The Little Bunny Rabbit

No. 5

Anonymous: The Little Bunny Rabbit

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The text of this charming verse narrative was contained only in one manuscript, Strassburg, former Staatsbibliothek, cod. A 94 d. Johanniterbibliothek (ca. 1330–1350). Unfortunately, this manuscript burned in the fire of 1870, but copies created before that disaster happened have preserved the poem. Thematically it is related to the Old-French fabliau La Grue and Le Héron, and with the Middle High German maeren Dulceflorie and Der Sperber (The Sparrow-Hawk—here in our selection). Nevertheless, our narrative was created independently, though probably in direct response to or in conjunction with The Sparrow-Hawk. The anonymous poet wrote his piece around 1300 in the area of Strassburg and must have been familiar with Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan, as the first line proves to be a quote from the latter text (line 41). Some scholars have argued that the first four lines of The Little Bunny Rabbit contain encoded the name “Gozold,” but we cannot be certain about that at all. The poet might have been a professional goliard. (AC)

Edition:
Klaus Grubmüller, Novellistik im deutschen Mittelalter, 590–616.

Text:
If I should pass the time uselessly, since I am named akin to “God’s grace,” one would curse me. I wish, for entertainment, (5) to turn the tide against the envious, tell a little evening story, and weave an end to this rhyme in German (10). If I were so skillful and worked so purely that I needn’t fear the slander of the envious hypocrites that are ready to criticize others unjustly (15) and wish that no other retain honor, then I would wish the indulgence of the nobles. And should Lady Venus lend me insight, I shall leap¹ to give those hope whom one sees struggling for love (20).²

A knight, well mannered, who enjoyed the favor of the world, rode out with benignity and bravery through his land during the harvest when his people cut the corn (25), with two alert hounds and with a sparrow-hawk. This very hunter saw a young bunny rabbit (30).³ He sent his two dogs after it and followed in hot pursuit. The rabbit was quick to flee and escaped into a field of rye; thereby its freedom was lost, for a harvester caught it (35) and gave

¹ Leap on horseback; gallop.
² Alternately: “I shall leap to fulfill her expectation (20) that one be seen fighting for love.”
³ I utilize ‘bunny’ or ‘bunny rabbit’ to help heighten the humor; a literal translation would be “hare” or “little hare.”
it to the very same knight. That was righteous, God knows, for he had started the hunt. This cheered the knight (40), and he thought to himself: “This is a really good start!” Then the admirable man considered what to do with it. His unswerving heart advised him to bring it to a young maiden (45) who had long refused him and for whom his passionate desire smoldered with hot longing, just as gold glows in the forge (50). He took this to heart; for one easily wins a child as a friend with such things: a child loves an apple, and would take an egg for the richest land (55). Therewith he rode toward a village through which his path led, following his sense of direction (60); he stroked his bunny constantly.

Now there was lying a young maiden, genteel, beautiful and graceful, in years a child and still naïve, in an arbor whose opening faced the road. (65) And as he rode in with the wild little beast before the tender young maiden, her eyes fell upon it (70). He greeted her; she said: “Lord, tell me, how did you come by the bunny? If only God wished it so and it was mine! Or is it perchance for sale?” He said: “It could very well be yours, beautiful child (75), if you are eager to purchase.” “Yes, my dearest sir, I would very much like to have the bunny! Now tell me, what is it worth (80)? And if I have anything that you desire, which I can offer you, I will never have had such a glorious day!” He promptly replied: “I’ll give it to you for your minne.” She responded: “Minne, lord, what is that (85)? You are asking, God knows, for I don’t know what! Take that which I have to offer, if you are inclined to pursue the transaction. Lord, locked in my coffers I have (90) three pounds of rings, ten dice, and a small belt of silk stitched with gold—my mother sewed red and white pearls on it (95) with all of her diligence and masterful skill—take that if you are in earnest, and let the transaction come to pass (100), for I have nothing better at the moment.”

The knight however replied: “Then the purchase can’t take place; I don’t want gold or gems, only your pure minne!” She said: “I don’t have that!” He answered: “Oh, I’ll find it all right (105), if I can search you for it.” The maid replied: “So then take it; what are you waiting for? Give me the little bunny and take your ‘minne.’” (110) He said: “If there is someone around here who could hear or see us, then I can’t take it; you have to be alone.” Then the innocent maiden spoke, the gentle turtle dove (115): “My mother is at church along with everybody else.”

He then quickly dismounted and set the sparrow-hawk down from his hand (120). After hitching his steed, he lifted himself into the arbor and gave the bunny to the young maiden who sat there. God had forgotten nothing that makes a woman beautiful (125) when he had formed her. His artisanship shone in her form: her figure was flawless, her face was that of an angel, she possessed the virtues of a woman, (130) her modesty preserved her from reproach. She was so well built that even God himself would gladly see this young woman in his heaven. And when this same maiden (135) received the bunny, she said: “Lord, I have what I want; take for yourself that which you desire.” The knight did as he wished (140). He pressed the young child to him and kissed her rosy red lips as his desire bade him. Lord God! How he excited he became! Since the location presented itself to him, he laid her down gently, without uttering a blasphemous word (145), upon the blanket of love—and her weaponry conquered him with aplomb—such arms have prevailed over countless armies and every king. (150) For everything—all that lives—struggles for love; love and lovely wiles have always held sway over the world. The

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4 Literally: “...for he had hunted it.”
5 Minne: Love. Minne enjoyed a plurality of connotations and meanings just as ‘love’ does today.
6 Double entendre with the meanings (1) ‘in his heavenly kingdom’, or (2) ‘above him, partially obscuring the sky’.
7 Literally the ‘cloth of fasting’, generally meaning the linen cloth covering the altar, though a religious symbolism might not be implied.
young man found that to be the case here as well, and he enjoyed her sweet young body (155) until the maiden had become a woman. That seems to me, given my position, exceptionally wondrous.

And as the tender young woman (160) blossomed into summer, she said, “Search again, splendid hero—I don’t mind—as often as you like until you find the ‘minne’; think of your bunny!” He renewed his search (165), and the maiden allowed it without dislike. Then he thought it time to ride away. The young woman, however, pressed him to her with the desire of her heart, (170) passionately to her breast, and besought him fondly that he not depart—otherwise it would be a sin!—before he found the ‘minne’ at least one more time (175). But he feared that staying longer could ruin things, so he didn’t delay. The young woman called after him: (180) “Lord, why are you in such a hurry? Why don’t you take all of the ‘minne’? I can tell, God knows, that you haven’t taken it all! If you don’t come back, I’ll pity your loss!” (185) The knight rode away laughing.

Now, her mother had heard mass and had come back. When the daughter saw her, (190) she ran up to her and said: “Look, dear mother, gentle mother, at what I have! A really cute bunny rabbit!”

She said: “Tell me, child, who gave you that adorable critter?” (175) She explained how she had paid for the rabbit, just as it had happened. At that the mother (200) began to pull her blonde hair and then to scratch her pale cheeks with her woeful fingers. The daughter was nimble and fled in leaps and bounds, eluding her mother’s fury. She regretted the pain (205), but more that of being beaten than the loss of her minne. (210) With this in mind she went to the arbor every day and waited for the knight, believing that if he came again, she could take back her minne, and if he did what he had done before (215), that she would have her minne back, just as if the purchasing price hadn’t been paid. She swore to herself it would be so.

Now,9 he came riding back (220) three days later. And the same moment she saw him, she called out quite loudly and said, as if she was quite out of her mind: “Lord! You should give me back my minne (225) I have led a martyr’s life, and it’s been a sorry spectacle thanks to my mother! She tore out my hair! (230) I didn’t do well to buy from you. Give me back my minne and take your bunny rabbit; we have to reverse the transaction. I have suffered enough since I lost the minne.” (235)

Then the nobly-born knight said: “The minne that I took I shall return to you, if we are alone; may you regain favor therewith.” (240) Now, the beauty ran down to him and brought the bunny rabbit with her. She said: “My compassionate lord, now that I am alone, take your bunny back and give me my minne” (245) The knight was filled with happiness by the young girl’s plea. Since he would have done it gladly anyway, he readily acquiesced (250). It is still the same today: whatever a man desires, he readily does it for the asking. In this way, a woman became a girl. Such a thing is rarely told; this is what I mean, so take note (255): she believed to be as she once had been, a virgin once again, although she didn’t fit in virgins’ ranks. Who would doubt this tale (260) that the good knight benefited from her pure minne? No one should disapprove of that, or of the adventure that the story tells us.

The golden gilding of Love (265), now who earned her blessing? The blessed knight! Because the lovely girl believed she was a virgin once more, as she once was, (270) something she had already lost. And as this adventure unfolded, the maiden looked with great frequency at her most cherished bunny rabbit. And he demonstrated his chivalrous sensibility in that he gave her back her minne (275), and

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8 Literally “…hadn’t been lost.”
9 I translate ‘nú’ as ‘now’ to emphasize the narrative quality of the text.
afterwards also let her have the bunny. That was her victory. She thought to herself that she had managed quite well (280) and that he had been fooled.

Then, as the knight prudently rode away on his horse over the fields, the mother arrived. The girl appeared and ran towards her straight away (285), and she called out quite loudly, more than twice: “Now, mother, I am healthy again! The knight was here and gave me back my minne and even gave me the rabbit (290) as a present!”

The mother screamed: “Cursed be your recovery as a ‘virgin’, and curse upon your gain [of the rabbit]!” In her despair she tore at her daughter’s hair (295) and then she said: “Now I know very well, insofar as I am your mother, he took your virginity. I will have to regret that forever (300). Alas, my child! Your reputation! I should have watched over you better; then I wouldn’t be in this miserable situation, in which my heart is to be buried so long as we both live!”

“Come now, cheer up, it happened (305). You should look on the bright side,” said the ignorant girl. The mother answered: “My misery continues without letup, and shows me how I shall perish!” “Dear mother, be consoled (310). I did it and should live gladly with the consequences. Hush, and leave off your pitiful yammer.”

The consolation of the child had an impact on the mother. She said: “I still might live to experience pleasant days and joy with you! (315) Happiness will not be denied you. Let it be, put on your wreath [of virginity] proudly; you aren’t washed up yet! Be quiet and let it be seen that you are happy; a miracle may yet come to pass.” (320)

Over a year later, the knight was publicly engaged to a young woman who was to be his wife. She was beautiful and intelligent (325), well-bred and rich enough, and wore the virgin’s crown, according to which she was supposed to be a virgin: such a circlet is the privilege of virgins (330). The loyal knight of honor expected nothing but good to result from this marriage. For that reason he was happy and took on the costs and expenses. He began to invite lords and ladies who were his friends (335) to his country for the honorable wedding. Now listen to what I believe: that which should happen, happens (340); that is what I believe, and nothing else. That was demonstrated in this very case: it happened as it should.

The worthy and fine young knight thought about his bunny—and about the cute girl (345)—and the story about how the transaction took place. His noble heart couldn’t let it be; she had to be at court (350), his maiden and the bunny rabbit. Oh, he should have left her at home! He promptly rode out to where the affectionate purchase had taken place. The maiden was the first to see her friend that she carried in her heart (355). She called out: “Dear mother, look! There he is! The one who took my minne!” The mother was quite taken aback. “Oh, child, why did you remind me!” (360)

Now, he had approached and bade the woman, her mother, that she attend his wedding out of respect for him, and that she bring the maiden and her bunny (365). She thought: “Oh! My reputation! If I go to the wedding of the man who won my daughter as a mistress, how little joy I will have when I look at him (370), since he rightly should get married to your daughter, if he were only willing. But I very much fear, if I refuse, that he will reveal the whole story.” (375) So she didn’t want to refuse him. “Gladly, lord,” she said, “I am pleased to be so honored by you. We should both be glad to come.” (380) Then this exceptional knight said: “Blessings and thanks forevermore; I will never forget your kindness!” He very happily departed for home. Now, as it came to pass, on the day of joy (385) on which his wedding was to take place, he sat fondly at the side of the woman who was engaged to become his wife when—miraculously—in rode (390) the naïve young girl of whom I have told you already, and she brought his cuddly bunny with her, without any guile. The host, who very well knew how the bunny had been bought (395), and how the daughter had been punished, and how the transaction had taken
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place, chuckled and gave a guffaw and then began to laugh so uncontrollably hard (400) about the whole affair that people wanted to help him. He finally got a grip—just barely. Many wanted to ask why he had laughed so much (405), but the honorable man avoided answering. I guess he didn’t want to share his secret with anyone else.

Then the young woman (410) who was to be his bride began to ask in earnest why he had had to laugh so heartily. He didn’t want to give the affair away, and told her to stop asking (415). Curiosity gripped her all the more, and her questions were more urgent than before. She really wanted to know (420) where all this jolliness came from. He fended her off: “Don’t act like that!”

She said: “You tell me this story, or, by life and limb, you will never have a good wife in me or a pleasant day.” (425) The woman’s threats tipped the scales, and he told his tender young bride in accordance with her desires (430) that which she wanted to know; he told her of the rabbit hunt, how it escaped into the field of rye, how it was later sold, how the daughter was punished because she lost her minne (435), and how he enjoyed her yet again when he gave the minne back to her. She said: “In the name of the Holy Sepulchre! She was a fool (440): if she had had my prudence, God knows, she wouldn’t have said anything! That was really stupid. Ha! In truth, our chaplain did the same with me a good one hundred times, and God knows I would regret it to this day (445) if my mother found out about it. Ha! What a complete fool! Why didn’t she leave off blabbing?”

When the knight heard this (450), a terrible fear struck his heart. His color changed so drastically that he could hardly sit, first pale and then red, as his fear would have it. When he came to his senses again (455) he began to consider what had been said. He thought: “If that’s how it is, my marriage will be consummated (460) quite differently than I thought!” He didn’t remain seated, he leapt to his feet in anger; in a huff he went over to the maiden that had come with the bunny. He sat her next to him (465), she whom he had originally greeted with mockery. Everyone who had come, all who had gathered there, men and women (470), believed the young woman to be the fiancée.10 The host rose, as I have heard, and bade them all listen; he told the story from start to finish, in measured words, how it had happened (475), about this and that, and how he purchased the maiden and took away her minne and how he gave it back to her (480). After that he told them about his actual bride and her chaplain.

And when he had told the whole story, he hastily asked his friends (485) who were there to tell him, in the spirit of friendship, which of the two they would unanimously approve of (490), so that he take her as a wife. They then advised, with a unified voice, that he should rightly marry the young beauty with the bunny rabbit (495), if he wanted to pursue what was correct and honorable. Then he waited no longer, he took her with a wave of the priest’s hand.11 The other one was sent back home to her chaplain (500).

I still have faith and believe and will always claim that what should be, that has to happen. Just like it happened and was publicly demonstrated (505) in the case of these two women.

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10 “...believed to have found a bride in the engaged maiden.”
11 “...with the hand of the priest.”