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Absurdity in Medieval Literature? Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs* as a Transgressive Literary Enterprise Long before Modernity

Albrecht Classen

Department of German Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA; aclassen@arizona.edu

Abstract: Although the concept of the Absurd seems to be characteristic only of modernity, especially since WWII, we face the intriguing opportunity to investigate its likely first emergence in the early thirteenth century in Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs* (ca. 1220). While the narrative framework insinuates that meaning and relevance continue to be the key components of the priest's life, especially because he constantly seeks new sources of income for his own generosity and hospitality, his various victims increasingly face absurd situations and are abandoned even to the threat of insanity and death. The analysis of the verse narrative suggests that the protagonist begins to embrace crime and violence as the norm for his operations as a fake merchant. Thus, in some of the episodes of this famous *Schwankbuch*, elements of the absurd become visible, creating considerable irritation and frustration, if not horror and desperation, among the priest's innocent victims.

Keywords: Der Stricker; *Pfaffe Amîs*; absurdity; fake merchants; rogue; pranks; insanity

1. Introduction

We commonly associate absurdity with situations or conditions people experience, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, i.e., in the modern or post-modern world. Absurdity—in 1893, the sociologist Émile Durkheim also coined the term 'anomie' for a very similar phenomenon when all social cohesion and meaning disappear within an alienating context, which then might trigger suicide (see Merton 1938; Deflem 2015)—entails an utter loss of rationality and logic when individuals act in specific situations in such a way that we can no longer recognize meaningfulness or significance. When something appears to be, for instance, kafkaesque, insane, completely irrational, etc., we could also say that it has become absurd and devoid of meaning (Bowker 2014). Indeed, in the face of horrendous phenomena such as WWI, WWII, the Holocaust, the threat of the nuclear bomb, and the appearance of epidemics such as COVID-19 in which people find themselves completely helpless and abandoned, it might make good sense that writers suddenly describe their existence as determined by absurdity. When there does not seem to be a god or an ultimate *telos*, when law and order are utterly undermined or have become irrelevant as arbitrary, when people act irrationally and without making sense, or when we realize that humanity is destroying the very earth we live on, we feel caught in absurdity (Mittleman 2023). In a world where religion, above all, no longer seems to play a dominant role, as was the case still in the Middle Ages, it does not come as a real surprise today that we might face at times a situation that would be best described as meaningless, abstruse, arbitrary, and hence absurd. In addition, currently (2024), there is a growing sense in many countries across the world that democracy is losing its foundation or relevance, being replaced by global corporations and an overburdening bureaucracy, jettisoning us into absurdity at large. However, could we also apply the term 'absurd' and its implications to some cases in medieval literature, and this at the risk of being anachronistic?

Famous playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugène Ionesco presented humans on the stage who can no longer figure out their own *raison d'être* and are entirely lost in a world of meaninglessness, without purpose, goal, or objectives

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(Esslin 1960; Schaper 1994). The infinite waiting for Godot continues until today, and he might never arrive. Albert Camus resorted to the mythical Greek figure of Sisyphus to illustrate the uselessness and pointlessness of all human efforts and endeavors within modern contexts (Camus 1942; Lennartz 1998). Although the roots of the Absurd go back in some way to existentialism in the late nineteenth century, we definitely observe new challenges and developments in philosophy, the arts, literature, religion, and psychology since the middle of the twentieth century, leading us into a universal crisis in the post-modern world (Cornwell 2006).

Under current conditions, with humanity having entered the Anthropocene in which we threaten to destroy our own existence, the Earth itself, in a ghastly suicidal drive out of ignorance, greed, and stupidity, poets, artists, philosophers, and others have already embraced a global epistemology determined by the notion of absurdity because nothing seems to make sense any longer (Gavins 2022). When neither the Church nor the government, when neither any ideology nor any scientific teaching appears to be useful and meaningful, or universally accepted, the individual might even give up and accept that absurdity rules, especially in the face of a possibly imminent takeover by Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Sagi 2002; Schloßberger-Oberhammer 2018).

From a slightly different perspective, when we recognize that nothing we try to do in this world to promote our lives, careers, dreams, or ambitions has any effect, we might simply give up, shrug our shoulders, despair, or identify the world as being determined by idiocy or absurdity, whatever social groups such as "The Last Generation" might advocate for so vehemently. In addition, from yet another viewpoint, when we find ourselves in a kafkaesque framework where nothing functions as it is supposed to do and the legal system or bureaucracy operates only for its own sake, to the utter disregard of the human individual and his/her needs, then absurdity stares into our faces (Bennett 2015; Uchman 2021). That kind of realization, such as within the Holocaust and its victims, might lead to suicide, as Jean Améry (1912–1978) reflected upon, especially in his famous treatise, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death* (1976) (Améry 1999). He committed suicide in 1978, not being able to handle the continuing absurdity of post-Holocaust existence.

According to famous philosopher Thomas Nagel, "In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality" (Nagel 1971, p. 718). In addition, he adds: "The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself" (p. 718). To understand the notion of absurdity requires, as Nagel underscores, the realization of different reference systems in our existence: "And that is the main condition of absurdity—the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life" (p. 726). It is highly unlikely that animals, for instance, have any sense of the absurd; by contrast, humans, when they start reflecting upon their own lives from the outside, are very likely to feel a sense of absurdity (p. 727). Tragically, when the sense of absurdity gains a foothold in us, there is a grave danger of abandoning all attempts to lead a meaningful and productive life—certainly a profound problem philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists have already explored for a long time (Belliotti 2019).

2. Meaningfulness in the Pre-Modern World?

Prior to the twentieth century, neither poets nor philosophers would have even thought of describing their world as being determined by absurdity. Both religion and philosophy, but also the traditional social, economic, military, and political structures, as chaotic and weak as they all might have been in the eyes of countless critics throughout time, provided some sense of meaning, relevance, structure, and systemic identity. To highlight this most dramatically, when Martin Luther and his fellow theologians launched the Protestant Reformation and broke with most of the traditional Catholic concepts, they all still operated within an intellectual, conceptual framework that made sense, certainly for themselves

and for the representatives of the old Church, the Catholics. Similarly, we would not find any courtly romance, any heroic epic, or any courtly love poem reflecting absurdity in the modern sense of the word because God, after all, was always there to create or provide meaning, even in the most elusive manner.

In Heinrich Kaufringer's powerful verse narrative "The Hermit and the Angel" (ca. 1400), the poor hermit is about to despair at the end in face of the absurd developments around him because nothing the other person does to the fellow members of society makes sense to him. He almost faces absurdity in a most dramatic fashion and is helpless in coping with the loss of all standard moral, ethical, and religious principles. However, then, the seeming perpetrator reveals his true identity, being an angel, and explains that everything he had done had been ordained by God and complies with divine justice (Kaufringer [2014] 2019, no. 1; cf. Classen 2019). Hence, everything that seemed to be absurd to the hermit suddenly proved to be divinely determined and hence meaningful. In terms of human justice, there was only crime and violence, but God sees it quite differently (cf. also Johannes Pauli's Schimpf und Ernst, 1522, no. 129, for the edition, see (Pauli [1924] 1972); for a recent study, cf. Müller 2010). In this respect, it makes good sense that Flo Keyes characterizes medieval literature as determined by hope, whereas we today seem to be oppressed increasingly by hopelessness or resort to science fiction to compensate for the horrors of our existence (Keyes 2006, pp. 129ff.).

Altogether, we would hence assume that absurdity as an epistemological phenomenon would have to be associated with post-modernity above all when people found themselves increasingly abandoned within a universe deprived of a God figure. Nevertheless, here I want to challenge somewhat those common notions so central to the usual characterization of our current world, as if medieval and early modern cultures were fundamentally grounded in a rock-solid concept determined by harmony with and submission under God and the cosmos and would not have faced critical challenges as to the meaning and relevance of their own existence. The history of suicide in the Middle Ages confirms, for instance, that individual despair and loss of meaning was not such an uncommon experience already then, as much as the Church identified it as a serious sin (Knapp 1979; Signori 1994; Murray 1998).

Of course, there are many pre-modern poems resulting in tragedy because virtually no one survives as a result of meaningless slaughter (e.g., Nibelungenlied, ca. 1200). The entire corpus of entertaining verse narratives (*fabliaux*, *mæren*, *tales*, *novelle*, etc.) is predicated on satirizing and criticizing traditional authority figures and the patriarchal system at large, especially the Christian Church, but the resulting laughter ultimately translates into reconstitution of traditional values and ideals.

Granted, the anonymous poet of the Middle High German verse narrative *Mauritius von Craûn* (ca. 1220/1240) deeply undermined the expectations of his audiences by offering disturbing challenges to the entire notion of courtliness, knighthood, and courtly love, but we would be able to characterize the protagonist Mauritius or his beloved, the Countess of Beaumunt, at most as personal failures within the courtly system and definitely not as catalysts of a complete breakdown of their world with its fundamental values (Reinitzer 2000; cf. Fischer 2006).

In the Middle English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1378), we are informed about a ghastly decapitation game, but as absurd as the entire setting might be on the surface, ultimately the protagonist learns valuable lessons regarding humility and honor, returns to King Arthur's court still alive, and carries important messages about the fundamental value system sustaining their society (Vantuono 1991). The presumed absurdity of the Green Knight's horrifying game is ultimately dissolved and translated into a deeply intriguing challenge of courtly values and ideals that are, in the end, reconfirmed and validated. Countless medieval poets, artists, and theologians examined the meaning of death, for instance, in a certain way as an absurd force in human life, but the Christian (or Jewish/Muslim) faith has always provided a relevant framework that has never allowed a sense of absurdity to arise (Classen 2016).

3. Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs*—An Absurd Protagonist?

Despite all those observations, it still might be possible to identify at least one poetic work in medieval literature that appears to be determined by a highly unusual sense of absurdity, Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs* (ca. 1220/1240; for the various editions of his texts, see Der Stricker 1967, 1977, 1992, 1994), an argument that current scholarship has not even considered yet. This poet, of whose identity we know practically nothing, deserves our attention globally because he experimented with various traditions and proved to be surprisingly innovative and influential far into the early modern age. Here I want to isolate a number of situations or episodes, at least in his *Pfaffe Amîs*, that appear to reflect a sense of absurdity because the protagonist operates quite successfully as far as he is concerned but where the suffering of his victims simply does not make sense, which ultimately casts Amîs as a purely destructive character (Röcke 1987). Those victims are respectable, worthy individuals; they are dignified members of their society; they have not demonstrated any moral or ethical shortcomings deserving punishment, and yet Amîs targets them brutally, viciously, and deceptively, robbing them of their wealth and leaving them behind as devastated, frustrated individuals who no longer understand their world. In short, they are not evil characters, and Amîs does not target them because of evil or satanic intentions. He only wants their money and demonstrates no hesitation in employing brutal, reckless, and psychologically devastating strategies to destroy them. Thereby, the poet creates, for the first time in medieval literature, a sense of absurdity. Critics might regard this claim as anachronistic, but the close analysis of Der Stricker's text strongly suggests that the protagonist operates effectively with the absurd and leaves his victims stunned and helpless, not able to understand why their terrible misfortune has happened to them. They are guiltless and yet horribly punished at the same time, and this bizarrely in a kafkaesque fashion.

Neither the narrator nor the main character expresses any pity; they do not reveal any empathy for their suffering, and we are left simply with absurd situations. As we will see, nothing really makes sense in those circumstances, even though the protagonist is a priest and initially intended to collect money to continue with his extraordinary hospitality back home and live up to his Christian ideals. We might even be able to identify the entire narrative framework as determined by a certain degree of absurdity, even though the protagonist never questions his own actions and words and can conclude his life as a highly respected and worthy abbot.

The discrepancy between this priest's pranks and the people's suffering at his hands raises serious questions about the philosophical foundation of this *Schwankroman* with jest narratives all connected with the main figure. We are supposed to laugh about and with him, and also to ignore the pain and anxiety caused by his actions, but at closer analysis, we increasingly notice internal contradictions and the emergence of situations or actions that no longer really make sense and become meaningless, hence absurd. Some scholars have tried to resort to a superficial defense of these internal problems, pointing out a general tendency in medieval literature to disregard consistency and coherence because of the oral performance of the original texts and the poet's disinterest in following a tight logical sequence of events, always responding to different audience expectations (e.g., Kalkhofen 1989, pp. 173–74).

Schilling urges us to assume that "die konstatierten Unstimmigkeiten des *Pfaffen Amîs* nicht auf Nachlässigkeiten beruhen, sondern erzählerische Funktionen erfüllt haben" (Schilling 1994, p. 193; the observed lack of coherence in the Pfaffe Amîs does not rest on carelessness but is predicated on a narrative function). What that function might have been, however, remains elusive, both here and in other scholarly studies on this text, especially since there is universal agreement that Der Stricker commonly has his literary figures operating in a surprisingly rational, even though highly callous fashion (Schilling 1994, p. 195; cf. Classen 2022).

If we can confirm this observation through a careful reading of some of the critically important scenes presented by The Stricker, we will be in an extraordinarily interesting

situation, building direct connections between our post-modern existence and the later Middle Ages in epistemological and existentialist terms determined by absurdity, i.e., our inability to make sense in human terms (for studies on the late medieval crisis, see Bauch and Schenk 2020). We can be certain that this remarkable text found multiple parallels both long before it was composed and in the following centuries, especially because we already know of a considerable body of 'nonsense' poetry from the early twelfth century onwards (e.g., the first troubadour, Guillaume le Neuf; cf. Kirk 2021; see also Martínez Pérez 1991, p. 151; Classen 2012a; see also the anthology of late medieval literary examples ed. by Brunner 2014). Most important, however, is that *Pfaffe Amîs* has survived in ten complete manuscripts, three fragments, and one incunabulum from the end of the fifteenth century (Schilling 1994, pp. 180–85; for the latest update, see online at https://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/368; last accessed on 13 March 2024), which signals its considerable popularity. Then, this infamous figure of Amîs strongly influenced Hermann Bote—his authorship is still somewhat uncertain, but see (Blume 2009)—when he composed his collection of tales, *Till Eulenspiegel* (first printed in 1510/1511; see Schilling 1994 in Der Stricker 1994, pp. 142–52), and other narrative accounts of roguish characters, such as the Priest of the Kalenberg (Velten 2016).

After all, there are numerous passages in Der Stricker's verse narrative that ultimately do not make sense and challenge both his contemporary audience and us today to come to terms with them because they are based on an absurd concept of this world. This forces us to question whether the poet and/or his audience could really see through the paradoxes implied here. Since there are practically no parallels to this tale in medieval German and European literature, here disregarding curious attempts to write nonsense poetry (Guillaume le Neuf), the novelty and experimental character of *Pfaffe Amîs* might have made it impossible to recognize the absurdity of some of the protagonist's actions. It is, however, not enough to characterize this text as simply irritating or ambivalent without a clear message (Peters 1977, p. 122; cf. now also Ferrari 2016). We can certainly agree with Hedda Ragotzky that the protagonist consistently operates with "list" (cunning, deception, trickery, etc.), but to what end? Whom does he help with his smartness? Whom does he hurt? There are just too many irrational actions and contradictions for us to be content with this rather traditional and, by now, also superficial reading (Ragotzky 1977). Joachim Heinzle goes so far as to talk about a "durch und durch verderbte[ ] Welt. . ., in der das Handeln aller einem Teufelszirkel von Dummheit und Schlechtigkeit gleicht, dem nur durch aufrichtige Ergebung in Gottes Willen zu entrinnen ist" (Heinzle 1984, p. 181; a world rotten through and through in which the actions of all individuals resemble a vicious cycle of stupidity and evilness, which one can escape from only through a sincere submission under God's will). This ignores, of course, that there are individuals who create that chaos and others who become the victims of this chaos and hence can no longer comprehend the world. In addition, it also ignores the fact that the protagonist always pursues his goals to gain as much money as possible so that he can continue to be generous and hospitable in the mindset of a good Christian. The means, however, with which he gains all that wealth soon turn out to be absurd and paradoxical.

4. Internal Contradictions

Der Stricker enjoys high respect among modern scholarship for his numerous literary experiments and efforts to move into new poetic territory, whether we think of his innovative Arthurian romance *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal* (ca. 1215) or his numerous verse narratives and fables. Even his recreation of Priest Konrad's *Rolandslied* as *Karl der Grosse* deserves full recognition (Böhm 1995; Classen 2021). In many respects, we can identify in Der Stricker's work the early emergence of rationality as a *modus operandi* for the protagonists (Classen 2022). His *Pfaffe Amîs* was also, apart from Heinrich der Glïchezâre's *Reineke Fuchs* (ca. 1180; Göttert 1976), a literary novelty, with a protagonist who operates as a rogue and causes much harm to his contemporaries, allegedly with the almost absurd

purpose to do good and to demonstrate Christian values pertaining to generosity and hospitality (Mahan 2023, pp. 234–36).

As the protagonist's title indicates, he is a priest, but he assumes many different roles when he travels around and operates in a political and economic context very independently from his ecclesiastical role and with highly selfish purposes. Stephen Wailes still argued that Der Stricker simply incorporated elements of ambiguity into his text (Wailes 1998), but I do not think that this captures the true issue explored by the poet.

Absurdity, as far-fetched as this might seem to be at first within the medieval context, is the dominant aspect here, which Der Stricker does not even intend to overcome because his protagonist actually causes it himself, and this very deliberately. Efforts to employ moral categories in investigating the *Pfaffe Amîs* are tenuous at best, especially because the narrative casts the protagonist as a worthy priest who, at the beginning, is innocently pursued by the envious bishop, who begrudges the lowly cleric's generosity and hospitality. In addition, Amîs subsequently orchestrates all his strategies in the name of his ideal of sharing all his goods with society at large, so he cannot be simply identified as an evil incarnate. Werner Röcke, however, claims:

"In beiden Fällen werden die innere Bereitschaft zum Guten oder Bösen und das äußere Zeichen unterschieden, der *muot* und das *guot*, Glauben und Werke. Wahrer Gottesdienst und wahrer Glaube erfordern eine innere Erneuerung, nicht eine noch so reiche Gabe. . .. Das wirkliche Opfer ist ein Opfer seiner selbst, nicht nur die nackte Zahlung." (Röcke 1987, p. 63) [In both cases, the inner readiness to do good or to pursue evil and the external sign are differentiated, the *muot* and the *guot*, faith and deeds. True service for God and true faith require an internal renewal/inspiration but not any donation irrespective of its value... The true victim is a victim of himself, not only the straight payment.]

It is, however, not Amîs's inclination or intention to act out an evil character when he deceives his contemporaries. After all, he still carries out all his plans with the 'good' intention to demonstrate generosity, to invite friends and others, and to be the best host possible, although there is no good explanation why he would have to act so profligately back home. As Röcke correctly observes, although the consequences he draws do not go deeply enough, "*milte* als Fest der Verschwendung an Gäste, Freunde, Gesinde, als anscheinend uneigennütziger Dienst am Nächsten, wird hier durch den rücksichtslosesten Egoismus erreicht" (Röcke 1987, p. 79, milte as a feast of free giving to guests, friends, and servants as a seemingly selfless service to the neighbor is achieved through the most reckless egoism). How can generosity be enacted and realized through the most brutal exploitation of others, that is, wealthy and completely innocent individuals, and this by a priest? Is there really evil incarnate at work as Röcke assumes (p. 80)? Can we truly claim that the text indicates a radical criticism of the entire world where all values have been lost and no ideals are of any relevance any longer because evil, in the Christian sense of the word, rules? The simple answer is 'no' because Amîs at the end joins a monastery, rises to the position of the abbot, donates his wealth to the monks, and is ultimately accepted by god in the afterlife as a saintly person (Der Stricker 1994, v. 2281).

In other words, is it really the utter "Verworfenheit der Welt" (Röcke 1987, p. 80; rottenness of the world)? It seems questionable to read Der Stricker's collection of jest narratives combined under the umbrella of one protagonist only in light of moral and religious criteria. Even though that would make good sense within the medieval context and the great dominance of the Christian Church, the narrative context appears to contradict that reading. After all, Amîs is a worthy priest; he demonstrates his intelligence and wit when he exposes the bishop's foolishness and selfishness; he constantly thinks about acquiring as much wealth as possible so that he can continue to display his generosity; and at the end, he even rises to the rank of an abbot and dies a worthy and good death.

It also does not make much sense to talk about "Weltklugheit" (worldly wisdom; cf. Kalkhofen 1989) because there is hardly any room in the narrative to identify a specific teaching about how to cope rationally or morally in this reality when Amîs, cast as an ideal character, primarily attempts to deceive, steal, rob, and cheat other people. It remains

highly questionable to talk here only about a funny, witty character who does his pranks to expose his foolish contemporaries in their naiveté and ignorance. Max Wehrli, however, still assumed that the text represents a "Schelmenromen, der den Stricker von einer ungewohnt heiteren und beweglichen Seite zeigt" (Wehrli [1980] 1997, p. 545; a jester novel that presents Den Stricker from an unusually jovial and flexible perspective).

5. Jests Gone Right and Jests Gone Sour

For a long time, the account of the Priest Amîs appear to be rather harmless and free of any conflicts in epistemological, moral, and ethical terms. We are not bothered by any paradoxes in the protagonist's actions. Of course, the priest faces the bishop's envy and even hatred because he spends his money so freely on other people. To discredit him, the bishop imposes seemingly impossible tasks on Amîs, who knows, however, to respond most skillfully and to make the bishop look rather foolish. Many subsequent authors of jest narratives (e.g., *Till Eulenspiegel*) copied that motif, but then it fit more smoothly into a uniformly satirical context that was the global target of social criticism. Der Stricker, however, can be mostly credited with having invented this kind of figure who operates enormously successfully in the world and knows how to avoid all rhetorical, political, and social traps set up by the authorities and others.

The narrator operates quite innocently in explaining why Amîs has to leave his home in England, namely, to gain new income, because he always remarks that he would need money for holding an open house for all his guests. It does not matter for a long time that he fools a variety of people and makes them believe in his deceptive strategies because they deserve to be exploited due to their ignorance and even foolishness, whether the women in a rural community whom he shames into donating much money or the members of the royal court in Paris, including the king, embarrassing them with the not-so-subtle charge of having been born out of wedlock, as bastards. Unwittingly, the king becomes a tool in Amîs's evil operation because he threatens all knights who would be exposed in their social status as having been an illegitimate child to withdraw their estates and hence to endanger their existence (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 583–84).

However, already when the rogue claims to the duke of Lorraine that he is the best medical doctor in the world, he begins to harm his fellow individuals, those who are badly sick and would really need sound medical treatment (for a number of parallel cases in late medieval literature, see Classen 2012b). Scaring them with the announcement that he would kill the one whom they all would identify as the sickest among them and use his blood to heal them, he manipulates all inmates of the hospital to swear that they are well and do not need medical help any longer (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 846–54). They are all so scared of this threat that they completely submit to Amîs's instructions and yet then get worse in their sickness than before, but by that time the fake doctor has long disappeared.

Der Stricker was one of the first to conceive of such a figure, and he badly undermined the general reputation of the medical profession at large. We observe here the first steps toward an ugly, vicious, and evil-spirited transformation of the fundamental values supporting society at large. However, the protagonist does not pursue his trickery with a truly evil intention; he only wants to gain more money and dupes both the duke and the sick in the hospital. No one dies, but they are all victims of his trickery, which rips the public appearance and especially reputation of an 'official' doctor apart.

Of course, Amîs comes out of this episode triumphantly, gaining a considerable amount of money, but the entire medical profession is ridiculed and the rational approach to healthcare badly undermined, which results in a disturbing sense of absurdity, at least for the poor victims. The narrator injects a brief comment intended to calm down his audience over this outrageous act of swindling, Amîs "wer mit kargen listen weis" (Der Stricker 1994, v. 924; was clever in handling those smart tricks). In reality, however, all trust in doctors and hospitals has been destroyed, and we are left, irrespective of the provoked laughter, with a deep sense of frustration about the mean and brutal strategy employed by this 'priest' who is completely reckless in engaging with suffering people and

abusing them for his own purposes. However, those purposes remain increasingly elusive and are nothing but pretenses for the rogue to play his pranks (as to the topical image of the rogue medical doctor, see Classen 2012b). Entertaining is now the name of the game, at least intradiegetically, whereas all previous claims that Amîs was collecting money to continue with his good deeds are really simply moot.

The episode with the peasant woman and her rooster works so well because she is naive and gullible in religious terms, and because Amîs knows fully how to abuse people's naivité and simplemindedness. However, whereas Till Eulenspiegel in Hermann Bote's jest narratives from the early sixteenth century operates as a simple village person without any religious or political claims, which make his pranks fairly harmless and undramatic, Amîs regularly draws on his authority as a priest and a quasi-holy man. This alleged charisma, however, is quickly exposed as a false claim and a selfish mask of no religious qualities, which ultimately leaves all his deeply confounded and despondent victims behind who no longer comprehend the world and are lost in a situation where nothing makes sense as it did before. It is no wonder that people consider him a "wissage" (Der Stricker 1994, v. 1066; prophet) whom they believe everything as if they were hypnotized or mesmerized, no longer able to think for themselves: "und geloubten ane wan,/swaz er in saite, daz wer war" (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 1056–57; and they believed him truly whatever he told them as truth).

Undoubtedly, the narrator comments in unmistakable terms that Amîs has turned into a perfect swindler and deceiver who knows extraordinarily well how to manipulate people and make them believe that he is a saint-like figure. The text clearly conveys extensive criticism of the stupidity and ignorance of the masses and highlights in strong terms the brilliance of this devious protagonist, who is certainly a clever rogue. It would be inappropriate to resort to the term 'absurdity' in these contexts because the poet projects Amîs's victims as foolish and deserving of their punishments.

The situation changes, however, when this priest turns to the eastern Mediterranean, where he aims at making his biggest coup by deceiving wealthy merchants, entirely disregarding all traditional values relevant for members of the Christian clergy. Whereas before he seemed to have targeted victims who do not really deserve much of our pity, when Amîs then attempts to gain true, vast wealth, he resorts to strategies that undermine the meaning of all human existence, creating anomie or absurdity. In particular, he engages with merchants and resorts to their form of communication and negotiation, and then he does nothing else but abuse the ethical principles upon which the merchants all rely; thus, he creates scenarios of complete chaos and a lack of rationality. This priest thus turns into a highly dangerous agent of meaninglessness, almost like a devil who deprives his victims even of the appearance of normalcy. However, as we have seen already, the epithet of 'devil' would not assist us in comprehending the epistemological processes at work here.

Amîs decides to turn into a 'capitalist' swindler, if not a criminal, who wants to gain huge profits instead of peddling in small donations from ignorant Christians who fall for every possible trick with fake relics. Even though he keeps his original intentions in mind to make his house back in England into a home for everyone who might be looking for hospitality (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 1344–45), the subsequent operations embark on a complete travesty of the world where nothing counts but deception and cheating. Amîs is the main protagonist of this transformation (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 1320–21), which has the ultimate effect of creating stunning absurdity that no one can resist (Ackermann 2008). After all, as he states himself, the ultimate purpose of his strategies no longer consists of establishing a solid fund for alms and benefices for the poor, but to gain a global reputation as an arch rogue the entire world would talk about in awe, disgust, horror, and fear (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 1346–50).

Has evil incarnate suddenly taken over, or is Amîs still driven by altruistic intentions? Considering that he then determines to turn into a fake merchant and to employ all his intellectual abilities to cheat others and deprive them, if possible, of their wealth, we find ourselves in an almost insurmountable paradox, laughing with, about, and despite the

protagonist. Even though he justifies in his mind the evil strategies with a reference to his house that is supposed to be world-famous for being a site of extreme hospitality (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 1344–45), Amîs emerges, as admitted by his own words, as completely obsessed with gaining a universal reputation as being the most astonishing individual: "daz man wunder da von saget" (Der Stricker 1994, v. 1349; they will tell wondrous stories about it). The episode with the western mason, a German Frank who lives in Constantinople and yet cannot speak the local language, marks the first step toward a new direction, recklessly and callously abusing individuals for his own intentions. The priest manages to convince him that he will be appointed as a new bishop and thus enjoy infinite authority and power. We need to remember here that Der Stricker enjoyed playing with the concepts of masquerading and illusions, self-deception, and playing with roles, as illustrated, for instance, in his other verse narratives (*Schwänke*), such as "Der begrabene Ehemann", "Der Gevatterin Rat", or "Der arme und der reiche König" (Der Stricker 1967, 1977). Since this mason is bald, Amîs has an easy time dressing him up as a fake bishop, who becomes a most convenient instrument in his hands to manipulate a wealthy trader in silks.

With a bishop in his tow who allegedly intends to reward all his friends and servants with valuable clothing at a festival planned for the near future, Amîs succeeds in convincing the merchant that he is trustworthy. Consequently, the latter allows all his textiles to be taken by the priest's aids, who store them in a ship with which he then can escape without having been recognized as what he really is—a cheater in big style. With the bishop as a pawn, so to speak, the merchant believes for three days that he will be paid for his valuable textile wares, but at the end he has to realize the bitter truth that both the poor mason and he himself have been deceived big time. Although he beats up the 'bishop' and almost would have killed him, this does not return the silks or produce the promised payment. Since the mason's previous employer then happens to appear, he can bring to light the terrible truth, and the result is that all goods are lost and thus much money. The merchant had royally treated this 'bishop' for three days in the assumption that he would be able to trust his rank and hence his wealth as a guarantee for the honest purchase.

We need to remember in this context that Amîs had originally suffered from his own jealous bishop, whom he had managed to outwit. In the current situation, the table is turned and a mason is outfitted as a presumptive bishop, which appears to signal that the poet thus undermined the entire institution of bishops and the higher Church administration since the miserable mason was only a puppet in a vicious game played by the protagonist to gain a vast treasure for himself.

In other words, as far as Der Stricker was concerned, bishops stood for political power and solid business practices, but not for spiritual authority. Neither the mason nor the merchant can be blamed for their failure to see through Amîs's trickery and showmanship, but both are badly victimized, as is the case in the previous and subsequent episodes. Fundamental trust, open communication, ethical principles, and the social contract are severely undermined by this 'evil' character, whom we cannot justify or even legitimate through his regular references to his desire to demonstrate endless *milte* or generosity in the Christian sense (this was still the main argument by Kolb 1974).

Of course, the entire episode serves, on the surface at least, to trigger laughter among the audience, but at closer analysis, we might choke about the situation as presented here because the victims must be pitied. While the mason was certainly dumb-witted, the merchant operated like all his fellows in that business, assuming that a worthy figure like a bishop would be a guarantee enough to allow all his goods to be transported away. Alison Williams, like most of her predecessors, still attempts to make sense out of the trickery played by Amîs, identifying the laughter caused by this rogue as having a "morally corrective function" (Williams 2000, p. 76). However, it remains rather elusive what 'correction' might be intended here or what shortcomings in society would need to be remedied since the merchant is not portrayed as an evil or deceptive character (Könneker 1970, p. 251).

The narrator does not really help us to comprehend the positive sides of Amîs's actions when he characterizes the priest's success in Constantinople as "heil" (Der Stricker 1994, v. 1821; blessing) and when he lets the protagonist comment to himself: "swer gut erwerben kan,/der wirt da schire ein richer man" (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 1827–28; Whoever can acquire goods there will truly become a rich man). There would not be any justification for labeling the Greek merchant as an evil person who would have deserved his massive loss. The mason was nothing but a willing pawn in Amîs's hands, naive and a glutton, and once his true identity has been revealed, he gets away without any further punishment. Altogether, it makes most sense if we recognize here the workings of a new world view determined by absurdity since neither the Christian faith nor secular mercantile principles come to the rescue. No authorities are called upon to retrieve the silk textiles, and the poor trader simply faces a huge loss of his fortune.

The next episode, *horribile dictu*, intensifies this sense of the absurd even further and shreds any doubts as to the almost nihilistic approach pursued by this amazingly daring and clever priest. Again, he turns toward Constantinople, where he dupes a wealthy merchant dealing with jewels and gemstones. Those have enormous monetary value and would be unaffordable for an ordinary person. However, Amîs plays the role of an equally wealthy trader who does not want to haggle for a long time over the price. However, whereas the Greek at first asks for 1000 marks for all of his treasures, Amîs offers only 600 (Der Stricker 1994, v. 1898), which seems to satisfy the former, who believes that the other man, who appears so self-assured and bold, could be trusted. Although he would like to receive the payment first before the wares are handed over, his trading partner insists that the innkeeper is the best person to weigh the silver that he would offer as payment. Moreover, he encourages the merchant to accompany him to his inn and to observe that the silver would be correctly weighed, for which he would pay him even extra. Amîs appears to be enormous wealthy and happily pays out money to avoid any delays in his business dealings. Thus, he manages to convince the merchant to come with him, while the gems are carried along by Amîs's servants.

The badly deceived merchant is immediately overpowered, fettered, and gagged, while the gems are taken to the ship for a speedy transport home. However, the situation gets much worse because Amîs pretends to a medical doctor that the victim is his beloved father who has lost his mind and fallen into a mental illness that would force him constantly to demand that he be paid for his goods: "Swaz man sprichet oder tut,/so heizet er im gelten" (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2008–09; Whatever one says or does, he responds with the demand to be paid). The priest resorts to the devious device of casting the victim as so deranged that he would constantly claim to live in that city and to own a house there (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2025–27). Since the doctor does not personally know the kidnapped merchant, he naively believes every word about the sick person and promises to heal this insane man (as to insanity in the Middle Ages, see the contributions to Muratore 2016 and to Eghigian 2017; for a global overview, see Scull 2015, pp. 48–85; for a literary analysis, see Huot 2003). This creates the perfect set-up for Amîs because it robs the merchant of any opportunity to explain or defend himself; every word he might utter is misread and interpreted as a clear sign of his ongoing madness. In addition, the doctor is bent on earning his salary fifty percent of which Amîs promises him to pay the next day, and the other fifty percent once the 'father' would be healed. Of course, this never happens either, and we can only conclude that this devious priest cheats every person he engages with and robs them of their property, leaving them all behind helpless, infuriated, and yet impoverished to an astonishing degree.

The poor merchant, however, finds himself caught in a true madhouse because he is exposed to harsh treatment by the doctor, who does not believe him at all whenever he asserts "daz er sinnik were" (Der Stricker 1994, v. 2102; that he was of a healthy mind). The victim is shaved and badly abused as part of the medical operation to heal this insanity. Because of Amîs's original setup, casting him as the insane grandfather, the miserable man can do nothing to convince the doctor otherwise. He offers bribes to him; he prays to God

and promises his loyal service; he begs that a messenger be sent to his friends, but "Swaz er sait, daz was ein wint./Er muste lîden als ein kint/allez, daz er im getet" (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2133–35; Whatever he said was spoken into the wind. He had to suffer like a child all that what he [the doctor] did to him).

In fact, the merchant has entered a torture chamber, from which there is no escape. In the morning, after many very painful operations, the two men engage in a short conversation, the result of which is nothing but more threats to inflict pain on the patient until he no longer claims that he is owed money from his 'son.' In fact, the doctor goes so far as to warn the merchant: "'. . . so daz ir die rede begebet,/oder ich quele euch, die wile ir lebet'" (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2165–66; until you stop saying this, or I will torture you until the end of your life). At this point, the helpless victim gives up and declares that he will not ask for his money back any longer. The physical pain has brought about this change of mind, although it is completely absurd and insane, with Amîs having been the one who matched up the doctor and the trader in this completely kafkaesque situation. Neither one is to blame for the horrible condition; the latter is rightly demanding to be paid, and the former is working hard to bring about a medically induced healing of the presumed insanity. In fact, the doctor praises the lord for having helped him overcome the patient's mental illness (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2171–72), and the end seems in sight.

However, in yet another twist into complete absurdity, when the doctor then learns from a servant that Amîs has left the country without his father, he gets so incensed that he threatens the merchant to gouge out his eyes as a punishment for their collective guilt. Only by offering a significant financial reward can he save his eyesight, and he is then allowed to send for his wife. She is completely confused when she sees her husband sitting there, naked and badly injured. She at first inquires about the huge payment for the jewels, but the merchant immediately warns her not to formulate that thought about the silver, otherwise she would be tortured likewise (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2217–18).

Even though he is finally freed and allowed to go home accompanied by his friends, he is still forced to pay the thirty marks as an honorarium for the doctor. That in itself would have to be considered completely outrageous and simply absurd, but since the doctor also works as the king's private physician (Der Stricker 1994, v. 2240), he has no other choice and grieves for the rest of his life over the great dishonor he had to suffer: "Des schamt er sich untz in sin grab" (Der Stricker 1994, v. 2244; He was ashamed of it until his death).

Sarcastically, the narrator then switches his perspective and indirectly praises Amîs for having made a healthy person into a sick one (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2245–47), acknowledging him for his generosity toward his friends and neighbors, and this for ten years. Only then does he turn his mind toward God, as if he should not have been required to do so before as a priest, leave worldly society, and join a Cistercian monastery. With his personal wealth, no one inquires about its origins; he richly endows the institution, and at the end, the monks elect him as their abbot.

Oddly, only now are we told: "Sich gebezzert alle sîn rat/und vleiz sich sere an rechte tat" (Der Stricker 1994, vv. 2277–78; his mind turned to goodness and he strove to do the best). Wrapping up this curious life story, the narrator finally emphasizes that Amîs gained God's praise and was welcomed by Him in the afterlife, as if all those horrendous acts to acquire wealth had not had any negative impact.

6. Conclusions

This outcome presents us with a profound paradox and a dilemma as to how to interpret this curious text, which obviously appealed considerably to the late medieval audience. Most puzzling appears to be the framework in which a pious, virtuous priest operates, using all his money, irrespective of how he has acquired it, to host many people, treating them very hospitably. However, as soon as he has defeated the envious bishop and has left home to find victims whom he can cheat out of their money, the individual situations become increasingly absurd and grotesque. For quite some time, the audience faces no real problem so it seems, to laugh about Amîs's pranks that are fairly harmless

and not really hurtful. However, once he has turned to Constantinople, where he swindles the two merchants out of most of their entire wealth, major questions arise that do not find good answers and force us to assume that the poet predicated his texts (or episodes) on the experience of absurdity. Particularly in the second case, the situation for the victim becomes extremely desperate since he would have almost been tortured to death. We still observe the workings of comedy, but the sarcasm and black humor certainly employed by the poet make any careful reader choke out of horror.

Der Stricker's successors, such as Hermann Bote (*Ulenspiegel*), certainly imitated or copied some of the facetious situations (Schilling 1994; cf. also Blume 2009), but Ulenspiegel/Eulenspiegel never really hurts his victims in any dangerous way. He soils their houses, he wastes or destroys food items, and he misreads instructions by way of following them verbatim, but we could not identify a sense of absurdity in Bote's stories about that rogue, as is certainly the case in *Der Pfaffe Amîs*. However, Der Stricker did not yet develop a full sense of absurdity; the traditional religious and political values and structures still exist, and the protagonist relies on them as well to carry out his various pranks.

However, each time Amîs stands to make a huge profit through cheating the merchants in Constantinople, he transgresses all traditional social and ethical norms and leaves the victim behind hopelessly lost in his misery and frustration, wrath and terror, shame and humiliation. We would have to confirm that the priest himself functions exceptionally well in the various worlds (court, urban center, rural community), and he does not slip out of the more or less rational framework of his own existence. Nevertheless, he leaves behind broken merchants who no longer comprehend the world and fear even operating in it because they have been so badly harmed and hurt.

Der Stricker did not criticize the merchant or urban class of his time, particularly because he has his protagonist operate in that function as well, and he also did not ridicule those wealthy merchants despite our laughter and mockery provoked by the narratives. Neither one would have failed under ordinary market conditions, but when confronted by the deception and manipulations, they fall into traps and are stunned in their realization that nothing makes sense any longer and that none of their money ensures that they can continue operating rationally in their respective markets. Amîs trumps them all and leaves behind psychologically and materially devastated individuals who have lost their fortune to this roguish thief whom they trusted too much and who thus become victims of his razor-sharp strategies of illusion and pretenses.

At first sight, of course, it seems dangerously anachronistic to talk about absurdity, or anomie, at least as perceived by the merchants in Constantinople within a medieval context. However, as our analysis has demonstrated, these poor victims lose all their wealth; they are furious but helpless, and they are also fearful of being victimized further. Amîs destroys those merchants, both materially and psychologically. Through their perspectives, a strong sense of the absurd enters the narrative stage, perhaps for the first time in the history of western medieval literature. It seems to go too far to assume that the poet himself recognized his world through that lens of the absurd. However, Der Stricker was innovative enough and ready to experiment with new genres, topics, narrative themes, and psychological experiences. The absurd makes its first appearances in this famous *Schwankbuch*, but then it took until the twentieth century for the absurd to return to theater stages and other literary platforms.

There are plenty of other literary works determined by irony, satire, sarcasm, and a strong sense of chaos throughout the Middle Ages. However, despite the often destructive and harmful plot developments, such as in the Old French *fabliaux* or the Middle High German *mæren*, and despite the growing interest in literary scatology, such as in the case of *Dil Ulenspiegel* or Michael Lindener's *Katzenpori*, absurdity itself does not yet seem to raise its head, except in Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs*.

Absurdity implies that not only the private existence becomes undermined by outside forces and then meaningless but the public norms, rules, and laws as well, as we can observe it intensively in twentieth-century drama. Pfaffe Amîs, by contrast, operates successfully

in his world and ends as a highly respected Cistercian abbot. However, behind the stage where his victims fall off, so to speak, or are left behind, being robbed of their property and psychologically badly damaged, the abyss of the absurd begins to loom large, especially once the curiously ambivalent protagonist has left the scene again and jubilates over his triumph achieved by means of his intellect, ruse, and trickery. He ruthlessly abandons them to their destiny, no longer capable of coping with this world because Amîs has destroyed their rational, communicative, and economic basis, as well as their trust in traditional ethical principles of mercantile activities. There are no authorities, no legal courts, and no members of the Church who would intervene, and the name of the game is only the priest's utmost deception and trickery.

In short, this priest who takes on the mask of a merchant proves to be a terrifying, uncanny character because he emerges as one of the earliest operators with the absurd, and this already in the late Middle Ages. When we then turn to *Dil Ulenspiegel* (ca. 1510/1511), social and cultural transgression continue to play a significant role, but there is no sense of an intellectual, moral, or ethical void, as irritated many of the victims prove to be since they are Eulenspiegel's butts of the joke (cf. Haupt 1978). In *Pfaffe Amîs*, by contrast, there is a much stronger, actually vicious strategy at play to eliminate the concepts of reality, reason, and rationality. Particularly, the second merchant in Constantinople is badly broken in body and spirit and has nothing left to comprehend or to operate in his world. It is a bad example of sarcasm when the victim of the joke is so decimated that he no longer dares to stand up, speak out, and continue with his previous existence (cf. the contributions to Baragona and Rambo 2018).

Recent research has intensively engaged with this major literary contribution by Der Stricker, but despite the emphasis on comedy, transgression, communication, and similar topics (Yun 2021), the emergence of the absurd seems to have been ignored, perhaps because the notion of anomie would not fit into the medieval mental framework. However, a priest who operates like Amîs, irrespective of his ultimate religious motivation to demonstrate unrestricted generosity and hospitality, crosses a certain taboo and leaves behind his own norms as an ecclesiastic.

Considering the extent to which Der Stricker experimented with various literary genres and themes, it does not really come as a surprise that he also invested in the notion of the absurd on a personal level, while the larger social and political framework still seems to be intact according to traditional norms. To be sure, Amîs does not fit into any specific social group or class; despite his rank as a priest, he does not assume that function apart from when he uses his sermons to deceive people. He pretends to be a merchant but is nothing but a swindler; he explores the world like a knight but lacks all the relevant attributes (for a structural analysis, see Melters 2004, pp. 109–18). Depending on the specific circumstances, he assumes whatever mask he might need, but in the end, the narrative suggests that the protagonist disappears as a cameo appearance, leaving behind a world he has exposed in its absurdity. In short, he travesties traditional courtly society and also threatens the existence of the newly emerging bourgeois class, which allows him to abuse all wealthy people and endanger their lives by way of removing rationality and meaning from under their feet. Thus, we might call him the first protagonist in western literature who approached Pandora's box of absurdity and who opened it at least temporarily for some of the episodes in *Pfaffe Amîs*. It would be hard to identify any parallel figure in the literature from the following centuries. To be sure, Der Stricker deserves great respect for his readiness to experiment with genres, topoi, themes, motifs, and even the most irreverent concepts. While Reinhart Fuchs in Heinrich der Glîchezâre's version operated as a brutal criminal free of any moral compunctions or ethical concerns (ca. 1170/1180), Pfaffe Amîs appears almost as the medieval forerunner of Mephistopheles in the famous *Historia D. Johann Fausten* from 1587) (cf. Rohde et al. 2018). The epithet 'absurd' seems to capture this case surprisingly well.

If our argument withstands criticism, then we can proceed and investigate to what extent other medieval poets had also played with the notion of the 'absurd,' such as the

Spanish poet Juan Ruiz in his famous *Libro de Buen Amor* (ca. 1330) (cf. Martínez Pérez 1991). In many ways, Der Stricker appears to have invented a new literary concept, the absurd, when he experimented with this unique genre. The work's considerable popularity far into the late Middle Ages suggests, however, that most audiences did not yet command our post-modern sensitivity to recognize the devastating events described, especially in the latter half of this remarkable if not shocking verse narrative. In fact, they would have been horrified to realize what we have discovered in the text.

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