Arthurian romance flourished in medieval Germany, but the pre-eminence of Wolfram von Eschenbach has perhaps overshadowed some of his successors. This book focuses on Wirnt von Gravenberg’s Wigalois, the later thirteenth-century Arthurian romance. It argues that whereas authors such as Der Stricker and Der Pleier follow the example of Hartmann von Aue by limiting themselves to an exploration of the pragmatics of the (fictional) chivalric value-system, the lay ethicist Wirnt chooses to examine the spiritual dimension of knightly existence, a theme first broached in the German context by Wolfram in his Grail romance, Parzival. Wirnt frames his romance as a corrective to that of his predecessor by creating a form of kingship for his hero which is more practicable than Wolfram’s millennial ‘Grail realm’. Rejecting the notion of an ideal space altogether, Wirnt’s naturalistic descriptions of his hero’s kingship give expression to a harmonisation of Arthurian and theocratic elements. The author thus suggests that Wigalois is not so much a paler imitation of Parzival as creative confrontation with the thought-world of his more famous predecessor.

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WIRNT VON GRAVENBERG’S

WIGALOIS

INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERPRETATION

Neil Thomas

D. S. BREWER
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Abbreviations

AbiG  Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik
ALMA  Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R. S. Loomis
       (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959)
ATB  Altdutsche Textbibliothek
BBIAS  Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society
CUP  Cambridge University Press
DTM  Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters
DVLG  Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft
       und Geistesgeschichte
EETS  Early English Text Society
GAG  Göppingen Arbeiten zur Germanistik
GLL  German Life and Letters
GRM  Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift
JEGP  Journal of English and Germanic Philology
LiLi  Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik
MLR  Modern Language Review
MTU  Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen
OGS  Oxford German Studies
OUP  Oxford University Press
PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
SM  Sammlung Metzler
UP  University Press
WW  Wirkendes Wort
ZfdA  Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum
ZfdPh  Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie
ZfrPh  Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie
Introduction: The Problematic Reception

To those accustomed to thinking of medieval literature in terms of the modern medievalist canon, it may be surprising to discover that after Tristan, Parzival and Arthur himself, the most commonly represented material from German romance in German art is the story of Wigalois.1

The early thirteenth-century Wigalois (recte Gwîgalois)2 by Wirnt von Gravenberg (the modern Gräfenberg near Bayreuth) exerted as great an appeal for medieval audiences as did the ‘classical’ Arthurian romances of Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach. Since Wirnt’s romance is not so well-known in our own age as those of Hartmann and Wolfram, a brief overview of its main stages is here given at the outset.3

Wigalois begins with the account of how Gawein is taken from the Arthurian court by Joram, the denizen of a distant realm where the goddess Fortuna is said to be the tutelary deity. Having arrived in Joram’s kingdom, Gawein is married to Florie, Joram’s niece, and presented with a belt of Fortune held to confer valour and well-being on its possessor. Without the belt (or having Joram as his guide) it is not possible for Gawein to return to Joram’s kingdom, and the story of Gawein’s son begins after his father has ridden back to Camelot but omitted to take with him the girdle of Fortune (which is later passed to his son). Gawein, who leaves knowing Florie is pregnant but not that she is bearing a son (who is to be named Wigalois), tries but fails to return to his wife, hence he and his family remain cut off from each other. Having heard many honorific stories about his father, however, when Wigalois reaches early manhood he seeks out...

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2 I keep to the conventional spelling used by the modern editor, Kapteyn, in order to harmonise my references with modern, electronic retrieval systems. There have been three editions of the romance: Wigalois, der Ritter mit dem Rade, getihtet von Wirnt von Gravenberch, ed. Georg Friedrich Benecke (Berlin: Reimer, 1819); Wigalois. Eine Erzählung von Wirnt von Gravenberg, ed. Franz Pfeiffer, Dichtungen des deutschen Mittelalters 6 (Leipzig: Göschen, 1847); Wirnt von Gravenberg, Wigalois, Der Ritter mit dem Rade, ed. J. M. N. Kapteyn, Rheinische Beiträge und Hülfsbücher zur germanischen Philologie und Volkskunde 9, part 1 (Bonn: Klopp, 1926). Citations will be from Kapteyn’s edition which is customarily recorded as the first volume of two because the text was originally planned to be followed by a Kommentarband which, however, never appeared. The only available continuous commentary comes in the form of the ‘Anmerkungen’ which Benecke appended to his editio princeps. On the circumstances surrounding the non-appearance of Kapteyn's Kommentarband see Wolfgang Mitgau, ‘Bauformen des Erzählens im Wigalois des Wirnt von Gravenberg’ (dissertation, University of Göttingen, 1959), p. 3, n. 2.
3 A fuller précis is given by Kapteyn in the Introduction to his edition, pp. 77–91.
his father at the Arthurian court where Gawein (whom, we are told, the son does not recognise by his name and reputation) is appointed as his chivalric mentor. Here the son, in an action portending his future preeminence, is able to sit on Arthur’s ‘stone of virtue’. Thereafter, in an initial series of skirmishes with sundry adversaries under the censorious gaze of a female emissary (Nereja), he manages to convince his sceptical guide that he is the equal of his father (whose services she had requested in preference to those of the youth). He thereby wins the qualification to proceed to the major challenge of defeating the Mohammedan necromancer, Roaz of Glois, the murderer of the good King Lar of Korntin, and so to release the unquiet soul of the ‘undead’ king. For this task (which takes place in a location styled as a purgatorial netherworld) he is endowed with an abundance of holy objects (but not with the belt of Fortune which has in the meantime been stolen). With God’s aid he defeats a host of demonic enemies and the necromancer himself (who has concluded a pact with the devil). The work of salvation completed, he marries the old king’s daughter, Larie, and rules over the now restored land of Korntin. In an extensive sequel he is joined by his father (whose identity has in the interim been formally revealed to him) and other Arthurian knights together with numberless converted foes in his campaign against a second malefactor, Lion of Namur. The siege of Namur successfully accomplished, Wigalois pays a ‘state visit’ to Arthur at Nantes before resuming kingship in the land of Korntin where his rule maintains standards of statesmanship and Christian compassion inaugurated by the late King Lar.

There are over forty surviving manuscripts of Wigalois and an index of the high medieval status of the work comes in the form of an adjudicating review of a number of medieval works by Hugo von Trimberg in the course of which he accords ‘höhen prîs’ to Wigalois. Further mentions or allusions are found in a number of other medieval works such as Diu Crône, Der Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg (a composite romance combining material from the Matter of Britain with legendary material concerning ancient Rome and the Trojan War).


5 See Der Renner, ed. Gustav Ehrismann, reprinted with a ‘Nachwort’ and augmentations by Günther Schweikle, 4 volumes (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970), lines 1221–6. The laudatory reference to Wirnt by Heinrich von dem Türlin (Die Krone (Verse 1–12281) nach der Handschrift 2779 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, ed. Fritz Peter Knapp and Manuela Niesner, Alldeutsche Textbibliothek 112 (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 2000), lines 2949f) has also been taken as documentation of ‘die beachtliche Resonanz, die das Werk vermutlich noch zu Lebzeiten des Dichters erfuhr’ (Bertelsmeier-Kierst, ‘Zur ältesten Überlieferung’, p. 275).

6 Der Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg, ed. Alfred Koppitz, Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters XXIX (Berlin: Weidmann, 1926). On the Arthurian associations of this romance see Manfred Kern,
and Konrad von Würzburg’s Der Welt Lohn. Konrad here takes Wirnt von Gravenberg as his protagonist, depicted as a man devoted to his worldly advantages who experiences a change of heart after glimpsing the hideous reverse side of the superficially seductive goddess, Frau Werlt. Seared by the vision, he resolves to devote his life to God by going on a crusade. Benecke included this short moral tale of 250 lines in his editio princeps and was inclined to see at least a kernel of historical truth in Konrad’s account (see his ‘Vorbericht’, p. x); but subsequent scholars have been more sceptical.

Meanwhile, in the latter half of the thirteenth century the romance of Wigamur exhibits a number of ideological continuities with Wirnt’s romance. As with Parzival, Tristan, and other celebrated romances of the first half of the thirteenth century, scenes from Wigalois are to be found on the Runkelstein murals, whilst some pewter figurines from Magdeburg bear further illustrations from the romance. In the later Middle Ages Jakob Putrich von Reichertshausen, an enthusiastic chronicler of the courtly era, gives an honourable mention to Wigalois in his Ehrenbrief and Ulrich Füetrer gives a condensed version in his Buch der Abenteuer. The continuing popularity of the romance in the Early Modern period is revealed in a number of literary recreations. There is a prose version of 1493, Wigoleis vom Rade, and translations of the romance into other European vernaculars, including a late seventeenth-century Yiddish redaction, Der Artushof, together with a printed version, Widuwilt, whilst a late Jewish version appeared under the title of Historie oder moralische Erzehlung von Ritter Gabein as late as 1789.

A short, fragmentary poem by Ludwig Uhland,
'Ritter Wieduwilt' (on the subject of Joram's initial challenge), appeared in 1809/10.15

The first modern edition of the Middle High German text was that of Benecke in 1816, so it may be claimed that, unlike other medieval narratives which were 'rediscovered' only in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Wigalois maintained its popularity for eight consecutive centuries. The early favour enjoyed by the romance in the aftermath of the Romantic era was, however, to be eclipsed by the advent of a positivist trend in German literary scholarship which led to more negative verdicts concerning the 'derivative' nature of Wirnt's work as a late manifestation of the Fair Unknown tradition (at the head of which stands the late twelfth-century Le Bel Inconnu).16 Furthermore, scholars of the later nineteenth century and many twentieth-century critics were inclined to work with a donor-and-recipient model of literary composition in mind and to view Wigalois (together with many other later works written in both German and French) as 'epigones' of the 'classical' predecessors, Hartmann, Wolfram or Chrétien de Troyes. Meanwhile, the lack of a morally problematical dimension in the protagonist's fictional identity caused disquiet to critics wishing to fit Wirnt's romance into the 'binary' literary sequence inaugurated by Hartmann and Wolfram (in which the hero, after an initial reverse in his moral life, labours to achieve a rehabilitation of chivalric standard).17 Criticism in the last few decades, on the other hand, has drawn attention to the elasticity of medieval genres, arguing that 'romance – and, more generally, any literary genre – has no meaningful existence as a static category. Rather, is it a question of genre as process: the functional literary life of romance involves a series of generic transformations over time resulting in a kind of dynamic continuum.'18 That analysis undergirds many of the following arguments; meanwhile my footnotes contain further references to various scholarly and critical writings which will indicate to readers the fresh critical direction(s) which have been taken in the last two decades.

The rules of evidence governing speculation about the authorship, patronage and dating of medieval works have become considerably more stringent in the
last few decades, the result being that those concerning themselves with the understanding of thirteenth-century romances must resort less to (unverifiable) historical speculation than to the exercise of ‘practical criticism’ through a close reading of the texts themselves.19 This can be observed most dramatically in the rejection of many opinions which were held about Heinrich von dem Türlin for the best part of the twentieth century. Whilst it was formerly supposed that Heinrich came of a burgher family from St Veit an der Glan, and that he stood in the employ of Duke Bernard of Carinthia (1202–1256), such identifications were rendered highly problematical by the work of Bernd Kratz in the 1970s.20 Similarly, nothing certain can be known of the author of Wigalois21 beyond his given name, the information that Wigalois was the author’s first work (although this information is embedded in a humility formula which for rhetorical reasons may have been framed to do less than complete justice to the totality of the author’s literary activities),22 and his putative connection with the town of Gravenberg. The dating of the romance also presents considerable problems23 with theories having been put forward dating it to from 1205 to 1235 or later,24 but more recently some time in the second decade of the thirteenth century has been favoured.25

Franz Saran once speculated that narratorial references to the lawlessness of his age indicated that Wigalois must have been composed towards the end of the interregnum in the period 1197–1208 when there was fighting between the two rival claimants for the imperial crown, Philip of Suabia and Otto of Brunswick.26


21 Cf. the useful Realien assembled in Wigalois. The Knight of Fortune’s Wheel, translated by John Wesley Thomas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), Introduction.

22 ‘nu wil ich iu ein maere/ sagen, als ez mir ist geseit./ zei ner ganzen wârheit/ trûwe ich ez niht bringen;/ wan eines wil ich dingen:/ daz iuwer hövischeit/ dem tihtaere des gnâde seit/ der ditze hât getihtet, mit rîmen wol berihtet,/ wan ditz ist sîn erstez werc’ (lines 131–40).


25 See H.-J. Ziegler, entry on Wigalois in Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters, Verfasserlexikon (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), volume 10, columns 1252–7.

26 ‘Über Wirnt von Grafenberg und den Wigalois’, Beiträge 21 (1896), pp. 253–420, here 269. As Saran conceded, ‘die chronologie des Wigalois kann nur mittelbar durch combination festgestellt werden’ (p. 267) and his speculations have more recently been adjudged an
The early dating was supported by reference to a number of verbal echoes once held to prove that Wirnt knew only the first six books of Wolfram's *Parzival* (which probably appeared in some form of 'fascicle' sequence in the period 1204–1210). Such views are now regarded as speculative and J. W. Thomas summarised present thinking in these terms:

Although the narrator’s aphoristic intrusions into the story far outnumber those which criticise thirteenth-century society, the latter have received more attention from scholars, partly from those who wish to use the novel as a source of specific historical data, partly from those who wish to date it by matching the contemporary society described by the narrator with that of a particular decade of the thirteenth century. Actually, however, the social criticism in *Wigalois* is of such a nature that it reveals no specific relationship to a particular society and, indeed, does not significantly differ from the social criticism of *Le Bel Inconnu* or, for that matter, in the works of Chrétien.27

At the other end of the chronological spectrum, on the other hand, the attempt by de Boor to use similar criteria as those of Saran as a means of advancing a late dating (in the 1230s) has been questioned on the grounds that it depends on a subjective, ‘decline-and-fall’ notion of courtly culture.28 Wirnt’s lofty praise of Wolfram as ‘the fine-feeling sage of Eschenbach whose verses have never been bettered by any layman’ (‘her Wolfram/ ein wîser man von Eschenbach/ sin herze ist ganzes sinnes dach/ leien munt nie baz gesprach’)29 has more recently been taken to imply an acquaintance with the whole of *Parzival*.30 It is even possible, given the lapidary tone of the encomium, that Wirnt may have been repeating at second hand a judgement on Wolfram which had had time to become proverbial.31 The consequential possibility of a date in the second decade of the thirteenth century has in turn led to the speculation that Wirnt knew Wolfram’s *Willehalm* (c. 1217), or else that he might have been composing at approximately the same time that Wolfram was composing that epic.32 The exact chronology remains unclear, but it is likely that *Wigalois*

27 *Wigalois. The Knight of Fortune’s Wheel*, p. 49.
29 Lines 6343–6.
30 The references to Wolfram appear to reveal ‘eine im Abstand gewonnene *Parzival*-Kenntnis, die nicht vor dem zweiten Jahrzehnt des 13 Jahrhunderts möglich oder zu erwarten ist’ (Friedrich Neumann, ‘Wann verfasste Wirnt den *Wigalois*?’, p. 33).
31 For this conjecture see Cormeau, ‘Wigalois’ und ‘Diu Crône’, p. 120.
was enriched by a broader acquaintance with Wolfram’s work(s) than was supposed by an earlier generation of scholars.

Forty years ago Friedrich Neumann counselled against dismissing the literary claims of a text which had stood the test of time so well, yet despite the appearance in the last two decades of a number of publications on Wigalois, it continues to present unresolved cruxes. In the attempt to seek solutions to some of these problems, this study will offer a critical re-reading of the romance in the context of putative sources and analogues and in the light of its literary posterity. I adopt this comparative and diachronic approach because other treatments of the same basic themes may confirm or clarify readings or else suggest alternative realizations of a theme, helping us to recognize what any given poet was doing by showing us what (s)he chose not to do and what possibilities were ignored. The following remarks on the layout of the book are intended as a guide to the critical problems which will be dealt with in detail in the body of this study.

Chapter One is concerned with matters of literary polemics and illustrates from a range of texts how several later German writings within and outside the Matter of Britain cycle reveal a nuanced and often critical attitude to those works of predecessors accorded laureate status in much modern literary historiography. Wigalois will be situated within this general trend towards literary dissent, my specific argument being that Wirnt’s reframing of the ideological parameters of the Fair Unknown tradition serves to dissociate Wigalois philosophically not only from its European analogues (Le Bel Inconnu, the Middle English Libeus Desconus and the Italian Carduino) but also (and more significantly for the German tradition) from the best-known German exemplar of the Fair Unknown tradition, Wolfram’s Parzival. In particular, the emphasis placed on Wigalois as a hero who (albeit purportedly unbeknownst to him) receives early instruction from his supposedly lost father seems rather to oppose the premise of a


34 Stefan Fuchs in particular has called attention to the ‘zahlreiche sich widersprechende Interpretationen und Bewertungen’ which the romance has received (Hybride Helden. Gwigalois und Willehalm, Beiträge zum Heldenbild und zur Poetik des Romans im frühen 13. Jahrhundert, Frankfurter Beiträge zur Germanistik 31 [Heidelberg: Winter, 1997], p. 100).


WIRNT VON GRAVENBERG’S WIGALOIS

(temporarily) fatherless and therefore untutored (tump) lad which characterises Parzival and the Fair Unknown tradition as a whole. The ‘coaching’ administered by Gawein to his son must have counted as a provocative innovation in the context of a romance ostensibly offering an hommage to the spirit of the Fair Unknown stories, and is one indication that the socially conservative Wirnt was tendentiously rejecting the egalitarian basis of the ‘brave man slowly wise’ idiom given such influential currency by Wolfram.

The second chapter presents the case that the ostensibly supernatural tokens of Fortuna (whose emblematic wheel [rota fortunae] gives the romance its editorial subtitle, ‘The Knight of Fortune’s Wheel’) are an example of a phenomenon common to medieval tradition of ‘magic that fails to work magically but that does work for the poem’, in this case metonymically since the winning of Fortune’s favours is so intimately associated with Gawein’s experience. Fortuna’s token of the magic belt (which, as will be observed below, has a legendary connection with Gawein in a number of medieval texts) plays only a small role as a magic object since its wonder-working abilities are limited. Its more important function is as a token linking Wigalois with the chivalric standard of his father since in Wirnt’s semiotic system the concept of knightly good fortune (saelde) becomes broadly synonymous with Gawein’s peerless knightly reputation. Hence, when Wigalois later comes into possession of one of Fortuna’s supposed tokens (in the form of the magic belt which had originally been conferred on his father), the effective implication is that he becomes a knight following in his father’s footsteps rather than one under the supernatural tutelage of the goddess.

My third chapter seeks to demonstrate that the moral kinship of son and father is only temporarily annulled by the messianic nature of the protagonist’s central challenge. Although the Christological dimensions of the Roaz adventures place Wigalois on a different existential level to that occupied by the flawed Gawein (who puts up a notably poor showing at the testing ‘stone of virtue’ on account of a past sexual misdemeanour), the narrator’s undaunted partisanship for Gawein permits him to undergo a moral rehabilitation which in turn enables him to offer credible support to his son in the establishment of his kingship. Although the role of Gawein as a more or less negative foil to a hero surpassing him in either chivalric or spiritual standard is a literary commonplace in a host of medieval texts, Wirnt rejects that model, avoiding the binary distinction inherent in the topos by underscoring the capacity of father and son to pool their individual talents in the final section of the romance.

The hero’s kingship forms the subject of the fourth chapter. The notion that Wigalois might be predestined to establish a theocratic kingship remote from the standards of the feudal, ‘Arthurian’ world is opposed by the comparison of Wigalois’s rule with Wolfram’s Grail realm (from which Wolfram’s Gawan is

37 Helen Cooper, ‘Magic that does not work’, *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976), pp. 131–46, 134. With reference to a number of English examples such as Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale* and Richard Coeur de Lion, Cooper points out that ‘there is frequently – indeed normally – a lack of excitement in the treatment of such talismans, and this is often reinforced by the minimal part they play in the plot itself’ (p. 131).
significantly excluded). Wirnt, unlike Wolfram, permits no terminal gulf between protagonist and deuteragonist, and the rehabilitated Gawein is given a symbolically significant place at the new king’s court. The conciliatory tone of a narrative in which Gawein plays such an important symbolic role in the new king’s rule (he arrives flanked by three further Arthurian knights, thus acting in both paternal and representative capacities) is underlined by the welcome shown to many (converted) Muslim adversaries in the ecumenical closure of the romance.

The realistic features which characterize the description of the hero’s kingship have commonly been seen as a proof that Wirnt was improvising the last c. 4000 lines of his narrative. Untrammeled by any known source, Wirnt in these sections reveals much about his own preferred working methods, and in my analysis I point to the effectivenes of realism as the literary mode favoured by the ‘improving’ narrator to exemplify his conceptions of what feudal kingship might best consist in. I also draw attention to a previously unremarked intertextual implication of a mode of treatment sometimes criticised for its prosaic tone. That is, the naturalistic detail of this section will be shown to carry a deliberately programmatic force suggesting the desire to tilt against some of the more fantastical/escapist features of Wolfram’s Kingdom of the Grail. Wolfram’s grandiose conception, which depends to a considerable degree on the Oriental myth of Prester John, lacks the kind of familiar cultural reference points which might have shown contemporary listeners that this exotic kingdom might represent a realisable goal.

On the basis of a reading of Wolfram’s later epic, Willehalm (which largely forsakes the realm of romance fancy by addressing the stubborn geopolitical realities of the Cross/Crescent divide), it is possible to infer that Wolfram himself may have come to see in his earlier work the abdication of an implicit mandate to provide a concrete evocation of an ideal kingship comprehensible to his medieval peers. It is a mandate to which Wirnt appears to have been particularly attentive since his romance is, as regards its mode of depiction, ‘made over’ into an epic (chanson de geste) in its later phase – this being a creative fusion of genres functioning as a generic signal that a ‘serious’ theme was being appropriately treated, that is, in a way which distinguishes Wigalois from the somewhat frivolous hyperbole of Wolfram’s account.

Issues of kingship are further explored in the fifth chapter entitled Romance and Exemplum where I analyse ways in which Wirnt instrumentalised his
material for homiletic purposes. The sobriety of his tone indicates that Wirnt’s purposes as a moralist were of a particularly practical kind. There is a conspicuous absence of reference in Wigalois’s form of kingship to the motif of the Grail – even though Diu Crêne, using very similar material (some of which will have been culled from Wirnt), does include this motif. Wigalois does not attempt to show how the role of Arthurian chivalry is eclipsed by a superior dispensation only accessible in the imaginative world of literature – as is the case in Parzival and in the later romance based on Wolfram, Albrecht’s Jüngerer Titurel (c. 1280/1300). In Wigalois, by contrast, there is no evasion and no escape into a quasi-transcendent sphere. Rather, the moral equality of Wigalois and Arthur is stressed in what appears to be a literary rejoinder to Wolfram making the attempt to harmonise the conflicting God/World imperatives left unresolved in Wolfram’s notoriously ambiguous closure (where the rank and file members of the ‘Arthurian’ world are left out of account). Wirnt as a self-styled moralist co-opted the resources of the romance form to create an Arthurian exemplum with a more satisfyingly transparent ethical structure than that which is apparent in the work of his more famous literary predecessor. Wigalois may in that sense, I argue, be more properly accounted a counterblast to Parzival than an imitation of it.

I finish with a conclusion drawing together in summary form the implications of previous chapters to suggest a new understanding of Wirnt’s still underrated romance.
Contesting the Canon

Like life, literature is a matter of continuation. Each existence is a sequel to the existences of others, who remain vestigially alive within us [. . .] Beginnings and ends are the most artificial devices of literature because they correspond to nothing in life [. . .] There is always unfinished business, and the truest literary endings are those which demur about their finality.¹

In medieval culture, the origins of stories tend to disappear in a way that would please the most deconstructive post-structuralists [. . .] The origins that we can trace are often of limited relevance to a particular manifestation of a narrative subject. What we must imagine is a skeletal, deep-structural form of a story floating in semiotic space, capable of being concretised, with widely different results, in any medium and in an immense variety of contexts.²

In this chapter the donor-and-recipient model traditionally said to dominate later medieval literature is challenged in favour of a narrative model which in a related context has been termed the ‘literary tiltyard’ (Anne-Marie D’Arcy)³. Since I wish to argue from an extensive corpus of evidence cumulatively tending to oppose the common opinion, I commence with a contextualising excursus showing from a range of examples how the surprisingly tenacious notion that later authors were simply derivative of their predecessors is in fact often flatly contradicted by the testimony of the literary archive. I then relate this finding to Wigalois and its position within its literary sequence, exploring ways in which Wirnt’s work stands out by dint of eclectic and idiosyncratic working methods which could hardly have been bound by adherence to a canonical source or group of sources.

The ‘Post-Classical’ Challenge

In much the same way that the writers of the ‘deuxième époque’ aspired to extend the tradition launched by Chrétien de Troyes in France, later German writers of Arthurian romance strove to advance traditions set by those writers conventionally accorded ‘classic’ status in German literary historiography, namely, Heinrich von Veldeke, Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach. Referring to ‘constant elements within the broad supranational