

1898

Der arme Heinrich and the Golden Legend

Sarah Estelle Arnold
University of Rhode Island

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lippitt_prize



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arnold, Sarah Estelle, "Der arme Heinrich and the Golden Legend" (1898). *Student and Lippitt Prize essays*. Paper 61.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lippitt_prize/61http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lippitt_prize/61

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student and Lippitt Prize essays by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

Der Arme Heinrich and The Golden Legend.

Sarah E. Arnold,

June 14, 1898.

Der Arme Heinrich and The Golden Legend.

Hartmann von Aue ranks among the greatest German poets of the Middle Ages. He was an educated man of noble poetic gifts and his story of Der arme Heinrich has been called "one of the most genuine and charming poems of the mediæval period." It is an epic, and is written in the easy flowing narrative measure of the twelfth century.

The story in brief is as follows. A nobleman becomes afflicted with leprosy; and upon consulting an eminent doctor, is told that only the willing sacrifice of a pure maiden's life will effect a cure. A peasant girl, the daughter of a tenant, learns of this wise physician's verdict, and her religious faith is such that she resolves to die for her lord. The offer is at first refused but after much pleading, the child's object is gained and the journey to Salerno, the residence of the doctor, is made. The physician, assured that her act is purely voluntary, raises the knife. Just at this critical moment Heinrich refuses to allow her life to be taken, and the sacrifice is prevented. He is miraculously cured of all ills, and the narrative closes with the mar-

riage of the maiden and Heinrich.

Nearly seven centuries later, our own Mr. Longfellow wrote a dramatic trilogy by name of Christus; the theme of which is the various aspects of Christianity in the Apostolic, Middle, and Modern Ages. The Golden Legend occupies the second part and is based on the poem of Der arme Heinrich. It represents that phase of Christianity called Faith.

In a comparative study of the poems one must consider the affliction, the remedy suggested, and the sacrifice so nearly consummated. Concerning the nature of the affliction, Hartmann von Aue tells us that Henry suffered from actual leprosy, which made him unpleasant to look upon. But in the Golden Legend the character of the disease is merely suggested, and we are left to draw our own conclusions as to the real trouble. It seems to have been a suffering both physical and mental. Prince Henry himself speaks of it thus

"A smouldering, dull perpetual flame,
As in a kiln, burns in my veins,
Sending up vapors to the head."

In both poems the affliction is due to some sin in the past. Heinrich, rich in his ancestral estates and in every worldly virtue, was spiritually poor, believing that all good things might be had without God. and so his punishment was sent. The effect is treated in much the same manner by both poets. The victim shuns everyone and is avoided by all; his nearest relative will have nothing to do with him and life becomes a burden. Heinrich seeks solitude in a farmhouse inhabited by one of his own tenants. But in the case of Prince Henry we are told, in a scene between two of his friends, that after this disease came upon him and he shunned companionship, he was sent forth in disgrace by the priests, who had failed to exorcise the evil influence, and was condemned to remain as one dead. He then sought refuge in the household of a tenant. There he is cared for by the farmer and his wife; for companionship he has the daughter of the house, who cheers him with her heart-felt sympathy and loving care.

It is interesting to note that the remedy is suggested to the unfortunate man in both poems in the same manner.

Both authors have the hero travel to Salerno to consult wise doctors only to learn that he is "curable yet incurable." The German poet has the heroine, whom he never mentions by name, a child of eight years, hear of this impossible remedy from the afflicted Heinrich himself, while Longfellow renders this portion of the story more modern by the dialogue between father and mother; and it is from her father's lips that Elsie, a maiden of fifteen, learns of the only cure for their benefactor.

Henry seeks for no victim to his own love of life, but is utterly discouraged by the doctor's advice. It makes him sad; still he tells no one of this remedy until questioned about it. Hartmann von Aue has the little maid hear of it by this means. She retires to think over what she has heard: and it takes such strong possession of her mind that she dreams of it day and night, until finally the marvelous resolution is formed. She will die for him. Hartmann von Aue tries in every way to make this appear not impossible. He dwells on the religious faith of the young girl and her love for her parents. She thinks that if Heinrich should die, his successor might be a hard landlord. She reasons that her life is of no value compared with that of so great

a man as Heinrich, and again she wishes to follow her Saviour's example. Mr. Longfellow makes this scene a little more credible in some respects. The heroine is older, and she thinks the sacrifice is required of her; she seems to see the hand of God in it, beckoning her to follow him. In vain the parents plead and coax; she argues well and a miracle follows. At last they give their consent to her death. Joyfully she hurries to Heinrich, but here she encounters another difficulty. He refuses to listen to her pleading. After much reasoning his love of life conquers his nobler self, and the offer is accepted. Longfellow treats this portion of the narrative in a different way. Henry takes the subject in question to the church, and it receives the sanction of the priest. The consent of the church, however, is obtained by fraud. Satan assumes the character of the priest; and it is this Evil Spirit that advises the prince to accept the terrible sacrifice, thinking to get control of his soul by this means.

Then follows the journey of the prince and maiden to Salerno and the interview with the doctor; here again Satan

has preceded them and awaits his intended victim. The doctor of the twelfth century seems to accept the offering of the maiden's life as a matter of course. Being sure that it is certainly self-sacrifice on her part and not compulsion, he feels perfectly free to further this desire of her heart. He hesitates at first, because he is not willing to act in the matter unless it is to effect a cure. His victim's eagerness leaves him no longer in doubt.

The consummation of the sacrifice intolerable to a person in his right mind in our day was accepted as a matter of possible occurrence in the twelfth century. In der arme Heinrich the entire story is clearly one of the Middle Ages. There is an artlessness, an atmosphere of simple credulity about the poem which stamp it as mediaeval. In fact we know that the poem was based on an old story intimately associated with the family history of the feudal lords Von Aue.

The Modern poet in reviving mediaeval Christianity to depict the power of faith has succeeded in a difficult task. To this end he brings in the Crusaders and the street

preaching of the monks common at that time. The idea of having Satan assume the character of Lucifer and appear on earth adds greatly to the mediaeval air of the poem, so strong was the belief of the Middle Ages in a personal devil. The Miracle-Play is from the drama of the Middle Ages, founded on the Old and New Testaments. What could be more striking and beautiful than the description of the scenes in the child Jesus' life? The poet endeavors to show that existence in a monastery was not necessarily peace. Nor were the monks free from the wiles of Satan.

The crudities of mediaeval faith may sometimes provoke a smile in these later times; but so long as good shall continue to triumph over evil, the beauty and worth of self-sacrifice--be it for kinsman, friend, fatherland, or humanity--shall receive a tribute of praise.

Sarah E. Arnold.