

Disability im höfischen Roman? Überlegungen zu Hartmanns von Aue *Iwein*

Disability in courtly romance? Reflections on Hartmann von Aue's Iwein

Sabrina Kremling, M.A.
(Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen)

The field of disability studies, which originally emerged in the Anglo-American world in the 1970s, is gaining increasing attention not only in the social sciences and law, but also in the humanities and cultural studies. Building on a fluid understanding of “disability” and “non-disability”, the potential of disability studies is being explored in an interdisciplinary approach, for example through critical examination of modern notions of “normality” or historically and culturally varied conceptions of human transience and vulnerability. Studies that focus on medieval and early modern conceptions of disability are increasingly valued for their focus on the often highly differentiated representations and evaluations of disability in pre-modern contexts. While this can be seen as an opportunity, it also raises various methodological challenges that arise when dealing with a pre-modern corpus of sources. This can be illustrated by the example of the Middle High German Arthurian romance: Within this literary genre, which emerged in German-speaking countries around 1200, the central aim is to present the ideal lifestyles of the secular nobility and to reflect on the conditions and possibilities for realising them. This makes it difficult to find characters who do not conform to this courtly ideal and who have a form of physical and/or mental impairment that would be classified as a disability according to modern understanding. Since the topic of disability does not usually occupy a prominent position at the level of *histoire* against this backdrop, a second challenge arises: to search primarily at the level of *discourse* for subtle and mostly implicit references and representational strategies that show that a character, due to physical, mental, emotional or social circumstances, is at least temporarily only partially able or completely unable to participate in the ideal way of life of court society and thus falls short of fulfilling their intended “role” within the structure of aristocratic society.

If these preliminary considerations are taken into account, a closer look reveals characters who, at least temporarily, do not conform to the ideals of courtly society due to their appearance and/or behaviour and thus represent an “abnormality” that can also be described as a “disability”. The lecture takes up these preliminary considerations in order to underline their relevance and further differentiate their complexity through textual observations in the so-called madness episode in Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*. The following considerations prove to be guiding “coordinates” for the analysis of the text passage: Disability manifests itself in the chosen scene insofar as the protagonist Iwein, triggered by a servant's damning accusation that he did not return to the court of his wife Laudine on time, falls into a state of madness. Highly discredited socially, Iwein silently leaves Arthur's court and lives from then on in the wilderness, where his madness manifests itself in extreme emotional reactions, the loss of all courtly skills and, finally, a drastic neglect of his appearance. However, the passage not only focuses on the differentiated symptoms of the protagonist's madness, but also addresses the reactions of those around him to

Iwein's precarious situation. King Arthur, for example, shows compassion for the disgraced knight, thus setting an example for the court of Arthur to be equally open-minded and helpful towards Iwein. A hermit whom Iwein encounters is also willing to provide the stranger with bread and cooked meat in exchange for goods. Finally, three ladies succeed in identifying Iwein despite his dishevelled appearance and cure him of his madness with a miraculous ointment. While these three examples impressively demonstrate that Iwein's environment reacts to his madness with understanding and compassion, a closer look reveals that the supposedly open-minded attitude and helpfulness of the king, the hermit and the ladies are either linked to specific conditions or do not reach Iwein at the right moment and thus only have a limited supportive effect. Ultimately, it is not only the various characters in the plot whose attitudes towards Iwein constantly shift between compassion and fear, helpfulness and functionalisation; rather, the narrator himself struggles at the narrative level with the challenge of expressing Iwein's madness in language and experimenting with different ways of positioning himself using various evaluative approaches. Far from merely pointing out a temporary state of deficiency in the protagonist, the text thus develops differentiated perspectives on a specific form of disability that not only attempt to take a close look at Iwein's physical, cognitive and emotional state, but also and especially address questions of responsibility towards a character who is completely incapable of acting at the level of action, as well as various possible evaluations at the level of representation, as constitutive components of a literary negotiation process about disability.