



Ulrich Bonerius –
A Swiss-German
Boccaccio?
Fourteenth-Century
Literary Synergies

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Abstract The Dominican priest from Bern, Ulrich Bonerius, composed his collection of fables, *Der Edelstein*, at exactly the same time when Boccaccio created his collection of tales, *Decameron*, 1350. Even though there is no direct evidence of any kind of personal contacts between these two poets, the strong similarities between both works in formal and conceptual terms prove to be striking. This article illustrates the reasons why we would be justified to call Bonerius, more than just playfully, a German-language Boccaccio, since he created the first major compilation of narratives (in verse), framed by a prologue and an epilogue, in the history of late medieval German literature. While Boccaccio has ten story-tellers entertain each other over ten days (ten stories per day = 100) reflecting on eroticism, love, adventures, or anti-clericalism, Bonerius offers one hundred didactic fables illustrating human failings, shortcomings, and vices. Both contemporaries thus aimed at criticizing and improving their society through surprisingly similar literary means. Bonerius thus emerges as one of the most important fourteenth-century poets in the German tongue who deserves to be placed close to Boccaccio.

Keywords Ulrich Bonerius; Giovanni Boccaccio; fables; entertaining prose narratives; late Middle Ages; Swiss-German medieval literature; comparative literature; literary framework

In contrast to the situation in the history of medieval German literature, the fourteenth century witnessed an enormous flourishing of Italian literature, with such luminaries as Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Francesco Petrarch emerging as the leading voices of their time, culture, and language, though each one quite differently from the others. As Natalino Sapegno famously formulated,

Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch are three poetical worlds, three epochs of cultural history and aesthetic progress, so profoundly different from each other and in certain aspects, even antithetical, who succeed and overlap each other in such a brief span of years within the frame of the same civilization that they helped to establish

and characterize with their ingeniousness, suddenly placing it at the apex of all European culture and literature by imposing upon it the role of director and guide (Sapegno 2016: 2).

There is no doubt that these three poets indeed created a new platform which was to become a pilot light for western literature ever since. While Dante certainly accomplished, with his *Divina Commedia* (completed ca. 1320), the crowning achievement of late medieval literature, both Boccaccio and Petrarch, while still being grounded in the previous cultural period, laid the foundation for what we generally call the Italian Renaissance, as much as this term has been problematized in recent years (Lasansky 2017). They were the driving forces of a major paradigm shift, though we could certainly not naively claim that Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) or Petrarch's famous letter to his friend Francesco Dionigi in Borgo San Sepolcro about his ascent of Mont Ventoux (1336; later included in the *Familiarium rerum libri IV 1*) all by themselves were the signal posts of the modern age (*Paradigm Shifts during the Global Middle Ages and the Renaissance* 2019).

Boccaccio drew much from Old French *fabliaux* and other sources and adapted them for his own purposes (Lee 1909; cf. now Classen, "German-Italian Literary Connections," 2020), which later appealed to countless other late medieval writers, including Geoffrey Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1400; Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptaméron*, 1558/1559). Petrarch profoundly predicated his reflections about the spectrum below his eyes seen from the top of the mountain on St. Augustine's *Confessiones*. He began to read in them just after he had turned his eyes away from the wide landscape below him at the very crucial moment when it seemed as if the early modern person was born taking in nature as it was in an open-minded and realistic fashion (Classen, "The Discovery of the Mountain," 2013). Nevertheless, none of that backward-turning would diminish their outstanding contributions to Italian literature, making them both, along with Dante, to the stars in the sky of fourteenth-century European poetry, as has been long established by scholarship over more than two hundred years (Sapegno 2016: 156–93).

In other countries or language areas, by contrast, the situation does not appear as impressive, although it would be a false assumption that consequently the literary annals of France, England, Spain, or Germany were

only poorly developed during that period. Nevertheless, there are some odd discrepancies between, on the one hand, the developments at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the early fifteenth century, on the other. When we think of England, we would normally refer, above all, to William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the anonymous poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and then Geoffrey Chaucer, all flourishing at the end of the fourteenth century, whereas earlier works, which were composed either in Anglo-Saxon (*Beowulf*) or in Anglo-Norman (Marie de France), date from a much earlier period. In Spain, Don Juan Manuel's *Tales of Count Lucanor* did not appear until 1335, and Juan Ruiz's *El libro de buen amor* was completed around 1330 (expanded until 1343).

In the German-speaking lands, numerous known or anonymous poets created verse narratives, a genre which flourished throughout the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, with Heinrich Kaufringer being one of the most active ones around 1400 (*Europäisches Spätmittelalter* 1978; *Deutsche Versnovellistik des 13. bis 15. Jahrhunderts* (DVN), Vol. 5, 2020). Parallel to secular literature, we witness the rise of mystical literature, especially the famous sermons and meditations by Meister Eckhart, and the visions by Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Seuse (Suso). Nevertheless, the fourteenth century seems not to have been the most fertile ground for secular lay poets writing in German who could be compared to Boccaccio or Petrarch (*A New History of German Literature* 2004; this resulted in an interesting, though rather incomplete and subjective literary-historical account). Virtually no major romances or heroic epics were composed since ca. 1300; instead, the public interested in literature relied increasingly on compilations of older works (*Heldenbuch*) and on the short verse narrative (*mære*) (Janota 2004: 462–63). The new emphasis seems to have rested on liturgical plays (Easter, Passion, Corpus Christi, Christmas), allegorical chess treatises, dance of death poems, sermons, and religious narratives (*Reimpaargedichte, Drama, Prosa* 1987).

To qualify and reassess this general impression, here I intend to discuss the Swiss-German author of fable literature, Ulrich Bonerius, whose *Edelstein* (Gemstone) appeared at just about the same time as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, ca. 1350, and which can be identified as the foundation for an innovative effort to produce larger literary works once again (Grubmüller, "Boner,")

1978). This would thus contradict the common assessment of the situation in fourteenth-century German literature (see above). Even though both the Italian and the German collection of narratives are determined by numerous striking parallels and similarities, there has not yet been any effort to carry out a comparison regarding shared concepts, values and ideas. Research has mostly examined nothing but Boccaccio's subsequent influence on late medieval German literature (Bertelsmeier-Kierst/Stiller 2015; Bennewitz, ed., 2015), as if there was only a one-way street.¹

While it would be rather speculative, if not even risky, to argue that these two poets might have known each other personally and thus might have exchanged ideas about their literary projects, it still promises to be a very productive effort to place both works next to each other and to consider what to make of the stunning proximity of these two pieces of literature, both functioning as major innovations in the field of literature south and north of the Alps, and this virtually simultaneously, whether in correspondence with each other or not. It is not inconceivable that Boccaccio could understand German; or that he had learned about Dominican preachers in Italy using Bonerius's literary material. At any rate, we will observe that the *Decameron* and the *Gemstone* prove to be intriguingly parallel in design, structure, and purpose.

There is a wealth of research on Boccaccio, both in print and online, especially on his *Decameron*, which he completed more or less at the end of the Black Death in Florence, using his literary project as an explicit response to it, as his prologue clearly outlines.² In fact, the experience with that pandemic provided him with the narrative framework to create this collection of tales, with seven ladies and three knights spending their time

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- 1 The impact of high medieval French literature, such as the *fabliaux*, on fourteenth-century Italian literature has been examined much more robustly, and also with very good reasons; see, for instance, Brown 2014: 125–62. Still very valuable are until today: Bartoli 1876; Landau 1971.
 - 2 Very useful for teaching and research proves to be Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, trans. and ed. by Wayne A. Rebhorn, 2016; for an overview of some of the relevant research, see the contributions to Barański/Gilson 2015.

outside of the city on some of their estates, telling each other ten stories per day over a period of ten days.³

The situation with Bonerius, as he calls himself (in modern research he is commonly identified as ‘Boner’), is quite different since we know very little about him and can only confirm that he was a Dominican preacher in Bern active until ca. 1350.⁴ As far as I can tell, this author does not include any reference to the Black Death, though this pandemic also raged through Switzerland. His fable collection, *Der Edelstein*, seems to have appealed to his audience first through oral channels since none of the manuscripts containing them date from earlier than the late fourteenth century. However, subsequently, these fables became a great publication success, with thirty-six manuscripts extant (at least until the end of the nineteenth century, one lost due to a fire) containing his narratives in verse, in total or in part, some dating from as late as the early sixteenth century. Bonerius’s work was also one of the first books in the western world ever printed, produced by Albrecht Pfister in Bamberg in 1461.

Bonerius’s popularity began to fade only at the end of the fifteenth century when other fable authors began to overshadow him (starting with Heinrich Steinhöwel, 1476). In the age of the Protestant Reformation, the genre of fables was also greatly favored, but Bonerius’s work was increasingly replaced by new publications, those then mostly determined by Protestant values and ethics (Blackham 1965; Dicke and Grubmüller 1987; Dithmar 1988/1997); Rubin and Sells 1993; Coenen 2000). Nevertheless, altogether we can affirm that his *Edelstein* represented a major milestone in fourteenth-century German-language literature, drawing from the ancient and early medieval tradition of fables (Aesop, Avianus, Romulus [Anonymous Neveleti]), and providing great inspiration for fable authors in the early modern age⁵.

3 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*. Ed. Vittore Branca, 1987); for an English trans., see Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. Trans., intro., and notes by G. H. McWilliam 1995; for recent scholarship, see the contributions to Holmes/Stewart 2018.

4 Mitzka 1955; online at: <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118661418.html#ndbcontent>. No further biographical references about Bonerius have been unearthed since then.

5 Ulrich Boner, *Der Edelstein*, 2016. I have translated all of Bonerius’s fables into English, which appeared in print in 2020 with Cambridge Scholars Publishing. For a

Numerous scholars during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century paid great respect to Bonerius as a major intermediary in the long history of fable literature, whether we think of Christian F. Gellert, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Bodmer and Johann Breitingen, Johann Joachim Eschenburg, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Georg Friedrich Benecke, or Franz Pfeiffer.⁶

Recent literary historians have also given Bonerius much credit, and yet, he remains a somewhat unknown figure within the ‘canon’ of medieval German literature, certainly not figuring among the ‘classical’ poets from that period.⁷ Specialists regularly praise him for his advocacy of individual freedom outside of the feudal bonds, for his encomiastic references to urban life – a rather questionable reading – his intelligent balancing of narration and teaching, his ethical and moral advice, and his emphasis on intelligent and considerate behavior.⁸ Mostly, however, he is only mentioned in passing, being politely acknowledged for his literary accomplishments as a fabulist (Cramer 1990: 116).

more detailed analysis of Bonerius’s fable within the literary-historical context, see Wright 2001: 107–31.

- 6 Classen, “Lessing als Philologe“, 1987. The most significant study of Bonerius’s fables to date is the monograph by Grubmüller, *Meister Esopus* 1977; but see also Elschenbroich 1990. In the introduction to my English translation of Bonerius’s fables I discuss at length the early history of philological research on this fable author.
- 7 He is not mentioned once by name in Toepfer 2019. Even in the eighth, revised and expanded edition, Gero von Wilpert (1955) 2001: 254–55, Bonerius appears only in passing, as if he did not matter at all.
- 8 Wehrli (1980) 1997: 720–22; Janota 2004: 300–03. Neither Wehrli nor Janota seem to have studied Bonerius’s fables in detail because their comments are extremely superficial and, at closer analysis, outright wrong. When Bonerius uses the epithet of ‘*kluogheit*,’ he mostly does not even mean what these two scholars assume, ‘intelligence,’ so they seem to ignore the poet’s employment of Bernese dialect. Janota emphasizes, for instance: “da er auf die *kluogheit* und Urteilkraft der Menschen setzt” (302). In fable no. 20, for instance, the little dog impresses its master not because it is ‘intelligent’ (‘*kluog*’) but because it has learned to perform little tricks (“*kluogheit*,” 4). In fable no. 48, the abbess is characterized with being ‘*kluog*,’ which means here, very differently, ‘educated,’ or ‘well trained,’ perhaps ‘cultured.’ In fable no. 81, ‘*kluogheit*’ means ‘external attractiveness,’ ‘smart appearance,’ but certainly not ‘cleverness’ or ‘intelligence.’ Granted, in his prologue, Bonerius highlights the value of “*kluogheit*” (66), which here certainly means ‘wisdom,’ but this is often not the case in the later usage of that word.

One reason for this almost problematic perception of this author might be that Bonerius drew heavily from his Latin sources with their commentaries (Avianus, Romulus), instead of creating his own fables, here disregarding some exceptions. As Aaron Wright observes, for instance, “it seems certain that Ulrich Boner’s source for his Avian fables was a school manuscript with a full prose commentary, its prose reductions generally close to the verses of the Roman poet, but with occasional additions and deviations that have in turn left discernible traces in the vernacular texts of the *Edelstein*” (Wright 2001: 122–23).

But most medieval vernacular poets prided themselves for having drawn in such a learned fashion from older, highly authoritative sources, and Bonerius was not an exception to this rule (Wehrli 1984: 92–107). However, in virtually every fable the author injects his own reading and develops remarkable comments reflecting his personal views about people’s behavior, weaknesses, or failures. Above all, three factors – continuation of the ancient Aesopian tradition, copying closely his Latin sources (Avianus and Romulus), and the strongly didactic intention of his fables – might have turned most modern readers away from Bonerius, which troubles and blurs our understanding of fourteenth-century German literature considerably, perhaps because it is too much predicated on erroneous assumptions and expectations concerning fable literature.⁹ To be sure, there is no German Boccaccio, and there were no trends toward a more modern approach in developing fictional accounts in the vein of this early Renaissance writer.¹⁰ But maybe we could, or should, count Bonerius among the true, but hitherto somewhat overlooked literary giants of his day and age; hence, we could call him the very gemstone which the rooster disregards so infamously in the first fable of his collection. As the poet himself comments:

9 Bonerius’s name also does not appear in Bennewitz/Müller 1991. Moreover, the entire genre of fables is not included in this volume at all. We might have to count Bonerius’s *Edelstein* among the “Vergessene Texte des Mittelalters,” as Nathanael Busch and Björn Reich 2014, entitled their volume of essays. There are many other literary histories in German or English which do not mention him, or which pay only lip service to him.

10 With respect to Heinrich Kaufringer (fl. ca. 1400), I have argued the opposite, however: Classen 2013.

Dis bîschaft sî geseit
 dem tôren, der sîn kolben treit,
 der im ist lieber denn ein rîch.
 dem tôren sint al die gelîch,
 die wîsheit, kunst, êr unde guot
 versmâhen durch ir tumben muot. (24–29)

[This fable serves as a symbol of the ignoramus who carries his fool's stick, which he prefers over a kingdom. All of those resemble the fool who dismisses wisdom, the arts, honor, and material goods out of a foolish mind.]

In order to examine and confirm this claim, it proves to be highly useful to return to Boccaccio's *Decameron* and to endeavor a comparison between both works, even though the Italian author did not compose fables and the German poet did not write prose narratives primarily for entertaining purposes. Previous scholarship has understandably considered the Swiss-German poet only within the tradition of the genre of fables. After all, Bonarius was not at all the only fabulist of his time, whether we think of Medieval Latin, Medieval French, Middle High German, or any other literary history. Gerhard von Minden, in his so-called *Wolfenbütteler Äsop* from 1370, combined 125 fables; the Nuremberg *Prosa-Äsop* from the early fifteenth century, 63 fables, the Leipzig *Äsop*, after 1419, 90 fables, the Magdeburg *Äsop*, ca. 1400–1410, 101 fables, Heinrich Steinhöwel's *Äsop*, 1476/1477, 160 fables, and the Wrocław (Breslau) *Äsop*, 1461, went far beyond all of those. Only Bonerius opted exactly for 100 fables and thus created, carefully crafted, a very systematic framework for his collection (Stange 2016: 411; Wright 201: 154–56). Both the prologue and the epilogue confirm precisely what his intention with this collection aimed for, although the complete set of fables is contained in one manuscript alone, Strassburg, Stadtbibliothek, Joh. Bibl. Ms. A 87, fol. 5r–122v (15th c.), which burnt in the fire of 1870. Fortunately, Breitinger had published a complete reprint in 1757. Two

other manuscripts, both in Heidelberg (cpg 400 and cpg 794) and beautifully illuminated, contain 99 fables (Stange 2016).¹¹

Why would a comparison with Boccaccio's *Decameron* even suggest itself, apart from the fact that both the Italian author and Bonerius completed their respective works at exactly the same time? Let us focus first on what was so unique about the *Edelstein*, both within the tradition of fable literature and within the history of late medieval German literature, before we proceed with the comparison. Bonerius was the first Middle High German poet to create a systematically developed collection of fables contained within the framework of a prologue and an epilogue, which has been duly noted by those scholars working with his texts, but which has been mostly overlooked by others examining the global impact of literary frame cycles.¹²

Most of his fables prove to be considerably longer than those by his predecessors, and he always added an epimythium to all of them, that is, a moral lesson addressing the audience and providing fundamental teaching about human failures and shortcomings. Of course, this is, in essence, the core intention of all fables throughout history, whether characteristic animals figure in the tales or not – Bonerius included a number of narratives where animals do not act in place of humans (seventeen altogether). Throughout the entire *Edelstein*, we hear the poet's voice loud and clear ridiculing the ignorant, boorish, and foolish person, whereas the virtuous and intelligent, but also humble and wise individual gains the highest respect.

In many ways, we can discover in Bonerius's fables a reflection of the Seven Deadly Sins, either by themselves or even in groups (Bloomfield 1952; Newhauser/Ridyard 2012; Tucker 2015). Clearly, the author, as a preacher, here had the many shortcomings of his contemporaries in mind and intended

11 Stange 2016: 412; for a complete list of all manuscripts, see <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/1763> (last accessed on Aug. 14, 2020). See also Boner, *Der Edelstein (Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität Basel, Handschrift A N III 17)*, 1987; online at: <https://www.omifacsimiles.com/brochures/cima04.pdf> (last accessed on Aug. 14, 2020). In the introduction to my English translation, I have carefully examined the entire manuscript tradition of the *Gemstone* and also discussed the various contents of each one manuscript as far as possible without autopsy.

12 See, for example, the contributions to Kleinschmidt/Japp 2018. Bonerius is not even mentioned by name.

to confront them with examples mostly from the world of animals as mirrors of their own failures. Undoubtedly, he did not think highly of women and actually revealed a strong dose of misogyny, at least in some fables, whereas in others he pays considerable respect for virtuous women, all depending on the circumstances, allowing dialectical positions to enter his own world view. Nevertheless, as Klaus Grüb Müller strongly confirmed, the entire collection of fables in the *Edelstein* reflects a “planvollen Aufbau” (a well-organized structure) (Grüb Müller, *Meister Esop* 1977, 11).

On this basis we can examine more in detail what the parallels with Boccaccio’s *Decameron* might consist of. It would be fruitless to search for possible direct connections between both poets, although there is now some evidence that Boccaccio might have been at least familiar with some Middle High German verse narratives which he appears to have utilized for the development of some of his own stories (Classen, “German-Italian Literary Connections,” 2020). Whether his contacts might also have included the Bernese Dominican priest Bonerius, only future research will be able to determine.

In his epilogue, the author firmly states that “hundert bîschaft hab ich geleit / an diz buoch, die nicht bekleit / sint mit kluogen worten” (9–11; I have placed hundred fables in this book which have not been formulated with sophisticated words). However, as much as he resorts to the humility formula so well known in the Middle Ages – “einvalt an allen orten / und ungezieret sint mîn wort” (12–13; my words are simple everywhere and not artistic) – he definitely insists on the validity of his teachings, strongly suggesting that even a small garden such as his *Edelstein* might yield great fruit. Of course, as he also laments – another rhetorical strategy – such straightforward messages do not meet with much approval in his world. However, those who would really need to learn from a good advisor and yet are either unwilling to do so or not able to comprehend would thus also not profit from an elegantly developed narrative (23–24).

Bonerius openly explains that he had translated his fables from Latin into German (41–42), which was a very common strategy throughout the Middle Ages. Fifty-three of his narratives were borrowed from the Anonymous Neveleti (Romulus), and twenty-seven from Avianus. Twenty-two fables can be traced to a variety of sources, including the *Alphabetum Narrationum*, Jacques de Vitry’s *Sermones*, Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina clericalis*, Odo of

Cheriton's *Liber paraboliarum*, and the anonymous *Gesta romanorum*. Four of his fables – nos. 43, 49, 53, and 99 – might have been his own creations (Stange 2016: 409). Altogether, as we can observe, the *Edelstein* is not simply a work of translations; each time Bonerius concludes with the plot of the tale, he continues with his own interpretation, so we face a complex intradiegetic structure which deserves a closer examination within the larger context of fourteenth-century European literature, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

The prologue outlines in great detail how the poet approaches his task and what the intention of this collection of fables might be. Insofar as not all stories contained in this collection follow the generic framework of fable literature, especially because only human figures appear and interact with each other, we need to keep in mind that Bonerius was rather creative in his method after all. This invites further investigation as to the parallels with Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Both literary works are structured in exactly the same way, generally speaking, with hundred stories framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The number hundred was obviously of great symbolic significance, as Dante's *Divina Commedia* had indicated already (Singleton 1977; Cogan 1999; Robey 2000; see also the contributions to Barański/Gilson 2019). There, the 14,233 verses are divided into three cantiche (singular cantica) – *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise) – the last two of which each comprising 33 cantos. *Inferno* consists of 34 cantos, but the first canto is generally accepted as a kind of prologue. This confirms the deliberate use of the number 100 most explicitly (Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Musa. Vol. I, 1984: 43). The Bible contains numerous references to the number 100 as well, and we find it used in a variety of other religious and philosophical texts from the Middle Ages, especially in the combination of 99 + 1.¹³ Thus, Boccaccio's reliance on 100 for his *Decameron* does not surprise us, especially considering his great fascination with Dante's *Divina Commedia*. (Boccaccio, *Life of Dante* 2002; Martellotti 1983). If, then, the structure of using 100 parts for one work, both in the *Divina Commedia* and in the *Decameron*,

13 <https://www.biblestudy.org/bibleref/meaning-of-numbers-in-bible/100.html>; for number symbolism in general, see Meyer 1975; Meyer and Suntrup (1987) 1999; Betz 1989: 160; Iffrah (1986) 1991: 53–59; Werlitz 2000: 300–01.

matters so centrally, then Bonerius's reliance on this framework, as the only one in the rich tradition of fable literature, carries considerable meaning. It is a definite possibility that this Swiss preacher, highly learned and well read, was familiar with Dante's masterpiece as well, or perhaps, which would be really intriguing, but impossible to prove, Bonerius had contacts with Boccaccio, and both exchanged among themselves specific ideas how to develop a major collection of entertaining and didactic narratives at the same time, both aiming for public entertainment and teaching (*delectare et prodesse*, Horace). Unfortunately, we know very little about the preacher's background and activities, which were documented only a few times in Bern documents (Janota 2004: 300–01). Hence, for our analysis, we can only rely on the primary works, the *Decameron* and the *Gemstone*.

In his prologue, “Von dem anvange diss buoches,” Bonerius begins with a strong praise of God whom no one would be able fully to understand (15) because He appears as ineffable (17). However, the poet pleads with Him to help people pursue a life free of sinfulness. The poet desires for himself and his audience virtues and honor (26) and believes that the power of fables lies in their ability to strengthen one's mind to aspire for those values: “an tugenden und an sælekeit” (28; virtues and bliss). An effective fable would achieve the goal of calming down and cultivating a wild man (35), it would help women to improve their behavior (36), and support young and old in their daily lives (37).

He explains that he set down to the task of translating these fables from Latin to German out of love for his patron, Johann von Riggerberg (43–45) and because he wanted to protect himself from the danger of excessive leisure and boredom (50). People face severe challenges regarding their virtues and spirituality coming from the own bodily needs, the devil, and the world itself, which make it impossible to do good deeds (52–53). Bonerius dismisses the danger he might face coming from those who could mock or deride him with evil words because even individuals whom he regards as much superior than himself in terms of inner qualities have often been victimized by evil rumors and direct criticism (56–59). In short, this poet is fully aware of the cantankerous nature of people and knows only too well that no one would ever be spared mean comments and criticism where none would be deserved. Obviously, as his remarks indicate, society has declined

in its ethical standards because there are no limitations on vile and vicious behavior, as expressed most explicitly through mean-spirited words directed even against those with the best intentions (60–62).

He wants to achieve the development of wisdom (66) and a joyful mind (67) by means of a close reading of his fables, so he alerts his readers about how important it would be to move deeply into the text and carry out a careful analysis of the hidden messages: “wer oben hin die bîschaft sicht / und inwendig erkennet nicht, / vil kleinen nutz er dâ von hat” (71–73; he who only looks at the surface of the fable and does not recognize the inner meaning will have little use from it). This is then immediately exemplified by the first fable about the rooster and the gemstone resting in a dung pile and which the rooster does not appreciate because it has no nutritional value for it.

Both here and many other times, Bonerius targets people whom he identifies as fools and simpletons because they are not able to recognize the true value of wisdom, the arts, honor, and movable goods (no. 1: Of a rooster and a gemstone, 28–29). Despicable individuals who are lacking in intelligence and wisdom only aim for the “üppekeit der erde” (no. 1, 35; material luxury here in this life) and are completely blind to the teachings of fable literature, which is derived from antiquity (Aesop). The poet explicitly condemns those who as fools are blind although they have healthy eyes (no. 1, 41). Bonerius clearly distinguishes himself from those who are not capable of understanding his lesson, which proves to be too subtle and refined for their simple minds (no. 1, 44).

There are many other examples to confirm this observation, such as no. 4: Of a Tree on the Mountain Top. Bonerius here offers less a fable than an allegorical tale about human epistemology as illustrated by a tree with a wealth of wonderful fruit. It’s location on a hill might not matter much at first because the narrator focuses on the relationship between the roots and the fruit. As sweet as the latter certainly prove to be, Bonerius emphasizes that no one would be able to enjoy them unless s/he would first accept the bitterness of the roots. The meaning is almost self-evident, implying that an individual would first have to accept struggle and hard work before s/he could achieve the desired happiness (“per aspra ad astra”). Virtues require constant strife and much effort, which now pertains to the location of the tree on the top of the mountain (25–26). This life here on earth proves to be, so Bonerius,

difficult and fraught with suffering, but the sweetness of the fruit on the tree would later reward the one willing and able to sustain the bitterness of the roots. Only when someone would be prepared to sustain long and hard efforts, would s/he be rewarded with true joys; knowledge and wisdom can only be achieved by means of “erbeit” (39; hard work). He appeals particularly to young people who pass through their youth without aiming for honor, skills, and virtues (44), warning them that they might later fail in life, which would not come as a surprise (46). Regrets about failures during one’s youth would only result into tears, and no one would then feel any pity (52–54).

Bonerius hence advises us to understand that the joys and happiness in life can only be realized if one accepts first the hardship and struggle (roots versus fruit), and he seriously warns the young audience to use their time well to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and ethical values early in life if they want to experience happiness, honor, and glory in their old age. Curiously, the same principles underline the entire courtly love discourse in the high Middle Ages, but here we find ourselves squarely within didactic concepts pertaining to ethics, morality, honor, and religion.

In the fable no. 83: Of an oak tree and a reed, we encounter yet another narrative that does not involve any animals, though the didactic intentions are just the same. Here we are confronted with a mighty oak tree, again located on the top of a mountain, while at the foot of the mountain reed grass is growing in a swamp. Although the oak tree demonstrates enormous strength, it cannot resist one mighty winter storm, so it comes tumbling down and lands next to the reed. The tree is completely baffled that the reed, in all of its elegance and splendor, yet also in its fragility, keeps standing. For the oak, it appears inexplicable that a mighty tree like itself would not have been strong enough to hold out against the wind. The explanation, however, provided by the reed proves to be a fundamental life lesson. This pliant plant reveals to the oak tree that it is certainly small, weak, but also soft and supple, and thus it knows very well how to recognize who is stronger than itself and when it is not worth fighting against the opponent (28–31). Its ability to bend down without breaking helped the reed to survive, while the storm blew past it (33–36). Extensive flexibility, but especially the smart understanding of the true forces threatening one’s existence helped the reed to survive, while the oak tree, in its rigidity and pride, could not hold on and was uprooted.

For Bonerius, this means that every individual would encounter a superior one, and only those with a certain sense of humility and self-understanding would be able to cope in this world without being squashed: “wer etswenn nicht entwîchen kan, / der dunket mich nicht ein wîser man” (49–50; he who does not know how to submit at times does not appear to be a wise person to me). The more strength and power an individual would command, the more s/he would face the danger of a deep fall (53–55). Once a deep fall would have occurred, it would be very difficult to get up again (59).

The enormous popularity of Bonerius’s fables especially since the late fourteenth century confirms that his messages directly met the general need for entertainment and moral and ethical instructions. Many of his fables were, of course, direct borrowings from the classical and medieval tradition, but he regularly offered his own interpretation and comments, which almost seem to be the most valuable part of his compositions. On the one hand, we can easily recognize the poet’s strategy to translate the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins into these fables; on the other we also recognize fundamental teachings about the fragility and temporality of human life in face of imminent death (no. 87: Of an emperor’s gemstone). It is also well possible that Bonerius reflected on the philosophy developed by Boethius in his *De consolazione philosophiae* (ca. 524), which was basic reading in all monastic and other schools throughout the Middle Ages and beyond (no. 51) (Hoenen/Nauta 1997; Kaylor, Jr./Phillips 2016).

However, most strikingly, this Dominican preacher obviously drew from his personal experiences and presented ordinary cases of people’s ignorance and foolishness, such as in fable no. 92: Of a captured nightingale. As this account makes clear, people easily believe what they are told, even if it sounds fantastical and magical, and they tend to fall prey even to simple tricks. Not by accident did the poet choose as his subtitle: “Of worldly stupidity.” In his epimythium, Bonerius emphasizes, for instance, “wer daz geloubt, daz nicht mag sîn, / da ist nicht grôzer wîzen schîn” (69–70; he who believes what cannot be realistically, demonstrates a great lack of intelligence). He adds, significantly, that especially those prove to be fools who are not willing or prepared to listen to advice (84–85); and unfortunately, as he then concludes, there are many people like that (86).

We also ought to consult fable no. 94: Of a person who had knowledge of necromantic books, where we hear of two good friends, one of whom is a master of the black arts. In order to test his friend, he first inquires with him whether he would grant him gifts if he were suddenly catapulted into the position of power and wealth. The friend assures him that he could rely on that. However, next, the necromancer creates the illusion that his friend is chosen as the king of Cyprus, and when he himself then approaches this ‘mighty’ man, the friend does not recognize him and refuses to grant him the request. The necromancer immediately destroys the illusion, which leaves his friend behind completely confused and distraught.

In clear contrast to almost all other ‘fables,’ in this case, Bonerius does not include his ‘own’ comments and lets the necromancer offer his reading of the outcome. It is highly likely that the poet projected himself as the priest who was deeply steeped in the Seven Liberal Arts (2) and other subject matters (3), including necromancy, which is here not viewed as a devilish or satanic study area, as much as the narrator qualifies it as dangerous (6).¹⁴ This priest explains that the illusion produced by himself represents the world which is lacking in constancy (71), is subject to the wheel of fortune (72–73), easily removes an individual’s honor (75), and makes people look foolish. Just as Boethius had emphasized that misfortune actually proves to be a positive phenomenon because it reveals who is one’s true friend and who is not, here Bonerius urges his audience to respect friendship as a high value in life (81) and to appreciate loyalty as essential for all people who want to live a good and harmonious life (85–86).

There are many other examples in *Der Edelstein* that certainly confirm the poet’s extraordinary insights in the failings and shortcomings of human life. The cases provided, mostly dealing with characteristic animals, illustrate in a striking fashion how much people are really in need of constant advice, of admonishments, and corrections. But Bonerius’s teachings, certainly closely following his ancient and early medieval sources, and certainly also revealing strong parallels with other medieval fable collections (Marie de France), are skillfully packaged in entertaining narratives and mostly do not address the

¹⁴ For the complex approaches to necromancy, see my introduction (1–108) and the contributions to Classen, ed., *Magic and Magicians*, 2017.

problems directly. The audience is regularly invited to smile, if not to laugh out loud about the characters (animals, people, or plants) in their foolishness and lack of understanding. Little wonder, then, that this collection, once it was fully established, quickly gained enormous popularity and became the central literary work in fourteenth-century German-language literature.

Could we then proceed further and investigate possible connections with Boccaccio's *Decameron* beyond purely formal criteria, such as the framing with prologue and epilogue, the exact number of one hundred narratives, and the combination of an entertaining account with a didactic epimythium? At first sight, such a comparison does not proffer many new insights because the genres used by both poets were very different. But there are many significant thematic parallels that deserve to be considered, not necessarily as evidence of mutual contacts or exchanges, but at least as indications of a shared mind-set.

The Black Death raged throughout Europe and other parts of the world especially in the years from 1346 to 1351, and the *Decameron* responded to this pandemic very explicitly. In many parts of Europe, the enraged and hysteric Christian population turned against their Jewish neighbors, committing horrible pogroms and forcing the Jews to go into exile. This was the case both in Italy and in Switzerland.¹⁵ Bonerius included one 'fable' in which a Jew appears as the central figure. In no. 61: Of a Jew and a Cupbearer, derived from the fairly popular Latin story "Iudaeo et pincerna" (Anonymous Neveleti et al.), a wealthy Jew requests that the king provide him with a guard for protection on his travel through a dangerous forest. This cupbearer, however, driven by greed, murders the Jew and takes his money. The Jew, pleading for his life, had warned the servant that birds would reveal his evil deed, but the murderer only scoffed at this prophecy and killed the victim. At that point, a partridge flies out of the bushes. Not long after, the king receives some partridges as gifts, and when they have been cooked, the cupbearer is charged with carrying one of them on a plate to the dinner table.

15 Fischhof 1973; *Guggenheim* (1982) 1987); Landolt 2009; for a useful historical summary, see <https://www.xn--jdische-gemeinden-22b.de/index.php/gemeinden/a-b/375-bern-schweiz> (last accessed on Aug. 16, 2020). For a critical assessment, see now Cohn 2007.

He laughs loudly when he remembers the Jew's words, but this then alerts the king who forces him to reveal the entire story. Realizing that his own cupbearer had committed a murder, he has him executed on the spot as a deserved punishment (Martin 2002). Bonerius comments the hanging of the cupbearer at the gallows rather laconically, but he leaves no doubt about his own position in this criminal case: "daz was wol!" (67; this was well done). For him, the murder was just that, and he believes that God intervened to avenge the Jew's innocent suffering (77). We cannot detect a trace of anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism here, and this at a time when the populace was often driven to mass murder of the Jewish communities in their cities.

Granted, the poet does not engage with the difference in religion, does not reflect on the Jewish faith at all, but murdering a Jew must be treated with as what it was, murder. Even though Bonerius does not formulate any particular comments about Jews, he does not indicate any negative sentiments. In his 'fable,' the Jew is simply a wealthy man, rightly requests royal protection, and warns the cupbearer about the possible consequences of murder. In fact, through God's intervention, nature speaks up and reveals the cupbearer's criminal act, especially because he is forced to laugh out loudly, maybe uncontrollably, when he carries the partridge, which then piques the king's curiosity, and then the whole truth is revealed.¹⁶

Boccaccio includes two major stories about Jews that deserve to be considered in the present context. In the stories two and three told on the first day, we are presented with highly laudatory Jewish figures who are wise, intelligent, but also successful as merchants. While in the second story, Abraham eventually converts to Christianity because he believes that the Holy Spirit is strong enough to overlook and compensate the utter corruption of the Holy See, in the third story, the Jew Melchizedek convinces the Sultan Saladin that there is no absolute answer to the question which religion is the true one by way of his parable of the three rings.¹⁷ The Jew concludes his

¹⁶ As to the epistemological significance of laughter in pre-modern literature, see my introduction and the contributions to Classen, ed., *Laughter in the Middle Ages*, 2010.

¹⁷ This story has been discussed already from many different perspectives, though the emphasis has regularly rested on the issue of toleration. Aurnhammer/Cantarutti/Vollhardt 2016.

parable with this comment: “And I say to you, my lord, that the same applies to the three laws [religions] which God the Father granted to His three people, and which formed the subject of your inquiry. Each of them considers itself the legitimate heir to His estate, each believes it possesses His one true law and observes His commandments” (44).

Bonerius’s take on Jews, at least in this one narrative (no. 61), deserves high credit, considering the extensive impact of anti-Judaic sentiments throughout the fourteenth century, especially since the outbreak of the pandemic. There are virtually no other literary parallels from the Middle Ages, and if we take the *mæren* by Heinrich Kaufringer (ca. 1400) as representative, most contemporary poets argued vehemently strictly against Jews and their allegedly false faith (Kaufringer, *Love, Life, and Lust* (2017) 2019, nos. 2 and 28). Boccaccio has received great recognition for his unique treatment of Jews, at least in those two stories, and we can now place Bonerius right next to him in this regard, especially if we consider the horrible consequences of the Black Death for Jews all over Europe, being made into the culprits of that pandemic, though they suffered just as much, if not even more, from the raging pestilence (Classen, “Ungewöhnliche Perspektiven auf Juden,” 2021).

Otherwise, of course, the further comparison begins to fail us because Boccaccio is mostly interested in presenting stories about lovers, sexual encounters, tragic strikes of fortune and happy outcomes, foolish behavior, deception, conflict in marriage, and so forth. None of his tales come even close to the genre of fables, though in the end, if we place the *Decameron* next to the *Edelstein*, both authors target people in their foolishness, evil nature, and weak characters. Boccaccio’s narrator emphasizes in the introduction that as a consequence of the Black Death “all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing” (5).

The actual tales pursue the strategy to present many different cases of human behavior, which is then revealed to be either foolish, sinful, ignorant, naive, or smart, depending on the circumstances, whereupon the listeners comment and discuss briefly how they viewed the account. Neifile, for instance, whose task it is to tell the second story on the first day, responds to Panfilo’s account by noting that “God’s loving-kindness is unaffected by our errors, when they proceed from some cause which it is impossible for us to detect” (37). Emilia, whose turn it is to tell the sixth story on the second

day, remarks upon Fiammetta’s narrative: “The erratic course pursued by Fortune frequently leads to pain and irritation. But since our mental faculties, which are easily lulled to sleep by her blandishments, are aroused as often as a subject is openly discussed . . .” (111).

Not every story is fully discussed, but there is a theme for every day, and the entire company of ladies and gentlemen endeavor to comply with it, which transforms the entire literary endeavor into a social activity in which all participants are invited to learn and think about human conditions. Accordingly, Dioneo comments on his own, the last story told on day ten, “the wisdom of mortals consists . . . not only in remembering the past and apprehending the present, but in being able, through a knowledge of each, to anticipate the future, which grave men regard as the acme of human intelligence” (795). Subsequently, Boccaccio himself offers a lengthy epilogue, defending his work against a whole slew of possible critics, responding to a variety of potential charges. However, he also observes, very much in a Boethian vein, “that the things of this world have no stability, but are subject to constant change, and this may well have happened to my tongue” (802). Boccaccio thus grouped his tales according to specific ethical or philosophical values, whether endurance in adventures (day two), importance of wit and intelligence (day three), changing of one’s fortune, especially in the lives of lovers (day five), intelligence by housewives in tricking their husbands (day seven), and acting liberally and generously in love affairs (day ten). Bonerius’s fables do not form larger groups, but they also address fundamental issues in human behavior, such as evil rumor (no. 3), violence (no. 5), disloyalty and deception (no. 6), false witnesses (no. 7), evil company (no. 8), excessive greed (no. 9), false happiness (no. 10), etc. We might say that the *Decameron* and the *Edelstein* represent the two sides of the same coin.

Bonerius underscores more strongly the moral and ethical teachings of his accounts, and yet also aims at wisdom and intelligence: “der nutz lît an dem ende gar / der bîschaft, wer sîn nimet war” (Epilogue, 3–4; the lesson can be found at the end of the fable by the one who can recognize it). And: “dar umbe list man ein bîschaft guot, / daz wîser werd des menschen muot” (7–8; one reads a good fable in order to gain more wisdom). He strongly expounds the value of his *Edelstein* and recommends it to his audience in strong terms: “Wer daz list oder hœret lesen, / der müeze sælig iemer wesen”

(33–34; he who reads it or listens to it being read out loud will always be blessed) (Reich and Schanze 2018).

Where does all this leave us with? Some critics might say, not much because the comparison has not yielded the desired firm proof of some kind of connection between Bonerius and Boccaccio. But this study did not try to prove what cannot be proven due to the lack of any concrete evidence. Instead, I have endeavored to bring the German-Swiss author Bonerius back into the limelight of fourteenth-century literature. Paralleling his *Edelstein* with the *Decameron* has illustrated that both works share, indeed, a number of significant similarities, irrespective of major differences, of course. Altogether, we can conclude, there are both significant differences and yet also major shared interests and objectives. As to the former: first, the fables by Bonerius are composed in verse, and the stories by Boccaccio in prose; second, the former mostly drew from animal narratives in order to reflect on basic human behavior (mostly sinful, foolish, and ignorant), while the latter presented accounts about people in his society, commonly pertaining to love and sexuality; third, the Swiss Dominican made sure to conclude each one of his fables with an explicit epimythium, whereas the Florentine author has his story-tellers take on this task only to some extent. But, reflecting on the similarities, within exactly same narrative framework both poets created a large volume of individual stories about human frailties, shortcomings, desires, vices, and virtues, one in Swiss-German, the other in Florentine Italian. These stories are carefully framed and form a holistic entity, emerging out of a rather chaotic pool of individual *fabliaux* or fables from previous centuries and thus creating a new literary platform. So, altogether it certainly pays off to consider both works side by side as literary masterpieces from the middle of the fourteenth century.

Certainly, Bonerius expressed strongly didactic and religious teachings, reminding his audience of the ending of all human life at some point: “Wer daz ende an sehen kan, / sîn werken, der ist ein wîser man” (no. 100, 89–90; He who can foresee the end of his works [life], is a wise person). And the individual who will be able to look back at his life at the time of his death and realize that he did well, would thus be able to overcome any of previous sins (94–98). Most powerfully, Bonerius resorts, concluding the hundredth fable, to the metaphor of the ship captain who would be rewarded for his steady hand,

having brought the ship safely back to the harbor: “der gewinnet selten leit” (102; rarely experiences suffering). Boccaccio seemingly follows a different path, concluding with the enigmatic, for most readers actually highly irritating story about patient Griselda, but even there we are confronted with an extreme situation in human life, here marriage, which only makes sense if we read it in allegorical terms, as even the reaction by the other story-tellers clearly confirms (Classen, “Utopian Space in the Countryside”, 2012; Rüegg 2019).

While scholars and the general readers have consistently lavished highest praise on Boccaccio on account of his *Decameron*, apart from many other of his writings, of course, giving him particular credit for this framing of hundred stories, Bonerius has remained mostly unknown both outside of German Medieval Studies and even inside. However, his *Edelstein* deserves much more recognition, whether the comparison with his contemporary can be accepted or not. Certainly, Boccaccio mostly culled his literary material from older French, Latin, maybe also Arabic and Hebrew sources (Rebhorn, trans., 2016: 453–64). Bonerius, by contrast, drew mostly from Aesop via Avianus and the Anonymous Neveleti (Romulus), so he relied on a different literary tradition. Nevertheless, both poets achieved greatest success with their works, which offered entertainment and ethical and moral instruction at the same time, based on an extensive compilation and translation process. Boccaccio created a setting in which ten figures tell stories to each other and comment on those briefly. Bonerius, all by himself, addressed his audience in the prologue in order to introduce the collection of the hundred ‘fables’ for the same purpose, defending himself immediately against his many critics, while Boccaccio relied on his epilogue to respond to the various points of criticism, at least in formal terms.

It goes too far, of course, to call Bonerius the ‘German Boccaccio,’ as I have formulated it provocatively in the title of this article. However, this exaggeration was intended to bring to our attention the fact that in the middle of the fourteenth century two poets, one Italian, the other German-Swiss, resorted concomitantly to the same structural model for their works, created thereby a literary masterpiece each on his own, and influenced generations of future poets with their texts. It is possible that both resorted to Dante as their great model – which would be more a speculation in the case of Bonerius – but both achieved a great public effect with their

compilation. This now explains also much better why the early German-language philologists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reacted with such enthusiasm to the rediscovery of Bonerius's fables, which indeed emerge now as a superior literary accomplishment and can certainly stand the comparison with Boccaccio's *Decameron*, at least in generally narrative and didactic terms. Granted, they are fairly simple and straightforward in their structure and content, and they do not follow the intricate, sophisticated model pursued by Boccaccio with his tales. However, as fables they achieved their goals very effectively, and the vast number of manuscript copies and the early incunabula confirm Bonerius's enormous success. Both poets addressed the wide range of human foibles, and provided significant lessons for their contemporaries, each on his own in great parallel with the other. This adds a significant new puzzle piece to the global history of fourteenth-century literature. **N**

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