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# An Approach Towards Another Aesthetics – When a Household Becomes the Centre of Action in Jörg Wickram’s *Nachbarn*-Novel

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## Introduction: Towards a Different Aesthetics

With his novel *Von guten und bösen Nachbarn* (1556), Jörg Wickram (ca. 1505–62) creates a somewhat unconventional text. The story does not follow the strict rules of class affiliation, meaning that the protagonists do not come from an academic background, nor is it directly linked to knightly adventures. Most of the prose novels written and published in sixteenth-century Germany are adaptations of medieval verse novels, and therefore take place in a knightly or courtly setting (see Schnell 1984: 214–248; Röcke 2004: 463–506). These knightly adventures, such as *Wigoleis in Rade*, *Tristan und Isolde*, or any of the *Parzi-val*-novels, were highly popular. There is also an early modern creation of an epochal prose tradition: the so called *Amadis*-Roman, which was a series of originally French texts that became enormously successful and were distributed to an uncommon extent (see Schaffert 2015). As Richard von Dülmen explained in his important study on early modern culture, the household functions as the centre of mere existence during this period (see von Dülmen 1999: 13). It is a microcosm of a society that is still committed to a decentralised structure of organisation. Although we face a change within the sixteenth century mainly caused by the Reformation, the household, more than the family as such, functions as the smallest unit of stability. In Wickram’s novel, the household is not only the setting of the story but also the centre of action, as well as a regulatory checkpoint. Rather than the family, it is the household that is always at stake, and it therefore becomes the actual protagonist. This pattern challenges the concept of familial ties and kinship, which are thus part of a constant negotiation (see Timm 2010: 47). Pierre Bourdieu (1983: 193), however, states that networks of familial relations are in no way either a natural or a social fact. Relationships in general are subject to historical, cultural, and economic changes. By accepting the active influence every acting part has in “doing kinship” or “doing family” (Groppe 2014: 23), older models in which familial structures are understood in terms of static narratives become obsolete. This is the sociological change that Wickram anticipates in his urban context.

Wickram’s novel is the first attempt to place a longer narrative into the sphere of the non-aristocratic, which has prompted researchers to make quite opposing judgments. On the

one hand, in modern scholarship, he is praised for being the first bourgeois known by name to write prose stories in German for a bourgeois audience about specific bourgeois views and topics (see Jacobi 1970: 373). This is why his writings are considered a milestone in the history of literature, being among the first German-language novels, and Wickram himself is seen as one of the first authors who could be identified as such. In this case, one can speak of a targeted (self-)staging (see Jürgensen 2011: 9–30; Bremer 2011: 55–67). Wickram represents a new type of author/narrator who inscribes himself in his texts and discusses his values and poetological thoughts within the texts. On the other hand, the mediocrity of the subject is repeatedly emphasised by critics (see Emmel 1972: 27). The early researchers of the nineteenth century even regarded the novel as a betrayal of poetry to ‘life’, simply depicting the unbearable banality of a philistine bourgeois everyday life (see Müller 1980: 1). Moreover, the novel’s significance for scholarship has often been reduced to a focus on the stereotypical images Wickram uses to portray the urban middle class it refers to (see Wåghäll Nivre 2004: 109). As a result, articles and monographs had been rare on Wickram until a sociocultural paradigm led to an interest in literary ‘underdogs’ (see Christ 1974: 106).

Of particular interest is that the members of the household are craftsmen and merchants. There is no elevation of status, like in the former narrative tradition, when the social setting is not aristocratic from the beginning: social success is not linked to ascension. This article seeks to highlight this new cultural development as an aesthetic phenomenon.

The *Nachbarn* novel tells the story of three generations, each strongly influenced by their neighbourhood. The first generation has the most difficult starting position: Not only do the merchant Robertus and his wife Sophia lose nine out of ten children within a short time, they also have put up with neighbours who take pleasure in their misfortune. By chance, Robertus is able to leave his community in Antwerp and start a new life in Lisbon. On a business trip he meets Richard, who falls so seriously ill that Robertus decides to take him in with his family and care for him until he recovers. In the course of this, Richard falls in love with the only surviving daughter, Cassandra, and they marry. After the wedding, Richard is attacked; a neighbour rushes to help him. Because of this assistance a lifelong friendship begins between Richard and his saviour, Lazarus. At the same time, two women in neighbouring households become pregnant. Those children are united from birth by a deep affection that turns into love in early adolescence. Since both are still very young, the parents decide to send the young Lazarus on an educational journey. The two families become one household and then even one family after Lazarus’s return.

### The Household as the Centre of Narration

In medieval usage, the term “Haus/hûs” is often used simultaneously to refer to residential property and family. When the story of a house is told, this connotation most certainly involves telling us about the family in matters of place and time (see Dimpel 2018: 250). The house itself functions as a polyvalent room of an imaginary state, in which patriarchal (and also matriarchal) structures evolve, and which provides an area for the legitimation of power, property, genealogy, and the dynamics of kinship (see Müller 2004: 52). Those functions are near-universal in their validity, in the sense that elements and motivations to ensure this kind of stability are found in almost every narrative structure with worldly

content; in adventurous settings, such as novels of Arthurian knights, it seems not to be the focus of the narrative, but it is to be found at the end of almost every novel.

The society Wickram designs follows the concept of *ordo* (“Godly order”), which permeates every work of Wickram. A successful lifestyle is therefore not associated with social advancement, but with the ideal fulfilment of one’s existing role in society. Raising family and kin is a matter of building alliances that guarantee stability (see Kellner 2004: 92; Kellner 2005: 320). The adoption of the new narrative model sets new prerequisites in the *Nachbarn* novel. The integration of friends and neighbours into the family takes place quickly and with few obstacles for those joining the family. To lay the foundations for the genealogical story, Robertus and Sophia lose nine children to a severe disease. In this horrible situation, which is based on the biblical Book of Job, the neighbours do not support the grieving family; on the contrary, they take pleasure in their grieving. This exposition reveals a certain loss of the *ordo*, which empowers the narrative to transform traditional patterns into new settings (see Müller 1980: 14). It also strongly prompts the further development of the narrative (see Lugowski 1976: 78): The first couple, Robertus and Sophia, leave Antwerp with their only remaining daughter. While establishing a new life in Lisbon, the family does not concentrate on their new neighbourly environment, but focuses on their economic success. During one of Robertus’s journeys, he meets Richard, with whom he begins a deep friendship built on Robertus’s hospitality. Richard, who is entering the household as a friend without any duty or responsibility, is regarded as equal to Robertus’s son. The text states that Robertus behaves “dann wer er sein sun gewesen” (*Nachbarn*: 30; “as if he were his son”). The assimilation takes place when Richard enters the household as a person needing help. The family cares for the sick young man until he is fully recovered and, by this time, has already become a member of the household. Richard then tells Robertus that he wants to marry his daughter Cassandra, with whom he falls in love because her beauty helps him to recover from his sickness more quickly.

The non-aristocratic setting forces the story to adapt to the circumstances of the protagonists’ lives, which necessarily has an impact on the design of the narrative. When the family members plan to leave their house to run some errands, they discuss how to treat the servants because the women of the household do not want them to behave improperly during their absence. At the same time, it is important for the future generation to have a good relationship with the servants. The parents provide the necessary education that ensures a peaceful life within the household:

Wir haben dir auch nie gestatten noch vertragen wöllen / das du unserm gesind / gesellen / jungen oder mägten / wiederdriess noch einiche schmach bewisen hetttest. Und als du schon zû verstand kamest / hond wir gar nit haben wöllen / das du von dem gesind etwas mårlin bracht / oder sie gegen uns verschwätzt / darumb bist du alle zeit von dem gesind lieb gehalten gewesen (*Nachbarn*: 111–112).

We never wanted to allow you to mess with our servants, male ones, young ones, or the maids, which you did not do. And when you came to mind, we did not want for you to tell stories to the servants or to antagonise us against them. Therefore, you have been appreciated by them.<sup>1</sup>

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1 All translations are the author’s own.



The trade-related absence of men from the household requires adjustments at the level of action and design. Those adjustments result in the inclusion of ancient narratives such as the tale of Lucretia and stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as vast passages taken from the Bible. The audience can be sure that the story is of a certain value, whereas the characters in the novel use the phrases to reassure those left at home of the stability of their household as a social unit. Their fear of losing the sound condition of their household draws attention to its functioning; they are afraid that the productivity, performance, and prestige of the household will rapidly decline. There is also a strong need to tie the new setting to a familiar pattern of fictional writing. The wedding of the second generation, for example, is told at length. When Cassandra and Richard get married, the celebration after the ceremony follows the customs of older literary traditions (see Wåghäll Nivre 2004: 109).<sup>2</sup>

The whole scene is modelled on the courtly *hōchzît* (courtly celebration) inherited from medieval literature. The meeting at a central place within the plot is already reminiscent of the typical starting point of Arthurian narratives: in the courtly novel it would be the Arthurian court, but here it is the household founded by the first protagonist Robertus, who appears as the *pater familias*. The scenario is, however, reduced and modified in the novel by keeping within the strict boundaries of social affiliation. Traditional Arthurian constellations are transformed and, without involving a direct prosification of the subject matter, integrated into this form of design. Not only the constellation of the celebratory society, with an authoritative and institutionally guaranteed board of agents, but also the components of the *hōchzît* fit together. The success of the merchant as head of the family replaces the medieval ideality of a ruler; by demonstrating the richness and the abundance of food that can be offered despite the spontaneous wedding celebration, Robertus is installed as the head of the wedding company (see Bamberger 2018: 26). This staging of a sudden celebration highlights the mercantile success of Robertus, as well as his financial means, and presents him as the influential centre of his sphere.

Despite the courtly reminiscences, commercial references remain dominant, which is why a prenuptial agreement must be discussed. This prenuptial agreement is signed “in beywesen der fründtschafft” – that is, it is witnessed by friends – and promises “güte versicherungen [...] damit man übernacht / semliche schriftten wüste zû finden”, meaning it is meant only as insurance for the household in case of emergency (*Nachbarn*: 40). Furthermore, other typical *hōchzît* elements are realised, albeit in a downsized version: in lieu of tournaments and jousts, ball and feather games are played competitively, in which there is a conflict that the groom must settle (see *Nachbarn*: 41–42). Although the usual courtly wedding environment is reduced to a literarily plausible level, it still offers the opportunity to mark the bridegroom – and thus the future head of the household – as outstanding and suitable for this task. The household takes over the duties of the court, while turning the protagonist away from the public sphere. Although the marriage is not arranged (see Wåghäll Nivre 2004: 110), all the preparations have been settled by the household, in this case by the parents, before the couple has met. When Richard falls in love with Cassandra, he talks not to her but to her father to find out whether the reciprocal love

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2 Elisabeth Wåghäll Nivre (2004: 109) states, however, that the *Nachbarn* novel is Wickram's “first work written more or less completely independently of older sources”.

will be approved by the *pater familias*, the head of the house. Robertus, however, makes sure that it is not only he who has to decide:

Mir aber wil dannocht gebüren / die mûter und die tochter darunder anzûsuchen / damit harnach kein verwiss daraus ervolgen thûe / so wolt ich auch (sie die dochter) nit gern zwingen / das sie wider iren willen einem jûngling oder witwer solt vermehelt werden / zû welchem sie keinen willen het (*Nachbarn*: 36).

It is also due to me to ask mother and daughter for their opinion in order to avoid any inconvenience. I also do not intend to force my daughter to marry a young man or a widower if she does not want to.

While Robertus is eager to ensure a consensual decision, Sophia is rather worried about the prospect of having a son-in-law because she fears that Cassandra may leave their household. Robertus has to soothe her: “Du solt dir / mein liebe Sophia / die sach nit so hart auffnemen / unser tochter zuo verheuraten / dann sie nicht destweniger bey uns in unser wonung und behausung bleiben würd / in einen weg / als in den anderen” (*Nachbarn*: 38; “You shall not worry about the marriage of our daughter, dear Sophia; she will not be any less in our house than before, one way or the other”). Robertus makes clear that Cassandra will remain a part of the household either way. He assures his wife of the decency of her future son-in-law, who is willing to travel to Spain and sell all his belongings. Although he would be in a position to take his future wife to his own property, Richard accepts the authority of Robertus and his household.

What has become the norm in the chivalric novels – a certain theme of social mobility, even if it may be a matter of minimal differences in class affiliation – is handled differently in Wickram’s text (see Wåghäll Nivre 2011: 205). Marriage takes place strictly within one’s own class boundaries, or at least strictly according to the laws of economic logic. Robertus settles the genealogical succession, which again ensures material wealth. He builds an alliance with his son-in-law – the narration follows a common practice. When Cassandra and Richard are finally married, Richard’s in-laws demand a morning gift. The economic background emerges with motifs from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, such as the morning gift itself being said to shine like the sun (see Schmitt 2008: 154; Kästner 1997: 362; Kartschoke 1982: 719). The combination of both indicates an attempt to harmonise the economic and literary concerns at play. The prenuptial agreement and the morning gift are two sides of the same coin, although the former is negotiated with much greater effort.

Wickram does not leave out any aspect of the wedding, whether it is the economic factors that must be considered or the haste with which the celebration is organised. One of the most important persons in the ceremonial process, the pastor, is missing at the beginning, arriving only in time to witness the couple administering the wedding rites: “Dise verkündung namen etliche seiner freünd / in einem schertz auff / liessens doch eine gûte sach sein” (*Nachbarn*: 40; “A lot of his friends thought the announcement was a joke, but they still found it a good thing”). The rush in which the wedding takes place underlines the economic success of the household; it shows that the mere possibility of organising an event of great importance requires material wealth. Robertus, as head of the household, essentially takes over the priest’s tasks while he is absent, even including a sermon about the duties of a Christian, such as being active in charity; here, Robertus also establishes himself as a role model by donating alms to the poor.

In the course of the narrative, however, there are more voices to be taken into account, and it is to these that the following section turns.

### New Gender Ideas

Wickram proceeds according to a schema that allows women to stay in the house and men to act in the outside world. Women are shown to play just as important a role as the men as regards maintaining the stability of the household. This is demonstrated by Sophia, whose name originally means ‘wisdom’, advising her husband on important matters; he specifically seeks her agreement, and the decision is made on an equal footing, even if Robertus remains the active part. Women also play an important educational role: in the absence of men, they tell each other stories from ancient mythology analogous to the situations in which they find themselves. The educational performance is therefore initially based on women and is primarily associated with them in the narrative. Moreover, women in the text, who make use of humanistic education, address as general authorities the novel’s readers, who are taken to include not only members of all social classes, but also of all genders. This was in no way typical of the time in which the *Nachbarn* novel was published; girls were usually only educated in monasteries unless they belonged to ruling families, as was the case for Mechthild von Rottenburg, who had a certain interest in literature (see Wand-Wittowski 2005: 1–27).<sup>3</sup>

On his journey, a landlord wants Lazarus to marry his daughter, which Lazarus rejects because of his love for Amelia, Robertus’s granddaughter. The landlord feels gravely offended and tries to kill Lazarus; however, he accidentally kills his own son instead of Lazarus and must carry his lifeless body home. The chapter’s woodcut shows a residue of public judgement: the father carrying his dead son is witnessed by the mother waiting at the open window. Whilst she is eager to witness a particular outcome as a result of her husband’s actions – that is, the death of Lazarus – it seems to be her duty simply to witness the consequences of his actions even though the actual outcome, the death of her son, is far from preferable to her. She also takes over the function of the entire household and represents the interior of the house, opened up to the outside world: she looks slightly bent out of the window, but is equated with the evaluating authority of the household.

Yet female agency is limited to the boundaries of the house itself. As Wåghäll Nivre (2004: 111) puts it, “Wickram advocates mutual respect and understanding between man and wife, and it seems as though the wives’ opinions have equal status with those of their husbands. Yet that equality exists only in theory” (see also Emberson 2013: 544). The spheres of men and women stay entirely separate, which leaves the household to the women (see Wåghäll Nivre 2004: 115). When the men are gone for business purposes, their wives take charge of the household on their own by monitoring the servants and educating the children, whereas when the action takes place within the household, business-related matters are mentioned only if something extraordinary happens, and are otherwise simply disregarded in the story. One could argue that the role women take on in this story is the result of placing the action in a household sphere: thus, women become equally important

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3 Christine Wand-Wittkowski (2005: 1–27) argues, however, that Mechthild’s role in the literary production at her court is strongly overstated.



as protagonists as men. The household is portrayed as a complete functional unit with duties that are not divided between the sexes. When the mothers talk to their children about their premature love, however, it is notable that Lazarus also talks to his father, whilst the mutual love between Lazarus and Amelia is discovered by Amelia's father when he overhears her private soliloquy.

In understanding Wickram's concept of gender roles in the *Nachbarn* novel, it has to be taken into account that in the sixteenth century, the "natural norm and basis for a well-functioning society" meant living in matrimony (Wåghäll Nivre 2004: 116). The women therefore try to convince Amelia, who is so sad about Lazarus's absence that she wants to join a nunnery, that the moral way of life in the convent is not appropriate for her. Not only do they refer to ancient literature, but they also quote from contemporary marriage tracts and extremely popular texts such as Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Colloquia familiaria* (1522) (see Wåghäll Nivre 2004: 116). Accordingly, the young love between Lazarus and Amelia is seen to be a problem not for the household community of Lazarus, but for that of Amelia, because the stability and moral integrity of a household is strongly linked to the behaviour of its daughters; however, since for gender-historical reasons travelling is possible only for Lazarus, he is removed from the household temporarily to allow for narrative discussion of the problematic situation. Although the parents hope for a later marriage between the two, circumstances do not allow for an immediate union; for one thing, the young couple might not be able to support themselves, but, more importantly, they kept their love a secret from the household, despite it representing a semi-public problem within the household community. The general public would not be opposed to the couple having some secrets, but privacy would not mean complete privacy in this context, given that the household itself is affected by the development of a new romantic relationship. This would have been a key concern for contemporary readers (see Assmann/Assmann 1997: 10; Lüsebrink 1997: 111–112; Keppler/Luckmann 1997: 216).<sup>4</sup>

The tension is also due to the fact that Amelia is under the guardianship of her father. At the same time, she speaks to herself in her room; she articulates the secret and thus negligently risks revealing it. In the narrating logic, this is not only necessary because of the ensuing motivation for action, but implicitly signals the need for revelation. On the other hand, when Lazarus is being sent away, he expresses doubts about his parents' love for him. His fear, however, results from his being sent away from home and the bonds of the household. Finally, Lazarus accepts the authority of his father as the head of the household, to which he belongs and wants to belong; he must travel in order to fulfil his duties within the household.

As this chapter has demonstrated, then, Wickram's novel works to narrow the wide narrative discourse typically associated with the court to the narrower focus of the household, whilst at the same time expanding the courtly novel's focus on a single – typically male – protagonist to encompass a broader range of people living together in a single house. The potential for action thus lies with several responsible people. The household decides on the whereabouts and the room for manoeuvre of an individual, who is

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4 Lüsebrink (1997) sees the opposition as arising in eighteenth-century France and Germany due to the national crisis of the French Revolution. For another context, see Keppler/Luckmann (1997), where the phenomenon is called "Halböffentlichkeit".



sometimes the protagonist in terms of narrative logic, but not in terms of action logic. The combining of autologic and heterologic literary structures in Wickram's writing create a new, different form of aesthetics.

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