Hartmann von Aue’s court poem Der arme Heinrich usually is read as a narrative of spiritual concerns, namely of Heinrich’s sin and subsequent salvation. Within this standard line of interpretation, one of the main points of contention has been the question of how the peasant girl’s intended self-sacrifice - prerequisite to Heinrich’s redemption from the divine punishment of leprosy - should be evaluated. Does the girl’s vehement desire for self-immolation make her equally worthy of salvation or does it suggest instead an excessive resistance against God’s plan, be it out of hysteria or inordinatio? Either way this question is answered, however, the ensuing interpretations seem circumscribed from the onset by their theological perspective.

While I do not dispute the significance of Christian meaning in Der arme Heinrich, I agree with some of the more recent scholarship that the text invites other interpretations as well.¹ I shall argue here that the poem’s uppermost layer of Christian concerns is punctured by a competitive subtext that seeks to disrupt and distort some of the core assumptions of social status in medieval societies. Far from affirming the asymmetrical valuation of aristocrat and peasant or man and woman, this subtext attempts to collapse some of the traditional dualities that privilege spirit over body, self-control over sexual desire, and activity over passivity. It isolates two bodies, those of leper and peasant girl, in order to illustrate the conventional distribution of social power, and then challenges the notion that the ascription of hierarchical social values to these bodies is immutable.²

This paper discusses these human bodies as discursive constructs to

¹ I am indebted to Hugo Bekker (The Ohio State University) and Nancy Mayberry (East Carolina University) for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Many thanks go to Charles Fantazzi whose comments were invaluable. — See Margetts 1988; Thomas 1995; Wynne 1994; and Shea 1994.

² On the significance of the body within the religious, aesthetic, and intellectual discourses of medieval culture, see Le Goff 1988; Brown 1988; and Walker Bynum 1991.
which power is either granted or denied. On the corporeal level, power can be gained by attributing particular meaning or values to physical forms in order to manipulate them. The physical difference between the two sexes is used to gender two distinct positions, one that is empowered to gaze and another that is the passive object of this look. The former, male-dominated position of power commands both the gendering gaze and the accompanying discourse that ensures its own continued authority; the latter position is reserved for those who are subjected to the concomitant speech that proscribes their corporeal otherness. Because the traditional target of such devaluation is the female body, this weaker discursive position may be seen as “feminized”. Such uneven attribution of gender and power based on visible corporeality shall be referred to here as the body politic.

The first part of this essay investigates why those controlling the body politic of Heinrich’s society seek to expel the knight’s sick body and how they profit by the terms of the blood sacrifice. Ostensibly the leprous nobleman’s body in Der arme Heinrich is presented as the locus of a divine stigmatization when it is in fact subjected to stringent social ostracization. Moreover, the once privileged knight Heinrich von Ouwe is reduced to a state of polluted corporeality, a demotion that subjects him to the repulsed stares of his peers and thus symbolically feminizes him, at least within the realm of the body politic. It is because of this visible loss of his once-powerful masculine gender that Heinrich’s cure requires the ritual destruction of a virginal, hence female body. This sacrifice of a virgin, disclosed by a physician and thus authorized by those wielding discursive power, permanently fuses the categories of the female sex and sexuality. The sick male noble body is interchanged with a virgin, not with a healthy female body - thus omitting social standing altogether and positing female health as sexual abstinence only.

But the sacrifice stipulates also that the virginal victim must re

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3 Walker Bynum, for instance, writes of this medieval binarism: “Male and female were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/ mercy, and order/disorder”; “… And Woman His Humanity’: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” (Bynum et al. 1986, 257).

4 For a further discussion of Heinrich’s feminization see Shea 1994, 391-2. Though Shea reaches a different conclusion than I, we both agree that Heinrich’s eventual cure depends on the girl’s deconstruction, be it, as Shea asserts, through her actual defloration (399) or through a discursive defusing of her (imagined) threat to patriarchy.