is my own. Forced conversions of pagans are also addressed in the Middle High German epics about Charlemagne. See for example Stricker, *Karl der Grosse* 3906–13: "toufent sich die heiden, | ich wil si vriden unt vristen, | als unser ebenkristen. | ist aber daz ez sô ergât, | daz si sich des tiuvels rât | sô sère lânt betriejen, | daz si uns beginnent liegen, | daz gêt in allen an daz leben" ("If the heathens get baptized, I will protect and preserve them as I do our fellow Christians. But if it so happens that they are so deluded by the devil's counsel that they deceive us, they must all die"). Unless otherwise stated, the translations from Middle High German into English are my own. On further examples of group conversions in Northern Europe, see Grayland 202–3.

6. *Decretum Gratiani*, pars 2, causa 23, quaestio 5, c. 30: *Ad fidem nullus est cogendus*.

7. Despite awareness of the problematic Christocentric perspective, the words 'heathen', 'pagan', and 'paganism' are used here and below for lack of a better term.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, quaestio 10, art. 8: *infidelium quidam sunt qui nunquam suscepunt fidem, sicut gentiles et iudei. Et tales nullo modo sunt ad fidem compellendi, ut ipsi credant: quia credere voluntatis est* ("Among unbelievers there are some who have never received the faith, such as the heathens and the Jews: and these are by no means to be compelled to the faith, in order that they may believe, because to believe depends on the will"); English translation quoted from the edition of Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

in the Holy Ghost?" The origin of these Trinitarian questions lies in the Great Commission, outlined in Matthew 28:19: *euntes ergo docete omnes gentes | baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* (Angenendt, "Taufe" 35; idem, *Religiosität* 463).⁴ In the course of the spread of Christianity and the expansion of missionary work, the significance of faith for the baptism ritual changed. During the process of European Christianization in the early Middle Ages, it was mainly adults who were converted. When Charlemagne Christianized the Saxons, baptism was not a matter of faith, however, but a matter of life and death, and forced mass conversions took place.⁵ Even though Charlemagne's court theologian Alcuin had already criticized the practice of forced baptism, it was not until the scholastic theology of the twelfth century that the voluntary nature of baptism was again emphasized (Angenendt, "Taufe" 38–40). In the *Decretum Gratiani* (c. 1140), for instance, it says that no one shall be forced to believe in the Triune God.⁶ Thomas Aquinas, referring to heathens⁷ and Jews who chose not to adopt the Christian faith,⁸ says that belief is a matter of free will (Angenendt, "Taufe" 39–40). But in the course of the Middle Ages, due to Augustine's doctrine of original sin (*De peccatorum meritis* 2.4, 152–53),⁹ infant baptism grew in importance. Consequently, the previously important personal preparation for baptism and catechesis faded into the background and the ceremony itself came to the fore instead (Wahle 30; Angenendt, "Taufe" 36; Grayland 211–13; Johnson 213).¹⁰

Since baptism is to be understood as an act of spiritual purification, water has a special symbolic meaning in the ritual. According to Robin M. Jensen, the baptisms that John the Baptist performed can be seen as "a symbolic, bodily cleansing that signified the recipient's repentance and desire for forgiveness of his or her sins" (*Baptismal Imagery* 8). At Jesus' baptism, the dipping in water is accompanied by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove (Luke 3:22) (R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 9). In the Middle Ages, the *benedictio fontis*, the blessing of the baptismal water, which was performed during the Easter Vigil, was an integral part of the christening ceremony. This prayer was intended to ensure that the baptismal water would be infused with the Holy Spirit so that those being baptized would be reborn¹¹ from water and Spirit (Wahle 35 and 43).¹² Despite the etymology of the word 'baptism' from the Greek βάπτω (báptō) or βαπτίζω (baptízō), meaning 'to dip' or

9. Beatrice (392–93) offers a summary of Augustine's doctrine of original sin: mankind is steeped in carnal desire (*concupiscentia carnalis* or *originalis reatus*) because Adam's sin was passed on to his descendants as a result of sexual procreation. Every human being is therefore born as a sinner. Baptism eradicates the guilt (*reatus*) handed down by Adam, which is necessary so that newborns are not condemned to damnation. However, this does not rule out sinful behaviour in later life, as the impulse to lust (*concupiscentia*) is not extinguished by baptism.

10. On baptism as a tripartite “rite de passage” in the fourth and fifth centuries, i.e. before the advent of mass baptism and infant baptism, see Filoramo 68 (esp. n. 4).

11. The idea of baptism as rebirth comes from the Gospel of John (3:3–5). See R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 137–76 and Wahle 35.

12. According to Wahle (35), the *benedictio fontis* prayer has hardly changed over the centuries, and the version of the *Decretum Gelasianum* (fourth to sixth century) served as a model until the *Missale Romanum* of 1570.

13. See Mark (1:9–11), Matthew (3:13–17), and Luke (3:21–22). On Jesus' baptism, see e.g. Apel, R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 7–14, and Lentzen-Deis. On the origins of Christian baptism and the often debated transition “From the Baptism of John to the Ritual of Christian Initiation”, see Grayland 111–15.

14. On the “anthropology of clothing”, see Kraß 38–65. On “[t]he garments of paradise”, see Murdoch 106–18.

15. Murdoch and Kraß mention Ps. 8:6 as an important source for this idea: *minuisti eum paulo minus ab angelis | gloria et honore coronasti eum* (“Thou hast made him little less than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honour”).

16. See Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (Gal. 3:27): *quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis Christum induistis* (“For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ”).

‘to plunge into water’, and the preference for baptism by threefold immersion or submersion found in ancient documents, Jensen, also provides references for other baptismal practices, by means of affusion (pouring) or aspersion (sprinkling) (R. M. Jensen, *Living Water* 136–42). She concludes that the “preference for some form of full immersion, with a practical allowance for other methods, continues through the Middle Ages in the West” (ibid. 141). According to Ursula Mielke (245), immersion baptism dominated until the twelfth century and was not replaced by affusion baptism in the Roman Catholic Church until the Council of Trent in 1545. The initial practice of baptizing outdoors in flowing water – following the model of Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist in the River Jordan – was gradually replaced by indoor baptism in baptisteries and, later, in chapels or niches in churches (R. M. Jensen, *Living Water* 129–32; Grayland 205–11).¹³

The symbolic significance of the baptismal garment arises from the connection between baptism and the Fall of Man.¹⁴ Before the Fall, it is said that Adam and Eve were naked, but were not ashamed of each other (Gen. 2:25). Afterwards, their eyes are opened, and they realize that they are naked, whereupon they cover themselves with fig leaves as loincloths (Gen. 3:7). Furthermore, God clothes the first couple in animal skins before they leave paradise (Gen. 3:21). The covering in fig leaves and animal skins indicates postlapsarian human sexuality or mortality (Kraß 46). Although the Bible makes no mention of Adam and Eve being clothed in any way beforehand, Bible commentaries often speak of the prelapsarian garment of grace, glory, or light (Murdoch 106–10; Kraß 40–41).¹⁵ The thought that baptism erases hereditary sin is linked with the imagery of taking off one's old clothes and putting on new ones; of stripping off one's old, sinful self and regaining bodily and spiritual purity; of being ‘clad in Jesus’ – symbolized by the white colour of the baptismal garment (R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 169–72; Seyderhelm 208–10).¹⁶ Ritual nudity during baptism was understood as “participation in Christ's nakedness at crucifixion” and “renewing the pre-lapsarian condition of Adam” (R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 167 and *Living Water* 159).¹⁷ Although various written and pictorial sources attest to the practice of naked baptism, ritual nudity – especially of women – was associated with certain worries.¹⁸ Despite the idea of regaining innocence in baptism or even genderlessness,¹⁹ there was a concern about sexual immodesty and scandal (Filoramo).

17. See also R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 175: “[Baptismal death and resurrection] is the way that Christians participate in Christ’s death and thus share in his resurrection; it is also the reversal of the human condition of sin and its resulting mortality.” On the Adam–Christ typology, see e.g. Rom. 5:12–21 or 1 Cor. 15:22: *et sicut in Adam omnes moriuntur | ita et in Christo omnes vivificabuntur* (“And as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive”).

18. There is some uncertainty as to whether ‘nudity’ in the written sources means complete exposure or whether an undergarment was still worn. See Neri 616–17.

19. See R. M. Jensen, *Living Water* 167–68 and *Baptismal Imagery* 182: “Nude baptism does not eliminate physical differences between men and women; it merely neutralizes their social and sexual power.” R. M. Jensen (*Baptismal Imagery* 181–82) also emphasizes the great divergence between different writers on the issue of gender.

20. For example, Tristan, whose father dies before he is born and whose mother dies in childbirth, is given his name because of the sad circumstances of his birth (Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan* 1996–2002): “wie si diz kint mit triure enpfie, | mit welher triure si’z gewan, | sô nenne wir in Tristan.’ | nu heizet triste triure | und von der äventiure | sô wart das kint Tristan genant, | Tristan getoufet al zehant” (“Since she conceived the child in grief and because of the grief with which she gave birth, we shall call him Tristan.’ Triste means sorrow and because of this story, he was called Tristan and immediately baptised as Tristan.”).

21. On the variability of conversion in general, see, for example, Weitbrecht et al., “Einleitung” 1–2: “Konversionen sind nicht zwangsläufig mit einem tiefgreifenden, unumkehrbaren, inneren und individuellen Ereignis verbunden, sondern können ebenso als kollektive Ereignisse begriffen sowie als räumlicher Wechsel, Rückkehr oder Unterordnung inszeniert werden”.

22. In the absence of a systematic study of baptisms in Middle High German literature, all search results for “toufen” in the *Mittelhochdeutsche Begriffsdatenbank* (“Middle High German Conceptual Database”) have been examined for this article. The query in the database was executed on 7 December 2022 using the old version of the database (i.e. before the relaunch in December 2023).

This is why in the early church, for instance, deaconesses were to accompany female candidates for baptism according to the *Constitutiones apostolicae* and the *Didascalia apostolorum* and why children, men, and women were to be baptized separately according to the *Traditio apostolica* (Neri 616–17; R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 168–69 and *Living Water* 164–66).

In Middle High German texts, infant baptism is, despite its frequency in daily life, only rarely addressed. If the christening of children is mentioned at all, it is mostly in the context of difficult birth circumstances, or in order to introduce ‘telling names’.²⁰ Frequently, however, the baptismal rite finds its way into literature in the context of conversion from paganism to Christianity. The concept of conversion has been widely discussed in medieval and early modern research for some time (e.g. Weitbrecht et al., *Zwischen Ereignis und Erzählung*; Juneja and Siebenhüner). I understand ‘conversion’ to mean the acceptance of the Christian faith in general. The process of conversion and the motives behind it are diverse and multilayered and must be analysed in each individual case.²¹

Since baptism is to be understood as a consequence of the Fall, it is linked to human sinfulness, sexuality, and desire, and therefore also to gender-related questions. In the following, I will focus on women’s baptisms because, in terms of gender issues, the set-up of a baptism is – despite the essentially egalitarian nature of a christening (Angenendt, *Religiosität* 463) – usually asymmetrical: men administer the sacrament of baptism, whereas women merely receive it. What is more, in Middle High German literature,²² women often appear as objects of male power and desire if baptism is imposed on them by their fathers, brothers, or future husbands for political or romantic purposes. For, without being baptized, pagan women could not marry Christian men. Besides, female conversions appear to be delicate due to the factor of ritual nudity: as baptism is performed naked, the female body is exposed to the public gaze during the christening ceremony. At first glance, one might therefore think that the ritual of baptism risks objectifying and disempowering women. Nevertheless, there are several literary examples in which traces of female agency emerge in the context of baptism. In order to explore the interplay and ambiguity between female empowerment and disempowerment in conversions of women to Christianity in Middle High German literary texts, I will

examine different versions of Saint Thecla's legend, the conversion of Arabel-Gybunc to Christianity in Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel*, conversion as temptation in Rudolf von Ems' *Barlaam und Josaphat*, and the juxtaposition of two female conversions in *Salman und Morolf*.

Rewriting Female Baptism: Saint Thecla

23. The numbers refer to the text sections and are not page numbers.

When examining female agency in baptism, one cannot help but include Saint Thecla. In the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (second century), the virgin Thecla is seized by Christian faith when she hears Paul preach about chastity (*Thekla* 7) and hence abandons her marriage plans (9–10).²³ Subsequently, both Paul and Thecla are condemned. Paul is scourged and must leave the city (21). Thecla is to be burnt at the stake but is saved by divine grace because a miraculous hailstorm extinguishes the flames (22). Thecla then follows Paul and accompanies him to Antioch, where a man tries to rape her (26). When she publicly denounces and shames her attacker, she is thrown to the beasts (27). Facing the beasts, Thecla turns to prayer, and neither the lions nor bears nor bulls can harm her. When she discovers a pool full of vicious seals, she plunges in, professing to baptize herself in the name of Jesus Christ. The seals die after seeing a flash of fire, whereas Thecla is surrounded by a cloud of fire which protects her from the beasts and covers her nudity (34). After her acquittal, she joins Paul again and tells him about her baptism. He then commissions Thecla to teach the Word of God (40–41). A later Thecla *Vita* from the fifth century (Dagron 19), *The Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*, not only tells of Thecla's self-baptism (*Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle* 20), but also reports that the virgin baptized others (*ibid.* 24 and 28; A. Jensen, *Gottes selbstbewußte Töchter* 373 n. 45; Dagron 42).²⁴

24. Anne Jensen ("Roman oder Wirklichkeit" 93–95) notes that, although this is the only *Vita* which tells us that Thecla baptized others, the idea is nevertheless firmly anchored in tradition. It can therefore be assumed that the account of Thecla baptizing others was passed on orally.

25. From Tertullian's comments, Davis (13) draws conclusions about the reception of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*: "The characterisation of Thecla in the story indeed seems to have inspired women who read or heard it to embrace new roles of leadership in the early Christian mission".

As Anne Jensen (*Gottes selbstbewußte Töchter* 373 and "Roman oder Wirklichkeit" 71–73), Stephen Davis (12–13), and Johannes Traulsen (141 and 144) have shown, the rewriting and reinterpretation of Thecla's story started already in late antiquity: in his treatise *De baptismo* (17), Tertullian questions the credibility of Thecla's self-baptism in order to prevent her *Vita* from being used to justify female teaching and baptism.²⁵ Ambrose reduces Thecla to her virginity and chastity and omits her fellowship with Paul as well

26. See Traulsen 146: “Damit wird die Jungfräulichkeit in der Thekla-Legende auf Weiblichkeit und den Widerstand gegen männliches Begehrten beschränkt. Virginität ist eschatologisch perspektiviert und begründet nicht mehr wie in den Apostelakten die Aussendung als Predigerin oder die Gemeinschaft mit Paulus”.

27. On the Latin tradition, see Traulsen 141–42. Jacobus de Voragine did not initially include Thecla in the *Legenda aurea*, but her *Vita* was added to later versions.

28. Weitbrecht (273 n. 12) mentions another Middle High German version of St Thecla’s legend in the *Buch von den heiligen Mägden und Frauen* (Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Lichtenhald 69, f. 180rb–187ra). This manuscript has not been edited yet.

29. “And Saint Paul baptized her. She was very beautiful and had a beautiful body. And when he saw her naked body in baptism, unchastity tempted him fiercely. From then on, when he saw her or even thought about her, he suffered badly.”

30. On the fear of and divine protection from *impudici oculi* (“shameless eyes”) in the lives of saints, see Weitbrecht 271–76.

as her activity as a preacher in his treatise *De virgibinus* (2.3.20).²⁶ Still, Thecla’s story finds its way into the collections of saints’ lives, albeit with modifications.²⁷ In today’s best-known Middle High German version of Saint Thecla’s legend in the collection *Der Heiligen Leben*,²⁸ the baptismal act is separated from her martyrdom and transferred to the beginning of the story:

Vnd tauft si sant Pauls. Nu waz sie gar schön vnd het zu mol ain schon leip. Vnd do er iren leip in der tauf also plosen sah, do gewan er groszev anvehtung der vnkeusch. Vnd wen er si furpas sah oder neur an si gedoht, so het er daz leiden alweg swerleich.²⁹ (“Tecla von Ikonium” 563.20–24)

Paul’s words enlighten Thecla’s heart, and she becomes a Christian. In this version, Thecla does not baptize herself, but Paul administers the sacrament of baptism to her. The baptism scene is focalized from Paul’s perspective. The narrative emphasizes Thecla’s beauty, which challenges Paul’s chastity as he catches sight of her naked body during the act of baptism. From then on, Paul suffers when seeing Thecla or when thinking about her. This transformation of the legend probably reflects the general concern about the sexual implications of nudity in the baptism ritual (Neri 616–17; R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 168–69; Filoramo). Later in the narrative, however, Thecla is protected from the public gaze during her fight against the beasts. When she jumps into the pool of aquatic animals, she is miraculously enveloped in mist so that neither man nor beast sees her naked body (“Tecla von Ikonium” 565.21–23): “Do kum ain lauterr groszer nebel, der bedekt si, daz si weder di menschen noch di tier mohten gesehen” (“There was a bright, enormous fog that covered her so that neither man nor beast could see her”).³⁰

With the late antique and medieval rewriting of St Thecla’s *Vita* we are hence confronted with a case of female disempowerment in the context of baptism. Instead of portraying her as an active follower of Paul, a baptist, and a preacher, the more recent accounts and narratives reduce Thecla to the role of a chaste virgin, turn her into a seductive object of sexual desire, and make her a merely passive recipient of the sacrament of baptism. Remarkably, Thecla’s loss of agency is not only a literary one restricted to hagiography, but also an institutional one involving questions of theology and devotion. This becomes clear in Tertullian’s and Ambrose’s (late) antique treatises that deal with Thecla’s *Vita* and are directed against females

31. The initial title of the romance was *Willehalm* (see Singer's 1893 edition). Werner Schröder renamed it *Arabel* to better distinguish it from Wolfram's *Willehalm*, which was handed down together with its prequel *Arabel* and its sequel *Rennewart* by Ulrich von Türheim from the fourteenth century on (Schröder 40–41).

32. Since the focus of the present study is on the comparison of female conversions to Christianity in different texts and genres, this article is limited to examining the depiction of Arabel's baptism in Ulrich von dem Türlin's prequel. Wolfram only alludes to the events that precede the plot of *Willehalm* (Willehalm's imprisonment, his love for Tybalt's wife Arabel, their escape together, Arabel's baptism, their marriage). The much discussed significance of baptism, conversion, and tolerance in Wolfram's work as well as the question of genre cannot be addressed further here. On baptism in Wolfram's *Willehalm*, see for example Kiening 61, 74–75, 163, 183, 186–87, 191–94, 197, and 220. Fritz Peter Knapp summarizes various interpretative approaches to "religious war, protection and mission" ("Glaubenskrieg, Schonung, Missionierung") in Wolfram's *Willehalm* (690–93). Heinzel's handbook offers a bibliography on tolerance and pagans in Wolfram's oeuvre (1275–77). On the question of genre with regard to Wolfram's *Willehalm*, see Greenfield and Miklautsch 264–71.

33. Arabel's christening is only one of several acts of legitimization when Willehalm and his pagan future wife arrive in France. Urban (207) mentions the arrival, the official welcome, the arrival of the Empress and of Irmenschart (Willehalm's mother), the baptism, the farewell of the imperial couple, and the arrival in Orange. These events are accompanied by seven feasts.

34. Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel* is quoted from version *A in Schröder's critical edition.

35. See Juneja and Siebenhüner 171–72: "The conversion experiences of the Apostle Paul and of the Church Father, Augustine, were crucial to shaping the long-term formation of the concept. While Paul described his conversion as a moment of enlightenment, Augustine represented his experience as a process of theological gnosis."

performing baptism and preaching, but this issue remained relevant into the twentieth century: in the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council removed Thecla – the first female martyr – from the Roman Catholic Martyrology (A. Jensen, "Einleitung" 7; eadem, *Gottes selbstbewußte Töchter* 177).

Angelic Beauty – Human Desire: Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel*

The topics of female beauty and temptation occur repeatedly in medieval narratives of women's christenings. Another example can be found in Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel*.³¹ This romance from the 1260s is a prequel to Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm*, a verse narrative at the edge of chanson de geste, legend, and courtly romance.³² Wolfram's verse epic centres on a war between pagans and Christians, which is triggered by the marriage between Willehalm, the Margrave of Provence, and the former pagan Arabel, who adopts the baptismal name Gybuc. Arabel leaves her husband Tybalt because of her love for Willehalm, who then, supported by Arabel's father Terramer, invades southern France with a huge army. This leads to a war with many casualties, resulting in great suffering for both warring parties. Ulrich's *Arabel* narrates how Arabel and Willehalm fall in love and recounts Arabel's conversion to Christianity in detail.³³

After Willehalm has explained to her how Mary can be Queen, Mother, and Virgin at the same time (Ulrich von dem Türlin, *Arabel* *A 235.22–31),³⁴ Arabel accepts the Christian faith. When reflecting on what she has heard about Christianity, she suddenly finds it very appealing and "the joy of baptism soaked her heart": "der gelöbe ir gahes wol geviel, | des töffes fröde in ir herze wiel" (*A 236.3–4). Intellectual and emotional motives are thus intertwined in Arabel's conversion; one could therefore speak of a mixture of the Augustinian and Pauline models of conversion.³⁵ As Arabel prepares for her official christening ceremony, she is taught how to behave, when to feel ashamed or unashamed,³⁶ when to speak and when to remain silent during the ritual (*A 271.2–9). None other than Pope Leo himself is to administer baptism to Arabel (*A 245–50). During the ceremony, she first chooses her baptismal name, Gybuc (*A 275.19).³⁷ Second, the Pope frees Arabel from her sins and casts out the devil (*A 275–276). Third, Arabel confesses, in

36. See Ulrich von dem Türlin, *Arabel* *A 271.5: “wa schamen, wa vngeschamet”. It is likely that this verse refers to ritual nudity. The idea of nakedness without shame in the baptism ritual is also found in writings of several Doctors of the Church (Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa), who see the original paradisiacal innocence restored in baptism. See R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 180–81. Later in the ceremony, when Arabel is still naked in the baptismal font after her affusion with baptismal water, the Pope tells the devil to feel ashamed because he has lost her to Christianity (*A 278.1–7).

37. For the history of naming and renaming at baptism from a theological perspective, see Winter 49–59.

38. See Ulrich von dem Türlin, *Arabel* *A 275.5–7: “ja, si waz entraket gar, | biz in ein hemde waz si bar: | daz zoh in dem stein der babest ir abe.” See also *A 277.27–31: “so wilty werden getöft? | ‘ja, herre.’ der babest si slöft | vz dem hemede, daz si schein bloz. | dristvnt er vf si goz, | daz ez ir über al den lip nv floz.” On the baptismal font and water as means of protection against “the body’s vulnerability” and the “exposure to external and environmental dangers” associated with baptismal nudity, see R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 170.

39. On the meaning of the white colour, which is also important in the description of Arabel-Gyburc’s body, see Rieger 340–42. Referring to the chess game in the romance, Rieger (342) accentuates the contrast between Arabel’s old identity and her new one as Gyburc: “Arabel wechselt mit der Taufe und ihrem Einzug ins *Kristenland* die ‘Farbe’ als Signum der Religions- und Gruppenzugehörigkeit. Zudem wird dieser Seitenwechsel hier mit einem realen Farbwechsel der Figur ins Bild gesetzt: Aus der schwarzen Arabel wird die weiße Kyburc”. According to Rieger (340), this colour symbolism is based on a literary tradition in which the conversion of literary characters corresponds with a change of colour from black to white.

the form of questions and answers, her faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as well as in the Christian message of salvation (*A 276–77). After she has affirmed her will to be baptized, the Pope pours water over Arabel-Gyburc three times (*A 277).

During the christening ceremony, Arabel-Gyburc has to take off her clothes. When she enters the baptismal font, she is naked except for a vest, which the Pope removes from her in the basin before pouring water over her thrice.³⁸ When she steps out of the baptismal font after the ceremony, she is seen naked, but only the ladies dare to look at her. She is then dressed in an extremely precious, snow-white,³⁹ shiny gold, angel-like baptismal robe (*A 278.8: “westerwat”) of silk, trimmed with pearls and gems and with seams knitted in gold (*A 278–80). After Arabel-Gyburc has put on the christening robe, we are told: “hie stvnt ein engel, nvt ein wip, | hie stvnt der wünsche vbersvzze minne” (*A 279.22–23: “An angel stood here, not a woman. | Here stood the perfect, overly sweet love”). This description presumably alludes to the prelapsarian garment of grace, which is called the “angelic garment” (Hamano W 972: “daz engliske gewate”) in the Vienna manuscript of the Early Middle High German *Genesis* (Kraß 44–45; Murdoch 106–8).

On the one hand, the course of the narrative makes it clear that Arabel-Gyburc gains a spiritual kind of beauty due to the baptismal ritual and robe. On the other hand, the description of her robe and body is interspersed with erotic allusions. For example, the text says that the robe is free of pearls and precious stones in the areas on which one sits or lies, so that the adornments do not interfere with (making?) love: “daz ez ze minne nvt mvget” (*A 279.17). Despite the presence of bridal motifs and the idea of spiritual marriage in writings about baptism, which is often inspired by the Song of Songs (R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 196–200), this tactile allusion seems to refer more to the secular sexual act because, after all, Arabel’s baptism is necessary for her marriage to Willehalm (Urban 209–10).⁴⁰ The narrator, then, explicitly invites the extradiegetic audience to gaze at the queen (*A 279.24: “nv schowet si hie dvkvneginne”) and affirms her extraordinary beauty (*A 279.26–27). The intradiegetic audience is indeed sensually affected by Arabel-Gyburc’s appearance. This becomes evident in the subsequent description of her hips (*A 280.3: “hvffel”) protruding under her robe and causing erotic desire and beguilement.

40. With reference to Aderhold, Hennings (581–82) assumes that the central concern of Arabel may have been to clarify when – before or after Arabel's baptism – Arabel and Willehalm's physical union takes place.

41. "I have forgotten one thing in which lies the joy of love: I guess their [her hips', M.D.] sweetness encourages desiring hearts. Their graceful protruding beguiles the senses of very wise men."

42. Scheidel (118) also points out that the description culminates in the focus on Gyburc's genitals and considers the accentuation of Arabel-Gyburc's beauty in the baptism episode in the context of the general tension between paganism and Christianity in the romance. Arabel's physical beauty is marked as pagan and linked to the ethically problematic "Venus love" (Scheidel 100: "Venus-Minne"). He interprets the appearance of the personified Nature in the description of Arabel's body as an allusion to Venus as the personified pleasure principle (118–19), and notes that Arabel's conversion to Christianity and her pagan carnal beauty go hand in hand (121–22).

43. Hennig (358) notes that the description of Arabel's nakedness, which is unprecedented in Middle High German courtly literature, is made all the more piquant by the fact that it immediately follows the description of the sacramental act of baptism.

einez ich vergessen han,
darinne minne fröde lit.
ich wene der selben svzzi git
vil mvtes gerenden herzen:
ir loslichez sterzen
betöret vil wiser sinne.⁴¹

(Ulrich, *Arabel* *A 280.8–13)

The text explicitly addresses the joy of love here (*A 280.9: "minne fröde"). Moreover, the hip bones are personified as rulers over the "place of love" which Nature has positioned there for the purpose of (erotic) pleasure: "der minne stat si hie wielten, | die natvre durch fröde het dar gesetzet" (*A 280.4–5).⁴²

The Vienna manuscript (Fig. 1) also illustrates the crucial moment when Arabel is lifted out of the baptismal font and when her naked body is exposed to the public gaze. In the illustration, Arabel's hips and pubis are concealed inside the goblet-shaped baptismal font, while she covers her naked breasts with her hands. Both the narrative and the illustration of *Arabel* refer to the iconography of a baptism scene, which usually shows a male person being baptized, with a naked upper body protruding from the baptismal fountain (Mielke 246). Whereas, traditionally, the pouring of water over the baptized person or the blessing is depicted (*ibid.*), in *Arabel* both the text and the image focus on the moment after baptism, thus accentuating the ambiguity of female ritual nudity.⁴³



Fig. 1: Arabel's baptism. Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 2670, fol. 53v.

In summary, Arabel is well informed about the Christian faith before her conversion, decides of her own free will to convert, and is meticulously prepared for the christening ceremony. However, this self-determined action reaches its limits when her body, clad in the semi-transparent baptismal robe, becomes the object of an intra- and extradiegetic male gaze and desire: despite the spiritual act of purification, the naked female body remains sensual and sexual. The narrative thus accentuates the theological problem – discussed (among others) by Augustine – that baptism relieves the baptized of Adam's guilt, but not of human concupiscence after the Fall of Man (Beatrice 392–93). There are certainly also narrative reasons as to why Arabel's christening is interwoven with erotic allusions: it ultimately leads to and is a precondition for her marriage with Willehalm (Urban 209–10). At this point, the mixture of the genres of legend and romance becomes manifest, as Arabel in her christening gown resembles a saint while also being a bride-to-be. With regard to the bridal motif in the context of baptism (R. M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery* 196–200), narrative motivation and theological tradition might interfere here as well.

Conversion as Temptation: Rudolf von Ems' *Barlaam und Josaphat*

44. On the origin and tradition of and the current state of research on Rudolf's *Barlaam und Josaphat*, see Pölzl (313–32): despite some recent publications (e.g. several articles in Cordoni and Meyer), this text has attracted little scholarly interest. For a long time, research focused primarily on the question of genre and the relationship between the secular and the spiritual. On the German *Barlaam und Josaphat* tradition in general, see Cordoni (195–230).

Another variation of temptation in the context of christenings is to be found in Rudolf von Ems' *Barlaam und Josaphat*.⁴⁴ The theme of baptism is crucial to this thirteenth-century legendary romance: Josaphat is the son of a pagan king who persecutes Christians. At his birth, a prophecy says that Josaphat will convert to Christianity against his father's will (Rudolf von Ems, *Barlaam und Josaphat* 22, 28–38). After initially growing up in isolation (23–24), Josaphat begins to ask himself what the meaning of life is when confronted with the suffering of the world – illness, old age, mortality, and death – for the first time (30–34). The hermit Barlaam then introduces Josaphat to the Christian message of salvation and, after having explained the baptismal ritual and its theological significance in detail (80–84, 96–101), christens him (169–73).

After his christening, Josaphat's mission is to spread the Christian faith. But, in one episode, this mission of conversion itself becomes a temptation for Josaphat. A disciple of the devil tempts Josaphat

by means of the most beautiful and lovely of all women, the Syrian king's daughter (302.33–37). The text explicitly relates the attempted seduction of Josaphat to Adam's seduction by Eve (302.25–32). The nameless princess falls in love with Josaphat when she is taken prisoner in his place (303.3–15), but Josaphat is not sexually tempted by her.

er sach si zühteclîchen an,
 er sprach: "vrouwe, saelic wîp,
 dîn liehtiu jugent, dîn schoener lîp
 hât mir sorgen vil gegeben.
 sol dîn minneclîchez leben
 in ungelouben sterben?
 [...]
 gedenke, minneclîchez wîp,
 durch rehte wîplîche tugent
 an dîne minneclîche jugent,
 und nim in dîne sinne
 die süezen gotes minne.
 toufe dich durch sîn gebot" [...]⁴⁵

(Rudolf, *Barlaam* 303.18–23 and 31–37)

Although Josaphat notices the woman's extraordinary beauty, he looks at her chastely and is concerned about her salvation. Instead of carnal love, he refers to the sweet love of God, and invites the woman to be christened.

The trouble begins when the woman assures Josaphat that she will be baptized if he does what she wants (304.11–23). Without knowing her intentions, Josaphat promises her twice to do anything she wants: "ich tuon gar den willen dîn" (304.25). The woman, then, asks Josaphat to sleep with her that night and claims that she will get baptized the following morning.

wildû vrô mines heiles sîn,
 sô lige dise naht bî mir,
 daz ich geniete mich mit dir
 mit minneclîcher liebe kraft
 lieplicher geselleschaft,
 so lobet mîn triuwe wider dich,
 daz ich morgen toufe mich.⁴⁶

(Rudolf, *Barlaam* 307.14–20)

The interesting thing here is that the woman uses theological arguments to convince Josaphat to break his vow of chastity: she

45. "He looked at her chastely and said: 'Lady, blessed woman. Your splendid youth, your beautiful body have worried me. Shall your lovely life die in disbelief? [...] Think, lovely woman, on account of the right female virtues, of your lovely youth and let the sweet love of God into your mind. Get baptized because of His commandment'."

46. "If you want to rejoice over my salvation, you shall sleep with me tonight so that I may be in pleasant company with you with the power of passionate love. So I vow to you by my faithfulness that tomorrow I will get baptized."

asserts that the conversion of a sinner makes the choir of angels rejoice (304.38–40) and refers to Paul's teachings on marriage (306.35–40). This leaves Josaphat with doubts:

Jôsaphât, der guote man,
vil sêre zwîveln dô began.
er dâhte, ob erz verbære,
daz ez vil wirser wære,
dan ob er si sus koufte,
daz si sich got getoufte.⁴⁷

(Rudolf, *Barlaam* 307.27–32)

47. "Josaphat, the good man, began to have serious doubts. He thought, if he refrained from doing it, it would be much worse than if he bought her so that she got baptized for God."

48. Notice the rhyme of *koufen* and *toufen* which often appears in Middle High German literature to criticize wrong motives for baptism.

49. Geisthardt (123) emphasizes the physical nature of Josaphat's change of heart, as he fails to solve the problem through discourse.

50. This strategy against doubts has been mentioned before: the blessing sign of the cross and prayers protect Josaphat from doubt (301.9–13).

51. Before Josaphat's temptation by the Syrian princess, the text says that Josaphat keeps his "very pure and sweet garment" (301.4: "die vil reinen süezen wât"), which was purified (301.5: "erreinet") in baptism, clean and free from sin.

Josaphat thinks that buying her baptism by sleeping with her is the lesser evil than breaking his vow of chastity.⁴⁸ In the end, Josaphat only gets back on the right track through mortification of the flesh⁴⁹ and prayer,⁵⁰ followed by a dream (309): a vivid vision of paradise and hell appears to him, and he sees and feels the fates that await those who are chaste and those who are unchaste, respectively (310–14), so that he sticks to his vow of chastity in the end.

Barlaam und Josaphat thus presents a harmful form of female empowerment in the context of conversion. The nameless woman's agency is demonstrated by the fact that she participates in the religious discourse by setting theologically justified conditions for her baptism. In doing so, however, she resembles Eve, since she serves as temptation by the devil. Josaphat affirms his faith and successfully keeps his baptismal garment clean by not repeating Adam's sin.⁵¹ In view of the close connection between baptism and temptation in *Barlaam und Josaphat*, it is worth considering whether Josaphat is also likened to Jesus here: Jesus is tempted by the devil right after his baptism by John the Baptist but resists all temptations (Luke 4:1–13; Matt. 4:1–11).

As Matthias Meyer has shown, the image of women in this episode is, however, more complex and ambiguous than that of an Eve-like seductress, due to the narrator's voice: Josaphat's temptation is framed by two narrative digressions. In the first one (294.35–298.10), Rudolf repudiates the claim from the literary tradition that women are diabolical. Instead, he praises courtly love and good women, following Gottfried von Strassburg's model (Meyer 278). The second digression (308.7–29) is a possibly ironic personal statement of the narrator, saying that, in Josaphat's place, he would gladly make the sacrifice of sleeping with a beautiful woman in

order to help her get baptized. Wolfram von Eschenbach could have served as a stylistic model here (Meyer 279). The portrayal of the Syrian princess and the way she is judged thus seem ambivalent: “The text tradition does not accommodate the double model of Eve and Mary, but sides clearly with Eve. Rudolf, however, introduces the courtly ideal into the text, and he does it willingly and with emphasis” (ibid. 280). Manfred Kern (209) similarly characterizes *Barlaam und Josaphat* as “Kunstlegende” (‘artificial legend’), i.e. “als Legende, die mit den Mitteln höfischer Dichtkunst komponiert ist, und als künstliches, heterogenes Textprodukt, das divergenten poetischen Einflüssen, den vielfältigen Stimmen legendarischer, heroisch-epischer, aber auch höfischer Erzähltraditionen erliegt”.⁵²

52. “... as a legend composed with the means of courtly poetry and as an artificial, heterogenous textual product, which is subjected to divergent poetical influences and to a variety of voices of legendary, heroic-epic, as well as courtly narrative traditions.”

53. The anonymous text has survived in three manuscripts and two prints. Two of the manuscripts are illustrated (Frankfurt a.M., Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. germ. qu. 13 [E] and Stuttgart, Landesbibliothek, Cod. HB XIII 2 [S]), and the third one contains blank spaces left for illustrations (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Arsenal Ms. 8021 [P]). A fourth manuscript was burnt (Strasbourg, Johanniterbibliothek, cod. b.81). All the manuscripts as well as several fragments date back to the fifteenth century. Both prints (Strasbourg, Matthias Hüpfuff, 1499 [d] and Strasbourg, Johann Knobloch d.Ä., 1510 [d']) are identical as regards text and pages and are illustrated with forty-six woodcuts (Griese 86–90; Curschmann 515–16).

54. “What I am telling you is true. He baptized her and taught her the Psalter for a whole year. He taught her the board game. He loved the queen, no matter how much harm she caused him.”

Two Bridal Quests and Conversions: *Salman und Morolf*

The pre-courtly epic *Salman und Morolf*, which dates back to the second half of the twelfth century,⁵³ contrasts two conversions of women for the purpose of marriage. Salman is the Christian king of Jerusalem and Morolf is his ingenious brother. Salman wins his first wife Salme, a heathen king’s daughter (*Salman und Morolf* 2) of extraordinary beauty (16–18), by abducting her across the sea, holding her captive in Jerusalem by force (3) and finally having her baptized:

Das ich uch sage, das ist war:
er dette sie teuffen und lerte sie
den salter ein gantz jar.
er lerte sie spielen in dem brett.
im was die kunigin liep,
wie vil sie im zu leide ie gedet.⁵⁴

(*Salman und Morolf* 4)

All we learn about Salme’s baptism is that Salman teaches her the Psalter for a year. In addition, she receives lessons in board games. No mention is made of the baptism ceremony. From the beginning, the narrator predicts that Salme will harm both the king and many other men (2 and 20). And indeed, Salme cheats on her husband twice with two different pagan rulers, who win and abduct her by using magic (90–99 and 598–610). The first time, Salman forgives his wife and takes her back to his court; the second time, he regains her, too, but back in Jerusalem, his brother Morolf kills her as a punishment.

55. Salme plays an active part in her abduction. After Fore fails to win Salme over by force of arms (*Salman und Morolf* 65–78), he is – against Morolf's advice – captured and placed in Salme's custody (84–87). Using a magic ring and arguments of power politics, he wins her over (96–107) so that she releases him (114). Six months later, Fore sends her a minstrel, with whom she steals away (147) after faking her own death (124–25).

56. According to Griese (127–28), the chess game is to be seen as the beginning of the courtship of Affer, even though Salman and Salme's marriage lasts another seven years before Salme is killed as a punishment for her second adultery and Affer becomes Salman's wife. See also Haug 187–88.

57. Griese (123–24) emphasizes that the conversation between Salman and Affer, which takes place in her private chambers, resembles a romantic encounter. Haug (188) states that the scene appears to be a set piece from a classical bridal quest.

The second female baptism in *Salman und Morolf* is linked to Salme's first abduction by the pagan king Fore (21–31). When King Fore kidnaps Salme,⁵⁵ Salman's brother Morolf is sent out to find her (157). Morolf carries out his mission and brings Salme back home. Yet Morolf suspects that Salme's fidelity will not last (537–39). Therefore, Morolf prepares a future second marriage by secretly obtaining another bride for Salman: Affer, King Fore's sister, whom Morolf wins as a prize in a game of chess with Salme at Fore's court (229–37).⁵⁶ When King Salman comes to retrieve his wife Salme, he meets Affer and they take a liking to each other (400–05 and 432–34). In Affer's private chambers, Salman first expresses the idea that Affer could come with him to Jerusalem and be baptized (433). However, Salman does not yet intend to marry Affer, as he is still trying to win back his first wife and does not know about Morolf's secret plan. Affer replies that she is not unwilling to go with him (434).⁵⁷ She then helps Salman to overpower her brother Fore (464–72 and 504–12) and accompanies him and Salme to Jerusalem (575) after Fore is killed (540–44).

Back in Jerusalem, Morolf is the one who convinces Affer to get baptized. Compared to the brief narration of Salme's christening, Affer's conversion is recounted at length. At first, Morolf tells Affer that her soul shall be healed, in order to convince her to get baptized: “künigin her, | du solt dich lassen touffen, | so bist du genessen an der sel” (580.3–5). Affer refuses, referring to the grief she still feels because of her brother's death (581–82). Morolf then makes a second attempt to convince her and this time uses a different strategy: he offers her a compensation (583.5, “ergetzen”) for her conversion.

Do sprach die maget wol getan:
“wie wiltu mich sin ergetzen, dugenthaffter man?

ich bin von geburt ein künigin her,
ich enwil mich nit lassen touffen,
dar so enbit mich es nit me.”

Do sprach der tegen lobesan:

“vil schone maget wolgetan,
so wenne gestirbet die künigin her,
so soltu gewaltig werden
über das rieh lant czu Jherusalem.

Ich gib dir czü manne den künig Salmon,”
also sprach Morolff der ußerwelte man.

Do sprach die künigin wolgetan:

58. "The beautiful maiden said: 'How do you want to compensate me? I am a mighty queen by birth. I do not want to be baptized. Do not ask me to do it again.' The venerable hero then said: 'Beautiful and handsome virgin, when the queen dies, you shall rule over the whole kingdom of Jerusalem. I will give you Salman for a husband.' That's what Morolf, the excellent man, said. The handsome queen said: 'Then I want to be baptized, Morolf, most honourable man!'"

59. Neudeck (100 n. 28) states that in *Salman und Morolf*, social factors determine whom women consider as a marriage partner and that the hierarchical thinking of the feudal nobility plays a role not only in Affer's case, but also in Salme's decision to leave her husband for Fore (*Salman und Morolf* 96–107).

"so wil ich mich lan touffen,
Morolff, tugenthafftiger man"⁵⁸
(*Salman und Morolf* 584–86)

Affer confidently replies that Morolf could hardly compensate her, as she already is a powerful queen by birth (584.3). She explicitly refuses baptism and forbids him to broach the subject again (584.4–5). After that, Morolf promises Affer that she shall rule over the whole kingdom of Jerusalem after Salme's death (585.3–5) and that he will give her King Salman as a husband (586.1). Only then does Affer change her mind and say that she wants to be baptized (586.4).⁵⁹



Fig. 2: Affer's baptism. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB XIII 2, fol. 328r.

60. R. M. Jensen (*Baptismal Imagery* 168) notes that according to the apostolic tradition women had to loosen their hair before entering the baptismal font.

61. The illustration shows a wooden tub as baptismal font. According to Grayland (204), movable wooden baptismal fonts were used in the northern European mission until the tenth century. Later, wooden tubs only served as baptismal fonts in poorer regions. From the Gothic period onwards, the trend went towards more expensive baptismal fonts made of stone or bronze. On the materiality and mediality of baptismal fonts in Northern Germany in the Middle Ages, see Vennebusch.

62. This time, the pagan king Princian courts and abducts her (*Salman und Morolf* 598–610).

63. The print versions from Strasbourg give more details on Salman and Affer's reign and also on Morolf's belated remorse; see Boyer 56–57 and Kohnen 179–82.

64. On deviations from the classical scheme of the dangerous bridal quest in *Salman und Morolf*, see Gries 133.

Morolf initiates Affer's baptism immediately. For the ceremony, which, according to the text, takes place in a cathedral (588.3, “thum”), Affer is dressed in a silk robe (588.4–5). In contrast to the illustration in the Stuttgart manuscript (Fig. 2), which shows Affer naked, with loose hair⁶⁰ and with her breasts and pubic region exposed in an outdoor baptismal font,⁶¹ the text does not go into further detail regarding the actual performance of the christening ritual. Nevertheless, it seems to comment on questions of baptismal practice. The remark that Affer is so heavy that her chambermaid does not want to hold her on her lap (589) is probably a comical allusion to infant baptism (Köppe-Benath 207). The problem of ritual nudity seems to be indicated by the fact that King Salman is sent away from the font by two duchesses during the ceremony, since they could well do without him (590.1–4) and there is the danger of indecent behaviour: “wer weiß, wie es under uch zweien ergat” (590.5, “Who knows what would go on between you?”). After her baptism, Affer goes to the Holy Sepulchre and makes a sacrifice. Afterwards, she studies the Psalter for four and a half years (591). Seven years later, after her second betrayal, Salme is killed by Morolf by bloodletting (777; Fig. 3).⁶² Morolf consoles King Salman by marrying him to Affer (781a–784.1). The manuscripts end the story here,⁶³ and only tell in brief summary that Affer reigns as a powerful queen in Jerusalem for thirty-three years before she and Salman die and obtain God's mercy (783).

Regarding the question of female agency in conversions, the epic of *Salman und Morolf* is complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, women appear, due to the pre-courtly narrative scheme of the dangerous bridal quest,⁶⁴ to be mere objects in connection with male marriage intentions: they are won by abduction, by magic, or as a prize in chess. Salme does not seem to have the choice of agreeing or refusing when she is baptized in captivity after her abduction by Salman. On the other hand, the text presents Affer as a power-conscious queen who deliberately and strategically decides to convert to Christianity. Unlike in other texts, where conversions out of worldly interests are condemned, Affer's political calculation regarding baptism is not criticized.



Fig. 3: Morolf kills Salme by bloodletting. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB XIII 2, fol. 338v.

65. For example, the text relates how thinking about the magic herb which is supposed to bring about her apparent death prevents Salme from praying and thinking about God during the service (*Salman und Morolf* 123–24).

66. Böckenholt (98–100) notes that Salme is portrayed ambiguously and incoherently, as by her actions she is judged to be culpable on the one hand (ruse, adultery, infidelity), but appears to be blameless on the other hand (sorcery, abduction). Bornholdt (230–32) emphasizes that Salman is partly to blame for his misfortune, as he (like the other men) loses his mind at the sight of Salme and is overwhelmed by his feelings. He thus becomes the antithesis of the Solomonic ruler. Following Haug (183), Griese (107) also identifies Salman's 'blind fascination with sensual beauty' as the fundamental problem of the narrative.

67. In *Salman und Morolf* 578.3–5, it says that women are best guarded by the intrinsic quality of being good and decent: "wan es wart nie kein hut so gut | wan die ein ieglich biderb wip | nun ir selber tut".

68. This is a discrepancy between the illustrations and the verbal narrative. The text says nothing about the material of the baptismal font, but the bathtub is said to be made of marble (*Salman und Morolf* 776.6).

But how does the text evaluate the two female conversions? Despite her christening, Salme is repeatedly lured by heathen magic⁶⁵ and proves unfaithful to her Christian husband.⁶⁶ This can be read as a criticism of forced baptism, which is doomed to fail. Affer, on the other hand, proves her loyalty to Salman even before her baptism. As Böckenholt (112) has shown, Affer repeatedly acts in accordance with Christian ideals such as charity and mercy, and in some passages she is even portrayed as saint-like. This could indicate that the baptismal ritual does not bring about a change of heart. Rather, having the right moral attitude beforehand is crucial to a successful conversion to Christianity.⁶⁷ Affer's reign of thirty-three years – which equals Christ's lifespan (Griese 132) – confirms her suitability as a Christian queen.

The illustrations in the Stuttgart manuscript also suggest that a comparison of the two conversions was intended. The undeniable similarity of the wooden baptismal font at Affer's conversion and the wooden bathtub in which Salme is killed emphasizes the contrast between Salme's betrayal and Affer's fidelity and visually relates the unequal conversions to each other.⁶⁸ Instead of the cleansing, redeeming baptismal water, the tub finally contains the blood sinfully shed as a result of adultery and murder. The *topos*

69. Interestingly, Morolf advises Salme to take a bath because of her “foreign love” (*Salman und Morolf* 776.3, “fremde minne”), i.e. because of her adultery; see also Griese (131) and Haug (187).

of the bath as a place of sexual immorality (Loleit 81–84) should possibly also be invoked here. Salme’s death in the bathtub could thus be interpreted as a punishment which mirrors both her sexual betrayal and her apostasy.⁶⁹ Moreover, the narrative might – beyond the mere pleasure of storytelling and entertaining – also be read as a literary reaction to the criticism of forced baptism in Scholastic theology.

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, I will not only summarize the results of the textual analyses, but also provide some further reflections on the influence of the respective text genre, because it can be assumed that the genre factor is not insignificant for the different representations of female conversions in the examples studied.

The Thecla tradition shows the gradual development and consolidation of gender inequality in the baptismal ritual – not only on a literary level, but also on an institutional one. From late antiquity onwards, Thecla steadily loses agency and is – in hagiography as well as in theological discourse – reduced to the perceptual patterns of chastity and seduction until her removal from the Roman Catholic canon of saints in the twentieth century. The *Vita* of Thecla belongs to the hagiographic tradition and therefore also pursues pragmatic goals: saints serve as role models whose behaviour is intended to inspire imitation. But Thecla’s self-baptism and her active teaching and preaching as a woman, still present in the older tradition, contradict later church doctrines. In order to avert the danger of imitation, the church must have considered the rewriting of Thecla’s *Vita* to be unavoidable.

Ulrich von dem Türlin’s *Arabel* not only gives insights into the ritual of christening and the preparation for it, but also illuminates the ambiguous nature of the naked female body between spiritual purification and sensual corporeality in the christening ceremony: although Arabel decides to be baptized of her own free will and is meticulously prepared for the ceremony, her naked body is exposed to the male gaze and becomes an object of desire when she leaves the baptismal font. In this way, the romance also addresses fundamental theological questions, such as the postlapsarian lustfulness of

mankind or the relationship between baptism and sinful behaviour. The sexual allusions in the baptism narrative are intriguing, as they stand in opposition to the idea of spiritual purification or even genderlessness in baptism. This tension, which might also interfere with bridal motifs in baptismal theology, arises because conversion to Christianity is necessary for the upcoming marriage. The tension in the depiction of Arabel-Gyburc's christening in Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel* is probably also related to the mixture of genres that characterizes Wolfram's *Willehalm*, which inspired it and which oscillates between chanson de geste, legend, and courtly verse romance (Greenfield and Miklautsch 270–71). In some passages, Willehalm and Gyburc are characterized as saints in Wolfram's text; at the same time, however, they act as worldly lovers and fighters (ibid. 188–93 and 200). In the baptism scene in *Arabel*, this tension between religious and erotic discourse becomes evident in the contrast between angelic beauty and human desire, which come together in the depiction of Arabel-Gyburc in her translucent baptismal robe.

In Rudolf von Ems' legendary epic *Barlaam und Josaphat*, Josaphat's vow of chastity and his commitment to convert others are related to sexual temptation and original sin. The nameless Syrian princess, who is well informed about Christianity, assumes the role of a diabolic seductress when she commands Josaphat to sleep with her in return for her consent to baptism. Intradiegetically, Josaphat demonstrates an alternative to the pattern of the Fall of Man by resisting temptation and not repeating Adam's sin. Extradiegetically, the narrator offers an alternative to the model of Eve by disavowing the story and introducing the courtly ideal offemininity in a narrative digression. This variety of voices demonstrates that *Barlaam und Josaphat* likewise represents a mixture of genres – of legend and courtly epic. In other words, Josaphat imitates Jesus as the second Adam, who defied the devil's temptations in the desert after his baptism, by rejecting the temptation of the Eve-like woman, who tries to seduce him to unchastity through baptism. The new female ideal developed in courtly literature could not be incorporated into the narrative, as it would contradict the legendary narrative scheme. Nonetheless, the new model of femininity is reflected in the narrator's commentary.

The pre-courtly epic *Salman und Morolf* contrasts a forced conversion which fails with a voluntary conversion which succeeds. In this way, the text emphasizes that the ethical attitude is more important than the mere performance of the baptismal ritual. Contrary to the narrative pattern of the dangerous bridal quest, which degrades women to objects of male erotic desire and political interests, Affer is portrayed favourably as a strong female character with a sense for power and as a successful Christian ruler. The emphasis placed on the right moral attitude which is necessary for a successful conversion to Christianity is similar to the so-called 'baptism of tears' in the courtly romance. Tears shed out of great sorrow can serve as an analogy or even as a substitute for baptism.⁷⁰ The connection between tears and baptismal water is not only a literary motif, but is also to be found in theological treatises, for instance in Ambrose's theology of repentance (Smith 203). Regardless of the genre, the idea of an ethical conversion to Christianity emerges here, so that the act of baptism merely ritually affirms a moral transformation that has already taken place. Conversely, the sheer performance of the ritual cannot bring about or replace the necessary inner and behavioural change.

70. This motif can be found, for example, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (28.10–19) when Belakane mourns her lover Isenhart, or in Wirnt von Grafenberg's *Wigalois* (8021–32) when Japhite weeps for her deceased lover Roas. On water, baptism, and tears in *Parzival*, with a particular focus on Feirefiz, see Gnädinger. On tears as a substitute for baptism, see esp. 67–69. Lembke (110–15) has analyzed these episodes thoroughly and has shown the great importance of focalization and narrative voice in both romances.

71. My thanks go to the participants of the NetMAR International Conference *Rituals of Gender Staging and Performance in the Middle Ages*, and to the members of the Mediävistisches Oberseminar at the University of Tübingen for the stimulating discussions of preliminary work for this article. For their careful proofreading, I would like to thank Alexa Bornfleth and Matthew Chaldekas.

The topic of female conversion to Christianity has hence proven to be extremely fruitful regarding rituals and gender. Many aspects (sin, seduction, ritual nudity, shame, sexuality, desire) are already present in the Bible or in theological discussion, but in the experimental area of literature, and depending on the genre, they are discussed and negotiated anew. Female agency and lack or loss of power often go hand in hand in literary representations of conversions. In terms of gender, the ritual of baptism is thus deeply ambiguous and is to be considered as a ritual of female empowerment and disempowerment alike.⁷¹

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: Arabel's baptism.

Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2670, fol. 53v. Scan from: Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm. Mit der Vorgeschichte des Ulrich von dem Türlin und der Fortsetzung des Ulrich von Türheim. Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Vindobonensis 2670 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Vol. 1: Faksimile. Vol. 2: Kommentar* by Hedwig Heger. Codices Selecti 46. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1974. © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt (ADEVA), Dr. Paul Struzl GmbH, St.-Peter-Hauptstraße 98, A-8042 Graz (Austria).

Fig. 2: Affer's baptism. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB XIII 2, fol. 328r.

Fig. 3: Morolf kills Salme by bloodletting. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, HB XIII 2, fol. 338v.