HARTMANN VON AUE’S RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE AND
DIDACTICISM IN HIS GREGORIUS

TO APPRECIATE Hartmann von Aue’s moral precept and his attitude toward Christianity, it is necessary first to review briefly Hartmann’s own character, so far as we can glimpse it from internal evidence in his works. He was Herr Hartmann, a member of the courtly circle; he shows, accordingly, in his Erec and Iwein a familiarity with, and appreciation of, the courtly life and tone. His protected life, devoid of hardship or struggle, reflects itself in a kindly and generous attitude, permeated with a sense of Treue as the word is used in the courtly epic. Treue is a fundamental trait of Hartmann’s character, implying a reciprocal loyalty to his overlord, as evidenced by the poet’s sincere lyrical laments over his loss. Treue of wife to husband in Erec, of husband to wife in Iwein, Treue as devotion of serf to superior in Der arme Heinrich—all these evidence the importance Hartmann attached to that quality. Such recognition shows Hartmann as a true and typical member of a courtly society that accepted Treue in its various meanings as a required part of the economic and social make-up. Loyalty, fidelity, allegiance—however one may interpret the term—assured a fairly secure and smoothly running society, without any great one-sided struggle for existence. The serf provided the means of living in return for the responsibility which the aristocrat assumed on his behalf. Hartmann as an aristocrat shows, accordingly, no great inner struggle and relatively little depth of philosophic insight. He accepts things as they are, and appears to write with an assured optimism that soon all will be better. Even in our moments of greatest anxiety over Gregorius’ or Heinrich’s fate, we feel that somehow all will
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turn out well. With but one noteworthy exception, *Tristan und Isolde*, the courtly epic may be generally characterized as optimistic in nature. Hartmann von Aue's optimism is typical of the courtly epic writer.

Hartmann's optimism springs not only from satisfaction with a life based upon *Treu*, but from a much more important and central concept of the art of living. It finds its source in a belief in the middle way or a golden mean of conduct; this he calls *mâze*, which, as he points out in his *Gregorius*, is a safe and guiding principle through all life's problems. *Mâze* prompted Hartmann's writing of his two great religious poems as an appeasement to his remorse of conscience over the frivolity and worldiness in *Erec*. Hartmann's strong belief in moderation in all things for the sake of spiritual harmony, together with the enjoyment of this life, is the keynote of his character and of his writings. The middle course, he believed and taught, guaranteed the well-being of man and the salvation of his soul. Thus he writes of his purpose and aims at the beginning of *Der arme Heinrich*:

```
dar an begunde er suochen
ob er iht des funde
dâ mite er swaere stunde
möhte senfter machen
und von sô gewanten sachen
daz gotes êren töhte
und dâ mite er sich möhte
glieben den liuten.¹
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(For thus the knight was wont to look
To see if he could not find aught
Wherewith his bad hours might be brought
To pass more lightly, or to find
Other things of such a kind
As to God's honor might redound;
Or whether, with the things he found,
He might regale his fellow man.²)

Existence, as Hartmann saw by virtue of his own inner piety,
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depended upon a dual sense of World and God, and a harmonious working between the two. A good wife, he wrote in *Erec*, must maintain a middle course with reference to both:

swâ mite ein wip gedienen sol
daz sî gote und dêr werlde wol
von schulden muoz gevallen . . .

(A woman should so act that for good reasons she is pleasing to God and to the world.)

Heinrich, in the midst of chiding himself for his youthful excesses and concomitant spiritual shortcomings, says:

dô nam ich sîn vil kleine war
der mir daz selbe wuschleben
von sînen gnâden hete gegeben.
daz herze mir dô alsô stuont
als alle werltôren tuont,
den daz saget ihr muot,
daz sî ère unde guot
âne got mûgen hân.
sus troug ouch mich mûn tumber wân,
wân ich in lützel ane sach
von des genâden mir geschach
vil èren unde guotes.4

(I gave to him but little heed
Whose grace permitted me to lead
A life of so much ease and good.
And thus it was that my heart stood
As all men’s hearts do, fooled by earth,
Whose intellects believe that worth,
And goods, and honor, we possess
Aside from God’s great kindliness.
This vain belief deceived me, too.
I looked but little on him, who
Bestowed upon me by his grace
My worldly goods and honored place.5)

His punishment is the result of too much worldliness,—a barrier to true and modest piety. Hartmann portrays similar spiritual shortcomings in the noble classes, a result of their excesses beyond *die richtige mûze* in *Erec* and *Iwein*, where,
in both cases, inner piety and a solution to life's problems are achieved only by fulfillment of one's duty to life and a devotion to godliness, simultaneously. Very similar to the foregoing passage from *Der arme Heinrich* is the poet's own interpolation in *Erec* concerning the human godly life:

> er tete sam die wisen tuont  
> die des gote genâde sagent  
> swas si èren bejagent  
> und ez von im wellent hân.  
> só triuget manegen ein wân  
> der in benamen beswichet,  
> so er sich des muotes richtet,  
> ob ihm iht guotes widervert  
> daz im daz si beschert  
> nüwan von siner frümekeít  
> und es gote dehein gnâde seit.".

(He did even as the clever ones do who speak graciously to God of whatsoever things they acquire as honors and what they desire to get from Him. Thus illusion deceiveth many a one who actually cheateth Him. Therefore he exalteth himself in his mind if any good befall him, imagining it only to be allotted him because of his virtue, and that betokeneth no grace to God.)

It is then clearly pointed out that everything in this life of any value is achieved only through God's good grace. There are many definite rules to be followed if we are to reap the joy of a complete life through the golden mean.

Many are the pious exhortations and didactic precepts of Hartmann, both directly and indirectly, in his *Gregorius*. In passing, it is interesting to note that Hartmann's poem of 4006 lines contains almost 1000 more than its French source, *La vie du pape Gregoire*, composed about the beginning of the twelfth century, and that Hartmann's philosophizing chiefly makes up for the difference in length. He often neglects lengthy descriptions of worldly possessions and objects, a feature of traditional epic style, in favor of dealing with moral precepts. At the very outset, Hartmann sounds
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the theme of his poem in stating his compulsion to write:

min herze hât betwungen
dicke mine zungen,
daz si des vil gesprochen hât
daz nâch der werlde lône stât . . . ?

(My heart hath often afflicted my tongue that it hath spoken much of that to which the world gives credit . . .)

—and the implication is made at once that the rewards of this world are not sufficient for man. One must seek the reward of heaven as opposed to the evil of the world:

der gnâden ellende
hât danne den boesern teil erkorn . . .

(The exile from grace hath chosen the more wicked part.)

He adds by way of further apology:

Durch daz waere ich gerne bereit
ze sprechenne die wârheit,
daz ez gotes wille waere
und daz diu grôze swaere
der sântlichen bürde
ein teil ringer würde,
die ich durch mine müezekeit
üf mich mit worten hän geleit.

(Therefore I was ready gladly to speak the truth since it was God’s will, and in order that the great oppression of my sinful burden might be somewhat lightened, which I, through my slothfulness and by my words, had brought upon myself.)

When he states that his tale is von dem guoten sündaere (about the good sinner), he expressed tersely and paradoxically the theme of duality in life, that sin and grace are not absolutely separated, but that they may interfere one with the other or even work concurrently in attempting to secure their separate aims. The epic proceeds to develop the thesis that no matter what degradation besets mankind, the power of salvation is sufficient to overcome it and to elevate the individual.
What then are the precepts that man must follow, according to Hartmann, to attain the highest glory? To the modern reader, it would seem that the story of Gregory is self-evident; but Hartmann, preacher-like, interjects his admonitions throughout. One is reminded of George Eliot's sententious utterances of Adam Bede, but one is grateful that Hartmann exercises more poetic restraint than the English philosopher-novelist. Possibly this restraint is a reflection of Hartmann's aristocratic sense of propriety and proportion. His good taste is further reflected in Gregorius by his conservation of detail when dealing with the horrible.

To return to the precepts of a perfect life, the old father, Polonius-like, gives them in brief to his son as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{wis getriuwe, wis staete,} \\
\text{wis milte, wis diemüte,} \\
\text{wis vrävele mit güete,} \\
\text{wis diner zuht wol behuot,} \\
\text{den herren starc, den armen guot.} \\
\text{die dinen solt du ëren,} \\
\text{die vremeden zuo dir këren,} \\
\text{wis den wisen gerne bl,} \\
\text{vluch den tumben swâ er sl.} \\
\text{vor allen dingen minne got,} \\
\text{rihte wol durch sin gebot.}^{11}
\end{align*}
\]

(Be loyal, be constant, be generous, be humble, be courageous with virtue; preserve well thy good breeding, strong before thy masters, good to the poor; thou shalt honor thy kin, avoid those strange to you, remain gladly with the wise, and curse the stupid whosoever he may be; above all, love God, be guided well by his commands.)

Here is the true pattern for courtly life, together with the first great teaching to love the Creator, according to His command. The precept, too, of sharing with one's neighbor is further emphasized as Gregorius takes leave of his mother:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{den gelt von iuwerm lande} \\
\text{den teilet mit den armen;}^{12}
\end{align*}
\]
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(Compensate him with your land; share with the poor.)
The third great and important requisite to shun the frivolities of this life, and the concerns of the devil, is stressed in the abbot’s appeal to Gregorius,

... verkoufe dine kurze tage
umb daz éwige leben ...

(Exchange thy short days for the eternal life . . .)

and also in Gregorius’ admonition to his mother that she should, in complete penitence, go into a cloister. This pious exhortation is made, he says, because

... got die wâren riuwe hât
ze buoze über alle missetât.

(God hath the true redeeming power to make up for all misdoing.)

On the other hand, the old courtier from whom the brother and sister seek advice after their incest, insists that the sister make amends for sin by good deeds in the world:

belibet sî bî dem lande,
ir sünde unde ir schande
mac sî sô baz gebüezen.
sî mac den armen grüezen
mit guote und mit muote,
bestêt sî bî dem guote . . .

........................
sô mac sî mit dem guote
volziehen dem muote:

(Let her remain in her country. She may thus more effectively make amends for her sin and her shame. She may greet the poor with goodness and with courage. Let her stand fast by the good. Thus may she through goodness gratify her spirit.)

Such counsel is far removed from that which resulted in the familiar medieval escapist practice of going on crusades or pilgrimages, or even of retiring to some protective convent.

Generally speaking, however, stress is laid on the ascetic idea that genuine grief associated with the fleeing from
company, thereby cutting oneself off from transitory joys and earthly wishes, is also an effective means for the soul’s salvation. The implication is obvious in Gregorius’ own act of penitence on the isle. True repentance is man’s real salvation, as Gregorius remarks most emphatically to his mother:

iuwer sêle ist nie sô ungesunt
wirt iu daz ouge ze einer stunt
von herzelicher riuwe naz,
ir sit genesen, geloubet daz.17

(Your soul is never so harmed, if at a moment the eye is wet with genuine sorrow; thus are you redeemed, believe that.)

The power of the Holy Ghost to overcome all error is directly stated by Hartmann in his comment on Gregorius’ self-incarceration:

swie sêre der gotes trût
an dem libe waere
verwandelt von der swaere,
nu was der heilige geist
dar an gewesen sin volleist
alsô gänzlichen
daz im niht was entwichen . . .18

(No matter how God’s spouse was changed in body by her trouble, yet was the Holy Ghost so completely the sustaining power, that no loss was suffered in any way . . .)

—but the Holy Spirit’s power can work only after confession and penance have effected the strongest deumuot (humility) and one has learned the lesson of mâze in his life, all of which is neatly summed up by Hartmann in describing Gregorius’ approach to Rome:

Er kunde wol ze rehte leben,
wan im diu mâze was gegeben
von des heiligen geistes lère.
des rehten huote er sêre.
ez ist reht daz man behalte
deumüete in gewalte
(dâ genesent die armen mite),19
(He knew well how to live aright when the proper spirit of moderation was instilled in him by the teaching of the Holy Spirit. He would champion the right strongly. It is proper that one should maintain humility in power,—so flourish the poor with him.)

In his stressing of **mâze**, Hartmann does not forget to make mention of **Treu** at the same time. Aside from the direct didactic reflections in the **Gregorius**, Hartmann emphasizes further his unity of theme and purpose by implication. Gregorius' horror and sadness are likened to the sorrows of Biblical heroes,—Judas, David, Absalom. The **tavele** (tablet) with its story of his birth, which Gregorius carries with him, also serves as a symbolic reminder of human guilt. It is significant to note that he did not have or need it while he lived under the protection of the monastery, and again, that he leaves it behind him at the fisherman's hut while he does penance on the isle. During this time of penance, moreover, the symbol of sin is burned with the hut in which he slept; yet he finds it again in the ashes, before he sets out for Rome. But this time it seems to have lost its power over him: the guilt has been purged through the fires of repentance and penance.

A subtle suggestion also that the church is the true guardian of man's soul is implied in the abbot's remorseful complaint to Gregorius:

Sun, du hâst mûr vil geseit,
manic tiutsch wort für geleit,
daz mich vil sêre umbe dich
wundern muoz, crêde mich,
und weiz niht war zuo daz sol,
ich vernaeme kriechisch alsô wol.

... ........................................

dû bist, daz merke ich wol dar an,
des muotes niht ein klôsterman.
nu wil ich dichs niht wenden mâ."}


The language that Gregorius had been taught in the monastery and should use is Latin—the language of the church.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Hartmann’s own point of view is presented in *Gegorius* (as it is also in *Der arme Heinrich*), under the guise of a narrative theme of penance for sin; and this point of view is but an expression of the theological moral teaching of his age, of sin, remorse and penitence, and redemption. In both his religious poems, Hartmann has a high seriousness of purpose behind his work: its aim is primarily didactic, but the charm and interest in narrative never flags. *Gregorius* is a combination of the traditional worldly or secular story, as exemplified by the *Niebelungenlied* or *Gudrun*, with that which treats primarily of truth or Christian teaching. However, the details and pictures of everyday life, as we have noted before, are cut to a minimum in *Gregorius* in favor of rationalizing and moralizing over the theme.

It is interesting in noting Hartmann’s religious attitude to compare the role of the devil in his *Gregorius* with that of its French source. In the latter, the devil is most important as the machinater of evil. The pious and naive writer of the French legend ascribed to him the full blame for driving brother and sister, and son and mother into incestuous relations. Hartmann, however, takes at once a more rational and moral view of the demonic impulse, playing the motif of the devil against that of human weakness. To be sure, the working of the devil is back of the deeds, for has not God ascribed to him the duty of mischief in this world? But before Hartmann says that the brother performed...
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... durch des tievels rät
dise grôze missetät\(^{21}\)

(... through the devil's advice, this great misdeed ...) he is careful to state four reasons why the brother is drawn to the sister—dieu minne (love,), sinr swester schoene (his sister's beauty), des tievels hoene (the devil's scorn), sin kinheet (his adolescence), three of which are associated with purely human "drives." In Hartmann's work, the devil is no longer a physical character, but a kind of abstract influence, subtly yet poignantly felt. The significant fact is that he possesses no compulsion, except in so far as the individual allows his promptings place in his mind. Four out of the five references to the role of the devil in the narrative make significant use of the word rät (counsel). The advice of the counselors in urging Gregorius' mother to take a husband is likened to that of Satan in the Garden of Eden:

\[
\begin{align*}
daz machten sine raete, 
&
der ouch vroun Even verriet, 
&
dô si von gotes gebote schiet.\(^{22}\) 
\end{align*}
\]

(His advice misled Eve likewise, so that she departed from God's commands.)

Here the devil works through a human agency, as is also implied when Hartmann describes the mother's distress upon discovery of the truth of her incestuous relations:

\[
\begin{align*}
sit er des tiuvels râte 
&
nu aber verhenget hâte 
&
daz si an der sünden grunt 
&
was gevallen anderstunt.\(^{23}\) 
\end{align*}
\]

(Since he had let the devil's advice run its course, which from time to time prompted their sin.)

and later in the same connection:

\[
\begin{align*}
sô hât uns des tiuvels rât 
&
versenkent sêle unde lípl 
&
ich bin iuwer muoter und iuwer wip.\(^{24}\) 
\end{align*}
\]
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(Thus hath the devil's counsel destroyed us, body and soul! I am your mother and your wife.)

Only once is the word wille applied to the devil—

\[
\text{da ergie des tiuvels wille an.}^{25}
\]

(There was the devil's resolution carried out.)

—when the counselors have succeeded in persuading the woman to marry. Again, significantly, the word is used only after many rational arguments have been put forth by human means and agents, who appear to be the prime movers while the devil acts only in the background. Such an interpretation of the role of evil is a modern and psychological advance on Hartmann's part, when we consider the fact that at the end of the twelfth century the devil was a very real person and personality for most people.

Another moral consideration of the epic, more in line with Christian dogma of the Middle Ages, is that of the inheritance of sin. Incontrovertibly, the guilt of the fathers was visited upon the children. In *Gregorius*, the mother-son incest is the working on Gregorius himself of the parental guilt. Hence we understand Gregorius' mental torment each time he looks upon the tavele:

\[
\text{er weinde von der sünde,}
\]
\[
\text{dà er inne was geborn.}^{26}
\]

(He bewailed the sin wherein he was born.)

The dogma of the church asserted that in the first place, man was born in sin. Gregorius cries out in despair, therefore:

\[
\text{wie sol ich gotes hulde}
\]
\[
\text{gewinnen nach der missetât}
\]
\[
\text{diu hie vor mir gescriben stât?}^{27}
\]

(How shall I achieve God's gracious favor after the misdeed which here stands written before me?)

This is the underlying and primary sense of guilt from which
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the tragic events ensue. The secondary source of guilt is the lack of obedience to the instruction of the church, represented by the abbot's advice to Gregorius to remain with him. Here, lightly veiled, is another of Hartmann's denunciations of courtly and worldly life.

Once more, the poet cannot resist the opportunity to present the idea (through Gregorius' exceptionally mature arguments based on a surprising knowledge of the world for a youth who has been entirely sheltered from it!) that Gott and Welt must co-exist—

\[\text{got und ouch die liute.}^{28}\]

(God and mankind likewise.)

In answering the abbot, the youthful Gregorius exclaims that the cleric's advice is

\[\text{wider die werlt und wider got}^{29}\]

(against the world and against God)

and Hartmann adds, by way of plea for a full and normal life in the world:

\[
\text{diz was benamen der beste råt:} \\
\text{wande ëlich hiråt} \\
\text{daz ist daz aller beste leben} \\
\text{daz got der werlde hat gegeben.}^{30}
\]

(This was assuredly the best advice, since legal marriage is the best life of all that God hath given to the world.)

Thus the question is raised again: which is the greater, the ascetic or the courtly-worldly life? There is little doubt that Gregorius' decision to return to the world to lead a life of service among his fellow-men supplies Hartmann's answer. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the most sympathetically drawn character in the story is that of the abbot. He is pictured as a man of interminable patience,
possessed of sincere love, and as having an amazing under-
standing of the human heart.

Generally, insofar as character is related to the moral
thesis, Hartmann has developed the moral nature of his
people beyond their counterparts in the French source. For
example, the sententious advice of the old counselor to the
brother and sister is added (Ll. 595 ff.), as are also the remorse
of the fisherman over his treatment of the holy Gregorius
(Ll. 3307 ff.) and, most significantly, the picture of the ideal
pope (Ll. 3793 ff.). Hartmann dwells at length upon the
latter description as a moral pattern for all, wherein we see
the chief virtues extolled—\( \text{diu mâze, des heiligen geistes lêre,}
\text{des rehten huote, demüete in gewalte.} \) A person possessed of
these qualities can counter the devil, and inspire the laity to
repent with \( \text{riuwe suoze} \) (sweet penitence) and to do pen-
ance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sus kunde er rehte mâze geben} \\
\text{über geistlichez leben,} \\
\text{då mit der sündaere genas} \\
\text{und der guote staete was.} \\
\text{von siner starken lêre} \\
\text{sô wuohs diu gotes êre} \\
\text{vil harte stärliche} \\
\text{in roemischem riche.}^{31}
\end{align*}
\]

(Thus he could give the proper golden mean for spiritual
life, whereby the sinner was made whole and the good man
was faithfully sustained. Through his serious precepts, God’s
honor increased very strongly in the Roman kingdom.)

In handling plot, Hartmann makes use of many themes
common to both folk and courtly epic—the sister incest, the
unwitting marriage of mother and son, child disposal, the
search for parents, the freeing of courtly ladies—some of
which he ties in closely with the moral purpose of the narra-
tive, such as the finding of a key (instead of the usual ring) in
the fish’s stomach (signaling here the penitent’s release from
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sin), or similarly, those of the miraculous renewing of food, the automatic ringing of bells, or the healing of the sick, all of which are directly associated with, and prove the inner goodness of Gregorius. The glory of holiness has replaced the emphasis upon aristocratic worldly life of the usual courtly epic, yet the story is still rich in dramatic incident and suspense. Contrast is effectively used with respect to moral emphasis, as, for example, in the characters of the weak brother and the strong sister, of the poor and rich fishermen brothers, of the rude fisherman and his sympathetic wife (the latter more strongly developed), and the courtly aristocrat, Gregorius, with these rude fisherfolk. In some respects, the handling of story shows some minor excesses, if not exaggerations—the sorrow of the dying father at leaving his children, the brother’s distress in parting from his sister, the baby’s winning of the abbot’s affection with his laughter, and the abbot’s and Gregorius’ following each other with their eyes as the latter takes leave of his protector. In all these instances, however, there is a purpose: Hartmann is attempting to express the dominant tone of high seriousness as befits an exposition of pious faith. No one will dispute that he succeeds in expressing a sincere earnestness for those who suffer extremely for the good of their soul. Hartmann’s polish and punctilious care in his manner of writing enhance further and emphasize the seriousness of tone. His choice of words with their didactic import, such as buoze, tugent, huote, màze and reht, ring constantly in our ears, yet with a quiet and pleasing quality, and with connotations as rich and authentic as are the sounds of the old didactic German words themselves. Figures of speech are not common in the religious poems, though personification is used occasionally. Diu Saelde (Salvation), vrouwe Saeligkeit (Dame Blessedness), who brings the gift of staete (stedfast-
ness), and *der Wunsch* (Freewill), the only examples noted, are again harmonious with the didactic theme.

To sum up Hartmann’s attitudes and treatment in general, it is apparent that he constantly allows his own ideas to shine through his work. The writer of the French legend was little concerned, by comparison, with demonstrating an attitude toward life; he accepted nature and all its appetites as an integral part of man. Hartmann has a transcendent idea: he is not content merely to delineate the sorrow of a mother putting her child to sea, but he must explain it as a sorrow of the soul; Gregorius’ act of penance is not only a moving human experience, but it is also a terrible moral duty. The French source, more Oedipus-like perhaps, is content to express the purely human feelings of the unfortunates, but Hartmann’s narrative explores the dualism in human life with its polarities of Guilt and Atonement, Sin and Grace, Damnation and Salvation, Hell and Godliness, all calling to mind the necessity of penitence and penance. Hartmann’s artistic and ethical touches are interpolated without changing the actual material or problem of the older legend. The story is told as vitally, but we are reminded by Hartmann in his closing remarks that it is told for a purpose—for the welfare of our soul, to assure us sinful men that true penitence and humility before God can release the direst sinner, purifying, ennobling, exalting him, and that only doubt can prevent our complete salvation—

> des gestiure uns got, âmen.\(^2\)

(You may support us, Amen.)

**J. BEATTIE MACLEAN**

**NOTES**

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8. Ibid. Lines 24 f.
10. Ibid. Line 176.
11. Ibid. Lines 248 ff.
12. Ibid. Lines 2728 f.
13. Ibid. Lines 1796 f.
15. Ibid. Lines 603 ff.
16. Ibid. Lines 619 f.
17. Ibid. Lines 2703 ff.
18. Ibid. Lines 3466 ff.
19. Ibid. Lines 3793 ff.
20. Ibid. Lines 1625 ff.
22. Ibid. Lines 1960 ff.
23. Ibid. Lines 2495 ff.
24. Ibid. Lines 2602 ff.
25. Ibid. Line 2246.
26. Ibid. Lines 1750 f.
27. Ibid. Lines 1782 ff.
28. Ibid. Line 441.
29. Ibid. Line 2217.
30. Ibid. Lines 2221 ff.
31. Ibid. Lines 3823 ff.
32. Ibid. Line 4006.