WHAT MAKES A MARRIAGE:
CONSENT OR CONSUMMATION IN TWELFTH-CENTURY
GERMAN LITERATURE

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According to his early chroniclers and hagiographers, the Northumbrian
king and martyr saint Oswald (d. 642) was a married man and the
father of at least one son.1 In twelfth-century Germany, however,
when Oswald’s life was recorded in the German vernacular and in the
shape and form of the then popular rhymed verse epics, various details
concerning the saint’s life and especially concerning his marriage and
death had been significantly changed. The German epic Der Münchner
Oswald unfolds as follows:

Oswald, the orphaned, and twenty-four year-old king of England
prays to God expressing his desire to marry a virtuous woman if God
deems this appropriate.2 God sends his response in a dream, inform-
ing Oswald that he supports and encourages his wish to find a queen
because Oswald needs to secure an heir for his kingdom and a compan-
ion for himself. Since Oswald cannot think of a suitable bride himself,
an angel appears before him advising him to seek his bride-to-be in
a foreign, heathen country and to convert her to Christianity. Later,
while at council with his advisors, the pilgrim Warnmunt appears at
the meeting and clarifies the words of the angel. He recommends to
Oswald the beautiful heathen princess Pamige. She secretly believes
in God, but she is also very well guarded by her father, Aron, who
has killed all of her previous wooers. Oswald dispatches a messenger
(a talking raven) to ask the heathen king for his daughter’s hand in
marriage. The proposal is rejected and the messenger is incarcerated,

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1 The oldest written version of the legend of St. Oswald is contained in the Vener-
able Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum from 731 (Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B.
discussion of the transmission of the legend see Marianne E. Kalinke, St. Oswald of
Northumbria: Continental Metamorphoses. With an Edition and Translation of “Ósvalds saga” and
“Van sante Osvaldo dene konninghe” (Tempe, AZ, 2005), pp. 1–9.
2 Der Münchner Oswald. Mit einem Anhang: die ostschwäbische Prosa Bearbeitung des 15. Jahr-
hunderts, ed. Michael Gurschmann, ATB 76 (Tübingen, 1974).
but he eventually manages to escape after he has obtained the girl's consent to marriage. Now Oswald and a large Christian army sail to the heathen country and, by means of much deceit and cunning and through heavenly intervention, Oswald and Pamige can flee together. The escape party is pursued by Aron and his army. Oswald defeats them in battle and, assisted by a variety of miracles, converts them to Christianity. Upon their return to England, Oswald marries Pamige. At the wedding feast God appears in the guise of a pilgrim. He tests Oswald's faith and orders that the newlyweds should not consummate their marriage; a stipulation to which both spouses agree:

[God:] “You are not supposed to engage in any sin with your wife! [...] Listen, here is how you can resist sin: you must have water in front of your bed; whenever your manhood overcomes you, jump into the water. Your wife must do the same.” [...] Saint Oswald, the mighty lord, served God in a praiseworthy manner; he and the queen, who also wanted to be God's handmaiden, began to lovingly lie next to each other, yet they abstained from worldly love: whenever worldly desire overcame them, they each jumped into the water.”

The German narrative of St. Oswald belongs to a group of pre-courtly German epics commonly referred to as minstrel epics (Spielmannsepen) because scholars considered them to be compositions of lay minstrels or jongleurs. The entire group is comprised of a total of only five works, which most likely were composed some time in the second half of the twelfth century, and which are the earliest indigenous German narratives that have largely worldly themes and topics. Four of these works—Der Münchner Oswald, Orendel, König Rother, and Salman und Morolf—are bridal-

3 “du solt aber chainer sunden mit der frauen pflegen! [...] merk, wie du den sunden seld widerstan:/ wasser soltu vor deinem pet han;/ wann dich dein manhait wil betwingen;/ so soltu in daz wasser springen;/ also tuo auch deu frau dein;/ sand Oswalt der furst reich/ dienet got gar wurdikleich;/ er und deu kunigun:/ die wolt auch gotes dienerin sein;/ si begunden liebleich pei einander ligen;/ aber weltleicher lieb si sich gar verzigen;/ wenn si der werlt freud betwang;/ ietweders in daz wasser sprang” (Der Münchner Oswald, verses 3510, 3515–19, 3527–3534).

4 These early vernacular epics are only preceded by German adaptations of the French Alexander and the Chanson de Roland, by the Kaiserchronik, the first vernacular German chronicle, which dates to around 1150, as well as by several shorter vernacular religious and historical texts, among them Des Lob Salomons (The Praise of Solomon); Diu Hochzeit (The Wedding), an allegorical reading of the Song of Songs; the Annolied and the Ezzolied, both religious narratives, the first, a praise of the life and deeds of the bishops of Cologne and the second, a hymn of God's creation and salvation.