

Dubious Actions Coming to Light: The Role of ‘Talking’ Gems as Indicators of Virtuousness

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Dieser Beitrag widmet sich der ‚Sprachfähigkeit‘ von Edelsteinen, ihrer Mobilität und ihrer erinnernden Funktion an im Text verheimlichte oder zurückgedrängte Elemente. Es soll gezeigt werden, dass Inschriften, die mittels zu Wörtern geformten Edelsteinen angefertigt wurden, nicht zwingend von der ‚Willkür‘ ihrer Rezipienten abhängen. Im Zentrum steht die Wachtafel des Gregorius in der Erzählung Hartmanns von Aue, deren besondere materielle Beschaffenheit aus teils vergänglichen und teils beständigen Materialien in vergleichender Analyse der Epitaphe gefallener Könige im *Willehalm* Wolframs von Eschenbach und dem Cupido-Helm aus dem *Wilhelm von Österreich* Johans von Würzburg neu betrachtet wird. Der Fokus in der Betrachtung der Wachtafel des Gregorius wechselt von der verwitterten Inschrift auf der Tafel, die nicht mehr von der sündhaften Vergangenheit berichten kann, zur witterungsbeständigen und edelsteinbesetzten Rahmung dieser Inschrift, die die schillernde Figurenbiographie des Protagonisten materiell in Szene setzt.

This paper is dedicated to the speaking capabilities of gemstones, their mobility and their function of reminding us of elements hidden or repressed in the text. It will be shown that inscriptions made of gemstones shaped as words do not necessarily depend on the ‘arbitrariness’ of their recipients. At the center is the wax tablet of Gregorius in Hartmann von Aue’s narrative, whose special material composition of partly perishable and partly durable materials is reassessed in comparative analysis of epitaphs of fallen kings in *Willehalm* by Wolfram von Eschenbach and the Cupido-helmet from *Wilhelm von Österreich* by John of Wuerzburg. The focus in the contemplation of Gregorius’ wax tablet changes from the weathered inscription on the tablet, which is no longer able to tell of the sinful past, to the weatherproof and gem-studded framing of this inscription, which materially stages the protagonist’s iridescent character biography.

A closer look into Middle High German literature reveals a high amount of inscriptions on all kinds of weapons, armor, and generally on a wide variety of objects and materials. While these inscriptions can serve many different purposes, this paper focuses on ‘talking’ gems – ‘talking’ in this case hints at inscriptions or specific ornaments which transmit a certain message. In the terms



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of Lorraine Daston these stones almost follow the principle *res ipsa loquitur* – they speak for themselves.¹ But this is not meant in a strictly logical sense, but flickering between the “epistemological polarit[ies]”² of absolute arbitrariness and self-evidence based axioms. The gemstones examined in this paper display a literary woven semiology that ‘speaks’ for itself in different varieties.³ The few examples of gems discussed in this paper are comparable regarding a specific connection of two different functions. On the one hand, there is their *agency*-capacity as message carriers when they form inscriptions, which is why their mobility is a main topic (in this context it will be necessary to specify in which way inscribed objects can be ‘agile’). On the other hand, there is their role as material reminders of past, questionable deeds of their bearers.

Concerning the aspect of a certain kind of *agency* of inscriptions and inscribed objects – meaning that they have the ability to make an active difference in a plot⁴ – Elisabeth Martschini argues against any hidden power that is ‘embodied’ in inscriptions and their effect on their recipients. She analyses various inscriptions in the *Prosalancelot*, Ulrich’s von Liechtenstein *Frauendienst* and *Reinfried von Braunschweig*: Her conclusion is that writing itself does not include any kind of agency. On the contrary, she points out that in *Frauendienst* V. 118–140 a book expresses its fear of being harmed by women receiving it; Martschini’s point here is that the written text is endangered by the arbitrariness of its recipient.⁵ She concludes that readers control writing (and therefore objects that contain inscriptions) instead of being controlled by it.⁶ Opposing Martschini’s view, this paper will consider three prominent objects that are not only carrying written text, but also serving a specific function that evades the control of their bearers.

The selection of the things discussed in this text is based on their individual qualities and their material nature as bearers of meaning, which connects them to the first example and main object of investigation of this paper: the wax tablet in Hartmann’s von Aue *Gregorius*. The analysis of this object focuses on the relation between its gems used to frame the inscription on the *tabula* and the medium itself, which ‘carries’ the story of Gregorius. The gems here are not ‘talking’ in the strict sense of the meaning – they do not form words, but they are related to the inscription –, which is why the wax tablet seems to be a good starting point. The second object is the so-called Cupido-helmet in *Wilhelm von Österreich* by Johann von Würzburg, which discloses a connection between the *tugend* of its bearer and certain gems that form words. This is followed by an analysis of a specific scene in *Willehalm* by Wolfram von Eschenbach towards the end of the text: it is the scene in which Willehalm unexpectedly discovers the golden epitaphs. These memorial plaques carry gems formed as letters that tell the names and stories of fallen Saracen kings. In this context, I will argue for an interconnectivity between the stories told by these specific gems and Willehalm’s killing of Arofel. Willehalm tries to euphemize his deed with his own version of the story. However, at the end of Wolfram’s

1 Daston 2004, p. 12.

2 Daston 2004, p. 13.

3 With reference to Daston and her notes on Roland Barthes’ research on things: Daston 2004, p. 14.

4 Mühlherr 2014, p. 261.

5 Martschini 2013, p. 143f.

6 Martschini 2013, p. 145.

text Willehalm's story is denied by the message of the 'talking' gems on the epitaphs. – The results of the brief case studies concerning the helmet of Wilhelm von Österreich and the epitaphs in *Willehalm* will then enable a fresh look on the table of Gregorius and the role of the gems framing his story.⁷

1. Gregorius – Gems as a constant reminder (?)

In Hartmann's von Aue *Gregorius* the story of a repeated incest and its remission unfolds the topics of *riuwe*, *suone*, the original sin and the *felix culpa*. Being the child of a sibling incest, Gregorius is abandoned. To ensure an education adequate to his noble heritage and also to inform the adult protagonist about his genealogy, his mother writes down the circumstances of his birth as an offspring of noble siblings and how to treat the abandoned child, once it is found (*Gregorius* vv. 726–766)⁸. The material of the *tabula* is described as follows:

*Ein tavel wart getragen dar
Der vrouwen diu daz kint gebar,
Diu vil guot helfenbein was,
Gezieret wol als ich ez las
Von golde und von gesteine
(Gregorius vv. 719–723)*

The table is ornated with ivory and gems – signs of Gregorius' noble heritage (ez [Gregorius as a child, F.N.] *waere von gebürte hô*, *Gregorius* vv. 734). With regard to the ornamentation surrounding the written story on the table, Edith and Horst Wenzel speak of a frame for the difficult past of the child – a frame that is adequate to his social status.⁹ The finder and reader of this *tabula* should keep its message secret until Gregorius himself is able to understand it (*Gregorius* vv. 750–752), so that he should always be humble and do penance for the deed of his parents, because he knows of his past (*Gregorius* vv. 752–762). Finally able to understand the inscription, Gregorius realizes his past and is shocked about the dubious constellation of his birth (*Gregorius* vv. 1745–1751). From then on, he always keeps the table with him in order to repent the sins of his parents ritually (*Gregorius* vv. 2377–2403). As a knight, he unknowingly rescues his own mother and marries her. When – with the help of the *tabula* written by herself – his mother realizes this misfortune, Gregorius flees into exile on an island in the sea and leaves the table unintentionally with a fisherman, who ties his feet¹⁰ and leaves Gregorius on a stone on the secluded

7 This selection of gem-set objects could of course already be extended with regard to Wolfram von Eschenbach, since the *Brackenseil* would also be a very good example of a materially valuable object with gems formed into words. However, this paper intends to examine the revealing effect of materiality and the message of gemstones on the objects in question concerning doubtful aspects of character biographies. As Tamara Elsner shows in this issue of MEMO in her article 'Text as thing. The dog lead in Albrecht's 'Jüngerer Titurel'', materiality also has an influence on its text-internal recipients, but at the same time, it is in conflict with the actual message of the dog lead. While in this case it is a matter of a materiality-related conflict of materiality and message, this paper will deal with the conflict of dubious and concealed aspects of central characters, which are kept present via gems as indicators of virtue. For reasons of coherence and this characteristic common to all three objects examined here, the selection remains limited to the wax tablet, the Cupido helmet and Arofel's shield.

8 All references from the text are taken from Mertens (ed.) 2008.

9 Wenzel/Wenzel 1996, p. 105.

10 As highlighted by Marshall 2016, p. 310.

island, so that he can repent his sins (*Gregorius* vv. 2481–3100). After many years, Gregorius is allowed to leave his exile and is chosen by God himself as the new Pope (*Gregorius* vv. 3177–3185). When he returns to the fisherman, he looks for the table. Even though the place where Gregorius had forgotten the table has been burnt down, it is not only found, but it is also as good as new (*Gregorius* vv. 3730–3735). Michael R. Ott has stated that, with regard to the fact that Gregorius' mother has decided against more enduring material like parchment or stone, it is more than remarkable that the table is well preserved.¹¹ The inscription is weather-beaten¹², but its frame of gems and ivory – according to Ludger Lieb and Michael R. Ott symbolizing chastity and purity and therefore standing in clear opposition to the former content¹³ – appears in an almost renewed state. However, instead of interpreting the vanished inscription as a sign of redemption¹⁴, the valuable materiality of the table as its sole feature could also be read as the indestructible reminder of Gregorius' heritage and the possibility of a new inscription at any time. As it will be shown at the end of this paper, in addition to the possibility of a new inscription one could also 'read' the remaining gems as a potential reminder of a peccable – human – past of a prospective pope.

How exactly specific gems can be indicators of both – a persistent or a fragile virtuousness – shall be demonstrated with the help of the following cases of talking gems in *Wilhelm von Österreich* and *Willehalm*, where they serve as tools to detect virtuousness or to bring dubious actions to light.

2. *Wilhelm von Österreich* – the Cupido-helmet as an unreliable indicator of virtuousness

In *Wilhelm von Österreich* (WvÖ) by Johann von Würzburg, the protagonist Wilhelm/Ryal has to pass several trials of virtuousness. An important part of one of these trials is the Cupido-helmet. Wilhelm receives this item in the treasure chamber of Joraffin, the ruler of the so-called fiery Mountains. Joraffin presents Wilhelm various valuable objects from which he may choose, but the protagonist's attention gets caught exclusively by a zinc white helmet with a little child-like figure on top of it – the Cupido-helmet (WvÖ vv. 3905–3911; vv. 4019–4037)¹⁵. The figure wears a wreath made of red gold as *zimier* (crest), and the word CUPIDO is inscribed on it with specific gems. Every letter is made of one distinct gem (WvÖ vv. 3950–74), and they do not only serve to highlight the quality and richness of the inscription, but they also seem to function as indicators of the righteousness of its owner. Every gem represents a certain kind of 'spiritual virtue' – meaning that it obtains a power through naturally given qualities, which again were assigned to it in medieval nature history treatises. This can be corroborated by regarding briefly every letter of the CUPIDO-helmet with Ulrich Engelen and Gerda Friess, who both did extensive research on gems in the Middle Ages.

11 Ott 2015, p. 257f.

12 Ott 2015, p. 264.

13 Lieb/Ott 2015, p. 23.

14 Lieb/Ott 2015, p. 25.

15 All references from the text are taken from Regel (ed.) 1906.

All the Cupido-letters are associated to theological and therefore *tugend*-related topics. The letter C is made of a ruby, representing the way out of sin – especially in the context of Mariology¹⁶ – and the letter U is made of carbuncle, representing godly light, the Word of God and his sympathy.¹⁷ The letter P is a turquoise, which is associated with humbleness.¹⁸ The letters I and D are both made of *adamas* (diamond), which is associated with durability and virtuousness in faith.¹⁹ The letter O is a chrysolite, a gem connected to virtuousness and faith in godly wisdom.²⁰ From a material-focused perspective, the constellation of these letters reveals – theologically spoken – a dense accumulation of stones linked to specific aspects of virtuousness in a Christian sense. As a matter of course, the inscription not only refers to theological dimensions. The more obvious connection between the child-like figure depicting Amor and the name Cupido as a self-reference to the Roman god is the theme of *minne*.

Following Engelen, ruby and carbuncle for the specific gems forming the letters C and U and their similar color could be read as a reflection of the two loving parts of one *minne*-relationship.²¹ To strengthen this assumption, the *minne*-dimension of the inscription as well as the helmet itself becomes apparent when Wilhelm chooses the helmet due to the fact that it reminds him of his beloved Aglye, whom he has never really seen before.²² In addition, Joraffin discloses to Wilhelm the *minne*-related meaning of every stone in the text (WvÖ vv. 4059-4101). Regarding the helmet on a metaphorical level, its gems function as representations of the catalogue of *tugend*- and *minne*-related qualities that the helmet-bearer should possess. Hence, specific gems can fall off the wreath, indicating a lack of virtuousness of its bearer – one could also state that they own the *agency* of observably judging their bearer:

*ez ist dar umme also getan,
er muoz sehs lay wirde han
der in ze haubt binden schol:
daz kuonnen iu bewaeren wol
die sehs stain glantz
die ligent in dem crantz
und in der krone guldin
die uff hat daz kindelin
daz uf den helm gemacht ist.
swem der sehs wird ainiu brist
der die stain sint geziuge,
fuor war! ich daz niht liuge,
swenne der den helm stuortzet,
zehant der stain zu buortzet
der der selben tugent walt.
(WvÖ vv. 4055-4069)*

16 Engelen 1978, p. 324-326.

17 Friess 1980, p. 136f.

18 Engelen 1978, p. 380.

19 Engelen 1978, p. 298f.

20 Friess 1980, p. 108f.; see also Engelen 1978, S. 294f.

21 Engelen 1978, p. 324-326.

22 Schneider 2004, p. 39f.

In this regard, Albrecht Jürgens speaks of a constantly threatening crisis concerning the reputation of the helmet-bearer (cf. WvÖ vv. 4122–4127).²³ Despite this constant threat of revealing inadequate behavior, Wilhelm decides to wear the helmet. Almut Schneider points out that afterwards, Wilhelm is able to kill his rival in love Wildomis without a fair fight and without losing a gem.²⁴ Wilhelm achieves the triumph over Wildomis with a certain degree of perfidiousness: He attacks with a poisoned spear and armed in a foreign armor after hiding behind a grandstand for women, where Wildomis most certainly would not suspect any opponent (WvÖ vv. 10227–10263). Wilhelm's way of 'dispatching' his rival attests him deceitfulness, but not *tugend* in any way. This raises the question how it is possible that all the gems stay in place, and that Wilhelm remains unmarked by the helmet?

This can be explained by the mobility of the helmet as a *tugend*-indicator. Wilhelm does not seem to wear the Cupido-helmet in this scene, because his new *zimier* is described as a twig:

*auch het er haizzen im bereit
gruen als der hag ain wafenclait,
ein duerrs ris sin zymmier was;
er wolt niht daz
in ieman do erkante.
(WvÖ vv. 10227–10232)*

The absence of the Cupido-helmet reveals the possibility of laying the helmet aside, thereby preventing the gems from 'witnessing' the killing of Wildomis. It seems that the function of the helmet as an indicator for virtuousness is bound to the condition that its owner is actually wearing it.²⁵ The *agency*-capacity of the visibly judging gems and their ability to mark dubious transgressions is restricted to their presence in the actual *tugend*-related events. That means, if Wilhelm can simply leave behind the indicator of his virtuousness, its *agency* is extremely limited and error-prone, because thenceforth the displayed false message of these gems still being in good order is only transparent for the original bearer and the recipient of the text, who know the history of the protagonist and the helmet. It is this connection between the knowledge of the recipient about a specific gem-*agency*, together with the gems' impact on the recipient's perspective on a character, that leads to the 'talking' gems in Wolfram's von Eschenbach *Willehalm*.

3. *Willehalm* – the authority of 'talking' gems

After defeating a huge Saracen army that had besieged the city of Orange in Wolfram's epic (*Wh*), *Willehalm* talks to a Saracen king named Matribleiz, who is a relative of his wife. After the victory of the French army that fights alongside the margrave, *Willehalm* grants Matribleiz security and a safe conduct home (*Wh* st. 461,24–463,1)²⁶. In this context he tells the Saracen king a story

23 Although later in the text, he is accused for this murder: Jürgens 1990, p. 411f.

24 Schneider 2004, p. 44.

25 Cf. Schneider 2004, p. 44f.

26 All references from the text are taken from Heinzle (ed.) 2009.

about a certain finding he had made earlier in an almost abandoned Saracen camp. In this camp, the margrave came across a tent; after entering it he found inside – quite to his surprise – the bodies of twenty-three kings to be layed out. Attached to their litters were golden epitaphs with inscriptions made of gems (*Wh st.* 464,25), but whereas the gems are not described in detail – they are just *edele steine* – the text reveals what they are 'saying':

*dar an was ieslich buochstap
mit edelen steinen verwieret,
al die bâre wol gezieret.
man liset dâ kuntliche
ir namen und ir rîche,
wannen ieslicher was erborn
und wie er hât den lip verlorn.
(Wh st. 464,24-30)*

The epitaphs speak of the names, birthdates and kingdoms of every fallen king and give information about the way in which they died. Willehalm literally regrets entering the tent after this finding (*mich gerou, daz ich dar under was*, *Wh st.* 465,1). He only seems able to read some of the epitaphs, and after a brief look, he turns his eyes away from the tables. Then he leaves the tent and safeguards the fallen kings and a Saracen priest, who sojourned there (*st.* 465,6-10). With regard to the topic of this paper, the brief mentioning of Willehalm's remorse without any further explanation, his almost evasive reading of the epitaphs, and also the timing of telling this story to a Saracen king, whom – unlike before – he grants safe conduct, needs to be analyzed in detail. All these aspects as well as the ability of gems to indicate virtuousness suggest a connection between the 'talking' gems on the epitaphs to gemstones on a shield connected to a previous killing of a Saracen king and close relative of Willehalm's wife: Arofel.

Arofel's death is a controversial topic because Willehalm kills Arofel regardless of his request for safe conduct and his defenseless situation.²⁷ The fact that there is no fight between the two opponents, because Arofel's armor shifts and his leg loses its protection before the two opponents can start a fight, further adds to the dubious nature of the killing. Willehalm makes use of this opportunity and cuts Arofel's leg off – sending his adversary to the ground, then killing him (*Wh st.* 79,9). Because of the absence of a fight, the shield of Arofel remains intact and therefore can be read as a reminder of the equivocal killing.²⁸ Arofel's shield is of extraordinary value (*Wh st.* 82,8; 202,24; 202,28-30) and is adorned with sumptuous and luminescent gems (*st.* 203,6f.). Willehalm leaves the intact shield as an indicator of his guilt in a monastery, which later burns to the ground.²⁹ Nevertheless the precious gems of the shield remain in the story told by the former abbot, and with their mentioning Willehalm is forced to tell the story of its acquisition to the king Lois, who listens to the abbot's story. Just like Wilhelm can leave behind the Cupido-helmet,

27 For a short overview concerning the different arguments about the (il-)legitimacy of Willehalm's deed and possible motivations for it cf. Nieser 2018, p. 48-77; Schröder 1974; Greenfield 1991, a.o. p. 107, 134, 168 and 181; Raucheisen 1997, p. 80; Przybiski 2000, p. 164; Bumke 2004, p. 285; Brüggem/Bumke 2014, p. 854f.

28 Cf. Nieser 2017.

29 Nieser 2017, S. 335-338.

Willehalm is able to lay aside the shield as an indicator of questionable virtuousness. Moreover, the shield as a 'witness' of the dubious deed is destroyed by the fire in the monastery. Willehalm uses this opportunity to modify his report to the king. He keeps silent about the absence of a fight, therefore the shield changes from being loot of a dubiously killed Saracen king to a trophy gained by righteously defeating his rival (Wh st. 203,20).³⁰ To put it bluntly: Willehalm temporarily overwrites the 'revealing' story of the intactness of Arofel's shield which is known only to him and the recipients, so his virtuousness seems to remain unblemished – at least within the frame of the story told.

Looking back to the tent-scene and Willehalm's evasive behaviour it seems likely that in front of multiple epitaphs telling the story of so many fallen Saracen kings, the problematic killing of Arofel and the *rêroup* (viz. stealing from corpses) might surface.³¹ If this is the case, the motif of *edele steine* – working as a reminder of Willehalm's deed – is forcing its way back into the story and finally gets its own 'voice' and authority over the death-story of fallen Saracen kings. The ones who know the correct sequence of events behind Willehalm's story at the monastery – the margrave himself and the recipient – are reminded of this knowledge, as 'talking' gems claim the sovereignty about preserving the *fama* and *memoria* of these kings, thereby acting as a reminder of the culpable dimension of a patron saint (Wh st. 4,13). If this is plausible, the margrave's manufactured story of a seemingly fair fight with Arofel ultimately closes in on Willehalm the moment he is confronted with these 'talking' gems.

Considering these aspects, the margrave's story to Matribleiz tells the recipient much more than his interlocutor on the narrative level: Willehalm's evasive look and near escape out of the tent could be interpreted as an involuntary confrontation with his questionable deeds. Keeping this in mind, the timing of telling this story to Matribleiz and granting him safe conduct appears to be an act of remorse provoked by 'talking' gems as a reminder of *tugend* and virtuousness.

4. Back to Gregorius – ornamental gems operating as 'talking' gems

Considering all the previous aspects about gems as indicators of virtuousness, a re-evaluation of Gregorius' wax tablet and its importance as a reminder of his identity becomes plausible. Sophie Marshall has already demonstrated that there is an interconnectivity between the rich material and Gregorius' past. She refers to the division of the treasure of Gregorius' parents and their incest as conditions of non-circularity.³² Marshall points out that the modification of the parents'/siblings' treasure into gold could be a solution to this familiar pseudo-circularity caused by the incest. While *gold* sets the search for Gregorius' identity in motion³³ and its value changes during the events in the text, the *tabula* – and its gems – keep their value as part of a hoarded – non-circular –

30 Nieser 2017, S. 341.

31 In addition, it is also possible, that Arofel could be one of these layed out kings and that his story was written down in gems on the memorial plaque. Because the text is not offering more details about the fallen kings, this has to remain an assumption.

32 Marshall 2016, p. 317f.

33 Marshall 2016, p. 320.

treasure that finds its way back to Gregorius. Following this argument on a basic level, it seems reasonable to state that materiality plays an important role as a marker of Gregorius' identity.

With regard to these aspects, the *tabula* combines several characteristics of the analyzed 'talking' gems. While the abovementioned scholars focus on the wax tablet as a sign of grace and Gregorius being at the point of his recovery as a saint, the way of treating the table as a secret, of laying it aside and hiding it is more than remarkable and seems to be equally important. The wax tablet as an object ornamented with gems linked to the past of its owner shares a distinct characteristic with the Cupido-helmet and Arofel's shield: it is mobile and can be laid aside.

Gregorius does not lay it aside on purpose but forgets it as he leaves into exile (*Gregorius* vv 3077-3080). Before that, however, he hides it as long as possible in order to prevent it from revealing its story in public. Gregorius' flaw as a child of siblings has already come out and therefore cannot be seen or read publicly, which is why the *tabula*'s mobility connects it to the Cupido helmet and Arofel's shield. All their particular bearers pursue the same target by laying them aside or hiding them: their individual flaws should not be revealed in public. Moreover, similar to the gems on Arofel's shield, the valuable stones on Gregorius' table are able to survive a fire and find their way back into the story – still referring to the royal, yet intricate heritage of its owner. In accordance with the inscriptions on the golden epitaphs the reminding gems on the rich table can be reminiscent of a problematic past and thereby keep in mind the peccable nature of the prospective pope Gregorius – and hence his human nature.

5. Conclusion

The paradox of the status of things "being material and meaningful"³⁴ lies at the bottom of the considerations outlined here. Looking back on the results so far, the three different gem-set objects combine the preservation of their original message in the interplay between the text and the recipient level. Their "matter constrains meaning and vice versa"³⁵: While the negative connotations for the owners of the Cupid helmet and Arofel's shield are asserted directly via precious stones formed into words, the valuable framing of the wax tablet possesses the agency of the reminding counter-voice of virtue – as opposed to the passing word on the tablet.

Moreover, there seems to be a closer connection between the shield of Arofel as well as the epitaphs in *Willehalm* and Gregorius' wax tablet. In Wolfram's text, Willehalm takes possession of the shield and, from that point onwards, carries the material reminder of his dubious deed. The wax tablet, however, is a gift that initially fulfills two essential functions as a marker of Gregorius' noble heritage and as a reminder of his intricate past. Both objects share the fate of getting burned, but with different outcomes: The 'message' of the intact shield in *Willehalm* has first to be remembered by the abbot's story and is recalled later on in a material way with the help of the epitaphs. Focusing on the role of

34 Daston 2014, p. 17.

35 Daston 2014, p. 17.

'talking' gems, the story of the dubious killing in Wolfram's text is told with the help of one fragile (burnt shield) and several imperishable message carriers (epitaphs). Considering these aspects, one may assume that Wolfram had knowledge of Gregorius' wax tablet, which combines these two dimensions.

The *tabula* as well as the valuable frame of its inscription endure the fire in Hartmann's text. The inscription, however, is weather-beaten and cannot be restored. Whereas Willehalm deliberately leaves the shield as a material reminder of his guilt behind,³⁶ Gregorius forgets the wax tablet when he goes into exile – to atone for his past that is partially written on the *tabula*. In both cases, the left-behind objects change their messages due to the influence of the elements but still are able to maintain their functionality in the text. Despite the transformation of both message carriers, the 'talking' gems are able to act as ultimately indestructible and constant reminders of the dubious past of their bearers. Their material value matches the level of virtuousness they are demanding of their owners. If they do not meet these high standards, no matter if forgotten, laid aside or burnt, the gems possess – to various degrees, of course – the *agency* to indicate individual (lack of) virtuousness and seem to be bound to the fate of their owners.³⁷ The gems on Arofel's shield keep their message that has to be reclaimed by the story told by the golden epitaphs, but the gems on Gregorius' *tabula* proved to be a special case. With the transformation of the wax tablet changes the function of its 'talking' gems: the vanishing of the inscription and hence of the story of Gregorius' intricate past seems to recode the message of the valuable frame from being a link to his noble heritage to framing a story of a prospective pope that has yet to be told. Thus, the 'talking' gems on Gregorius' *tabula* do not only serve the purpose to remember the problematic past of a prospective pope. The *tabula* also 'reframes' Gregorius' past and marks the space for a story about the papal future not only as one of a ruining incest child but also as one of a child of god.

In conclusion, the corresponding meanings of the messages, which – at least in the chosen examples – are in conflict with the respective biographies of the protagonists, are generated in different ways. The gems of the Cupido helmet acquire meaning through the theologically significant materiality and the second carrier of the gems – the little Cupido-figure. The stones on Arofel's shield can only assert their significance in contradiction to Willehalm's deliberately chosen perspective in his report and by his remorse in view of the gem-set epitaphs. The function of the gemstones on the wax tablet, on the other hand, can only take effect if they prove to be the enduring element from Gregorius' past in the weathered narrative of the tablet. What they all have in common is the conflict of their owners with a virtue-associated theme, which is negotiated in the intermediate level of the respective texts, in which the admonishing 'voice' of the gems also comes to play an important role.

With this finding of a materially bound, 'righteous' voice that can be heard in the interplay between the textual level and the level of reception, this contribution should be understood as a stimulus for further reflections on the agency of things as dissenting voices in the face of dubious biographies of characters that had rather remained hidden in the text.

36 Nieser 2017, p. 337f.

37 Cf. Lieb/Ott 2015, p. 25.

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Dubious Actions Coming to Light: The Role of 'Talking' Gems as Indicators of Virtuousness

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