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Courtly Colours. Colour Terms in Old Danish, with a Side Glance at Old West Norse and Middle High German

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Abstract: The present study investigates the use of colour terms in Old Danish. As colour studies have not yet been carried out within East Norse philology, a side glance at the research concerning the neighbouring languages of Middle High German and Old Norse is used for inspiration and comparison. By excerpting the Old Danish Dictionary's slip collections, the uses of colour terms as presented in written sources are tackled, and the colour terms in the six Old Danish courtly romances gathered in the manuscript K 47 are investigated in detail. As one of the results, it can be stated that colour clusters serve to illustrate courtliness, but especially in cases where a court is ruled by a genuinely non-courtly figure like a heathen potentate or a dwarf king. Furthermore, colour terms are not exclusively connoted with a single positive or negative meaning but can serve different narrative purposes.

Keywords: Colour studies, Old Danish, courtly romance, Middle High German, Old Norse, colour symbolism, East Norse

*Human societies do not only speak of colours, but
also with colours. (Eco 1985: 166)*

“Color is above all a social phenomenon, and there is no transcultural truth to color perception.” (Wolf 2006b: 73). Right at the beginning, this quote reminds us of the fact that we will never be able to find out how people actually saw or perceived colours in former times. Nevertheless, colour studies can serve to increase our understanding of which items or phenomena, regardless of materiality or non-materiality, are described in colours. This requires the assumption that the descriptions include more than a chromatic quality, but simultaneously present us with a moral or symbolic statement. It is important to note that the message of a colour has always been contextual. Through the ages, the colour red, for a

prominent example, could denote love, but in another context, it could signify its opposite, hate.¹

The present study is devoted to the use of colour terms in Old Danish verse romances as they have come down to us in a single manuscript. Cod. Holm. K 47 was written around 1500 by two Jutlandic scribes, and it consists of six romances in *knittel* verse, which have been called a ‘little anthology of courtly romances’ (“en hel lille høvisk romanantologi”, Kværndrup 1984: 469). In the following, I will analyse where the texts in this manuscript make use of colours, and what they describe by colour terms. To date, – as far as I know – colours in East Norse literature have not been investigated at all.

Within this study, it is not possible to treat the subject in any exhaustive way. Instead, my aim is to open up further research in East Norse colour studies, relating my findings to two literary systems neighbouring the East Norse area, namely West Norse and Middle High German. Evidence of colour use in these systems supplies a well-researched background. Both differences and common ground shared by the three literary systems will be discussed. However, before that, the influential colour term study by Berlin and Kay (1969) has to be introduced briefly and related to the Old Danish material, because both German and Scandinavian research relevant for the following refers to their scale of basic colour terms.

Brent Berlin and Paul Kay investigated the colour term vocabulary in 98 languages, and in their survey, they postulated the existence of eleven so-called basic colour terms.² Furthermore, they claimed that if a language’s use of basic colour terms is reduced to fewer terms, their notion is predictable, and they established a scale of stages from I to VII along which a language would evolve by expanding its colour term vocabulary. According to them, a language with only two basic terms applied, will have a name for black and for white (I). A fully evolved term system will own all eleven terms, i.e. use these two plus red (II), green, yellow (III/IV), blue (V), brown (VI), purple, pink, orange and grey (VII). A growing term set would expand along the sequence just stated, with the rule that yellow could as well occur before green, and that the four terms at the end of the sequence could differ in order, but would appear in close chronology (Berlin/Kay 1969: 22).

The basic colour terms occurring in Old Danish are *røth* (red), *hvit* (white), *svart* (black), *grøn* (green, fresh), *gul* (yellow, blond), *bla* (blue, blue-black, lead grey), *brun* (russet, dark red, purple), and *gra* (grey). As can be seen from the English translations, *bla* and *brun* own qualities that today are expressed via differentiating terms which denote several hues. *blek* (pale) as a frequently used colour term has a special position and mostly serves to describe facial colour (or rather: non-colour, see below). There are no basic terms for pink, orange,

1 For decades, the French historian Michel Pastoureau has published extensively as well as systematically on the cultural history of colours including the Middle Ages. In his works, which were widely translated, he provides a wealth of facts and interpretations of the symbolic value of colours, and he offers both studies concentrating on single colours: yellow (2019), red (2016), green (2013), black (2008), and blue (2000), and on comprehensive surveys (on the Middle Ages 1986, from an anthropologist angle 1989, on heraldics 1982 and 2009). Further colour studies in East Norse will stand to benefit from Pastoureau’s works. However, the present study is first and foremost aimed at an investigation of the occurrence and use of colour terms in its source texts and will leave interpretations of their symbolic meanings aside.

2 For a narrow definition of the terms, see Berlin/Kay (1969: 5–7).

and purple, the latter hue is presumably included in the term *brun*. According to Berlin and Kay's scale, Old Danish would probably have to be placed at the beginning of stage VII.

After this short introduction, I will now briefly skim the recent research that has been undertaken in Old West Norse and in Medieval German philology. Concerning the latter, however, the number of titles mentioned is inevitably limited and selective.

Colours in German Medieval Studies

In recent years, colours in medieval German literature have been investigated from several perspectives. In 2009, the German association of medievalists (Mediävistenverband) organised a comprehensive conference that brought together colour studies from a great variety of disciplines including linguistics and literary studies, yielding a substantial two-volume publication (Bennewitz/Schindler 2011). Here, Oleksandr Oguy published his colour term survey on the German medieval material (a comprehensive collection of texts he defines as literary), referring to Berlin/Kay. He postulated that in terms of frequency, the order of colour term use differs from their scale. An extraordinarily extensive use of the colour term *crâ* (grey) would put this hue between green and brown, which is followed by yellow. In addition, to the basic colour terms, Oguy also included adjectives depicting light, dark, shining, and varicoloured qualities, and defines the most basic of the basic colour terms as white/light, and black/dark. Furthermore, he placed the term *bunt* (multicoloured) after yellow and before the term last in row, blue (Oguy 2011: 407). This makes his study deviate from the defining principles of Berlin and Kay, but the statistic evidence is still useful to have, even if it is not significant for the chronology in evolution.

Further colour term studies were conducted by a research project at Siegen university on the semantics of colours in epic texts of the 12th and 13th centuries ("Polychrome Entwürfe höfischer Welten: Farben und ihre Semantiken in erzählender Literatur des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts"). It resulted in important articles by Monika Schausten (2008, 2011), on colours in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and in two dissertations, on the colours of the elite (*Die Farben der Herrschaft*, Klein 2014), and on the colours of the body at the court (*Die Farben höfischer Körper*, Osten 2014). In the context of the project, a conference was held focusing on colours in German literature and art, which was followed by extensive conference proceedings (Schausten 2012). Within this volume, articles deal with the colours of coats of arms (Haiko Wandhoff), 'monochrome' knights (Bruno Quast), and the colours of mourning (Andreas Kraß). Elke Brüggén deals with 'the colours of women', and refers to a typical courtly colour scheme put forward by Herman Pleij (Pleij 2004: 17). This spectrum sees red, white, and black as central colour areas. Further contributions to the above-mentioned volume, especially on complexion, will be discussed below.

Elke Brüggén's dissertation investigated clothing and fashion in narrative German literature in the 12th and 13th centuries, where she also treated coloured clothing, with a special focus on dyed fabrics (Brüggén 1989). In 2011, a comprehensive reference work on the significances of colour terms in the Middle Ages was published (Meier/Suntrup 2011). The lexicon concentrates on the figurative and allegorical use of the terms, with a focus on theology and the Latin evidence. This research interest was followed by a number of

publications on the occurrence and on the significances of colours in courtly literature, some of which I will refer to later in context with the East Norse material.

Studies in West Norse colour terms

Colour terms in Old West Norse have been investigated in extenso by Kirsten Wolf: during the last fifteen years, she has published systematically on almost all colour terms in Old Icelandic (Wolf 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2010, 2015, 2017). In her articles, she subsequently treated the Old Icelandic basic and non-basic colour terms, mostly concentrating on the occurrence of the different terms and the phenomena they describe, and leaning heavily on the influential colour studies by Berlin and Kay (1969). Referring to their report, Wolf was able to show that Old Norse is an early stage VII language: its colour term bias consists of eight colours: *svartr*, *hvítr*, *rauðr*, *grœnn*, *gulr*, *blár*, *brúnn*, and *grár*. Based on a wide corpus of texts and dictionaries (including the slip collection of the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose and both Eddic and skaldic poetry), her colour studies accumulated result in a solid overview over the colour term material conveyed, including non-basic colour terms (Wolf 2015), and the term *bleikr* (Wolf 2005, and 2006a).³ In his study of Old Norse colour semantics, Georg C. Brückmann is also very systematic in counting and displaying occurrences of the basic colour terms just mentioned (Brückmann 2012). He provides substantial, valuable data for comparison with the East Norse evidence. However, the poetic Eddic and skaldic material are not included.

Further studies, mostly on dyed clothing in the Icelandic sagas, were published by Anna Zanchi (2006, about *grœnn*), and Nathalie van Deusen (2012, about *blár*). Anita Sauckel's dissertation about the literary function of clothing in Old West Norse prose does not focus especially on colours, but it contains a whole chapter on blue/black (*blár*) clothing (Sauckel 2014: 115–128). A special strand of research gathers around the question of whether the blue clothing indicates the wearer's intention to kill, e.g. in the article by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar (2005).⁴ In this context, Thor Ewing states that clothes in this hue feature in many other, non-killing scenes. From the archeological evidence, he can show that *blár* was the most common colour used for dyeing fabric, but that red dye would have been the strongest marker of high status (Ewing 2006: 229).

Thus, to date, the colour term *blár* has sparked most interest in West Norse research. As the corresponding *bla* in East Norse likewise forms a peculiar case, I will come back to that. An article on courtly clothing in *Laxdæla saga* by Gesine Snell focuses on the fabric and less on colour, mostly because a more general expression (*litklæði*) is used in the text that does not specify any colour (Snell 2000). Long before but still vividly cited, Valtýr Gudmundsson published on this expression, including a discussion of medieval Icelandic colour terms in relation to their use for clothes dyed in and outside Iceland (Valtýr Gudmundsson 1893).

3 In addition, Wolf very recently edited the comprehensive, 6-volume *Cultural History of Color* (with Carole P. Biggam), cf. Wolf/Biggam (2021).

4 This cannot be proved for any case in Old Danish material.

Which colours?

Let us now turn to the appearance of colour terms in Old Danish. As we have seen above, this language shows eight basic colour terms. In addition to them, I will investigate the use of the term *blek*, which is not a basic term, but frequent and important in courtly romance.⁵

To set forth a first overview of the occurrences of Old Danish colour terms, I have exploited the Old Danish list collection (*Gammeldansk Seddelsamling*) and excerpted the most common uses of the terms. The collection, comprised of about 29,000 articles gathered on over 900,000 or 950,000 slips,⁶ is almost exhaustive. This data facilitates a sustainable base for reasonable assumptions if it does not serve as a source for statistical assessments due to the contingencies of transmission. The source material for the collection consists of text witnesses from ca. 1100 to 1515, including runic inscriptions, charters, letters, accounts and the like as well as narrative literature both religious and profane, both in prose and in verse, besides instructive texts representing the medieval arts, including glossaries, and collections of proverbs. In short, everything at hand in the middle of the 1950s was excerpted, and put online in recent years.

In a comprehensive statistical study (which is not intended here), it would be necessary to substract fixed expressions from the data provided by the *Seddelsamling* (for example *hvit pænning*, that means compounds sometimes inconsistently spelled as two separate words like *hvitløk*, see below), as well as the use of the adjective as a sur- or byname, which however features as a more frequent use in the Old West Norse material for *hvíti*, *svarti*, *rauði* (Brückmann 2012: 83). A specification of text genres (corresponding with the studies by Brückmann and by Oguy) would also be both reasonable and useful. In light of the time span covered, it would also be ideal for the dating of the individual records to be provided, but given the contingency of the text witnesses handed down to us, this data could not be provided with certainty.

The following first-time aggregation of recorded colour terms primarily serves to spell out tendencies in use in order to provide a foundation for further studies and, in the present context, a narrower observation of colour term use in the verse romances. The numbers below indicate the results of simple searches for adjectives, including occurrences of those adjectives in their comparative and superlative degrees.⁷ It is important to note that the data are not totally consistent. For example, in some cases the spelling of a compound alternates between one and two words, and the references are spread over three lemmata. The advanced search mode does not yield trustworthy results for the cases tested, therefore, none of the selection options was chosen, and all searches included the complete material. It was thus impossible to take close account of the text genres, but the most relevant usages are notified in the following survey.

5 The terms *blank* (shining, also used in the compound white wine), *skær* (clear, bright, shining) *lys* (light, clear, bright), and *myrk* (dark) specify the quality of a colour. They cannot be included in the present survey, but would have to form part of a more comprehensive investigation.

6 The dictionary's homepage makes two diverging statements on the number.

7 A discussion of the use of the inchoativa derived from the adjective, such as *svartne*, *blekne* etc. would certainly yield further results but has to be postponed to keep consistency of the present study.

Firstly, the data are grouped by colour and the frequency of the phenomena they denote are listed, although not in absolute numbers. Secondly, a survey follows, which shows the colour terms in K 47 in numbers of occurrence, before thirdly the K 47 data are interpreted in detail, with a special focus on the occurring colour clusters.

1 *røth* (274 slips)

In most of the slips, it is clothes or fabric that are described as red. Red-coloured plants, or their parts (herbs, spices, bloom, root, including *røth kal* (red cabbage, 4 plus – in one word – 3 extra slips), *røth løk* (red onion, 2 plus 17 extra slips) and *røth bynke* (dock or sorrel, 3 plus 1 extra slip) are followed in frequency by red precious stones, which however are often described by several colours. Blood is called red; in about a third of the cases it is Christ's blood. Notwithstanding, red is not the only colour ascribed to blood (see below). Other human liquids are mentioned often (urine or part of the four humours), mostly in medical texts. Human skin and face are described as red, sometimes in combination with *blek*, sometimes together with *fager* (beautiful). *Røth ok fager* usually occurs in devotional texts, as is the case with the expression Red Sea (*røthe mær* or *røthe hav*), which occurs repeatedly. Red gold is mentioned a number of times, and several animals are described as red (about six times in reference to a horse). Less frequent are parts of coats of arms, hair, or other physical items. Fire or flames are mentioned in only very few cases.

2 *hvit* (471 + 60 = 531 slips)

This great number of slips is staggering only at first glance. It is nearly doubled by samples referring to a fixed expression that is used with special frequency in economical accounts and inventories for silver coins, i.e. the Rhenish Groschen, described as a 'white penny' (germ. *Weißpfennig*, lat. *denarius albus*). The noun *hvit* gives 60 slips, 54 of which refer to the silver coin, the other 6 denote eggwhite. For the lemma *hvitæpænning*, there are three slips, two of which symptomatically have the compound written in two words. In all, its records sum up to 119, and thus account for almost a quarter of the evidence.⁸

Flowers and parts of plants, seeds and spices, most often garlic (*hvit løk*), are described with a separate adjective for white about 20 times, and in the same number of instances as part of a one-word compound (*hvitløk*). Second comes *hvit røkelse* (frankincense, ca. 11 slips). Together, the slips of this group total 100.

Fabrics and clothes can be white. *Hvit klæde* occurs frequently in devotional texts, where persons are described as white without specifying whether that colour is a property of their skin or their clothing, and white souls are mentioned. In a few cases, coats of arms are described featuring white parts. Eggwhites as well as white wine are mentioned frequently in both medical and culinary texts. White skin occurs about 20 times, specified in some cases as white faces, cheeks, necks or hands (see below).

8 This is a clear reminder of what the data in the *Seddelsamling* consists of, namely a great number of charters, accounts, and other non-literary text witnesses, where the material from the verse romances features, prominently, but in fact only forms a very small part of the whole.

White animals are mentioned, of which the most frequent species is the horse, both in literary and non-literary texts. White bread features in medical texts and some devotional literature. Urine can sometimes be denoted as white, and blood is described as white in medical texts. Snow is always depicted in comparison, both in the positive (*hvit som sne*, white as snow) and comparative (*hwider en snee*, whiter than snow) degrees. This phrasing is found in devotional texts and romances (see below). *Hvite tirsdag* (Shrove Tuesday) is a fixed expression, which only occurs twice.

3 svart (234 slips)

Most of the slips describe seeds, plants, or parts of plants that are described as black. Black (precious) stones also occur frequently, and the phrase *svart jorth/mold* ‘black soil’ is used several times. Black fabric (mostly *silke*, silk, and *lejdkisk*, a fine fabric woven in Leiden in the Low Countries⁹) and clothes are mentioned on almost 40 slips. Black magic is named ten times (*sorte kunst*), and black monks (*svarte brødre*), i.e. those wearing the black cowl of the Dominican order, nine times. Almost 20 slips show *Svart* as a surname. A black complexion is found on 15 slips, and persons are called black in 14 cases, some of them *svart blaman*. Black animals, many of them horses, occur as well, as does black hair. On several slips, black has a negative connotation (especially in superlative form *swartasta dyefflane*, the blackest devils, Post: 251,31). Blood is called black, and human skin (sometimes the face). *Svart*, in devotional literature, can also mean an ‘inner’ colour, negatively connoted, as ‘black and impure’.¹⁰

4 grøn (181 slips)

In most of the slips, *grøn* is used meaning ‘fresh’, most often denoting plants or parts of them (more than 90 slips), and fresh wounds (*grøn saar* 13 times). With plants it is sometimes not clear whether green indicates colour or freshness. The phrase *grøn lund* occurs five times, and a green grassland (*grøn æng*) occurs several times. Precious stones, mostly emeralds, are described as green. Clothes and fabric can be green. *Spænsk grønt*, a fixed expression denoting verdigris or copper rust, features on eight slips.

5 gul (88 slips)

In most of the slips, it is as part of a compound, *gulæ sot*, on 12 slips, and as a noun in one word, *gulsot*, on 11 slips, denoting jaundice. Plants and their parts come second, closely followed by stones. Complexion is frequent, especially, but not exclusively, in the medical texts, and fabric and clothing are called yellow. Other uses differ, but the meaning of blond hair is recorded several times. Egg yolk occurs both in medical and culinary recipes, and yellow blood features in three medical texts.

9 A still useful, commented list of medieval fabrics can be found in Falk (1919: 50–73). Further information can be gained from consulting the glossary of Middle High German, provided by Brügger (1989: 268–293).

10 E.g. ChrPedSkr I: 325.1: *De mwe ligness ved en mødding som vden till betact er met sne oc synness huid oc deglig men indwertiss er hwn swort och wren* (This can be compared to a dung heap which is snow-covered and so looks white and beautiful from the outside, but from the inside it is black and impure).

6 *bla* (91 slips): blue, blackish blue, dark grey

Most of the slips feature fabric or clothing. However, in most cases, *bla* is the colour of bruises: Blue and bloody, *bla oc blothigh*, are often combined, mostly in legal texts. Blue plants occur (mostly lillies), and the colour is used in descriptions of coats of arms. Twice it is used in the comparison ‘blue as the sky’.

7 *brun* (73 slips): brown, russet, dark red, violet

On 11 of the slips, *Brun* is a surname. Garments and fabric are also described as *brun*, often silk, or scarlet. The colour term is often used for plants and their parts, mostly for viola and poppy. Otherwise, the use is not very specific for any certain expression.

8 *gra* (66 slips)

In most of the slips, it is grey fabric, or horses listed in accounts. The expression *gra brother* occurs several times, but is to be added to the number of compounds denoting Franciscan monks (70 slips for *grabrother*, and 81 for compounds formed with that term, such as *grabrøthrekloster*). Hair is described as *gra*, sometimes in the phrase *gammel ok gra*, old and grey.

9 *blek* (65 slips)

In most of the slips, almost 50, it is the human face (or skin) that is described as pale. A few stones are described by the term. If *blek* is combined with another colour, it is mostly with *røth*; in a few cases it is *svart* or *gul*. It is twice used in a comparison, *blek som en aske*, as pale as ashes.

The perusal of the *Seddelsamling* allows for some remarks on the resemblance in colour term use by a number of texts. But again, the data does not allow statements on the numeric relationship of the terms concerning the text genre they occur in. Thus, as noted above, a comparison of absolute numbers will not yield objective results. I have therefore tried to give a preliminary overview of the occurrences, as more intensive studies are necessary to explore the data at a deeper level. Before going into detail, as a preliminary result, it can be stated that texts of religious instruction and devotion, such as *Herr Michaels rimværker*, *Henrich Susos Gudelig Vidsomsbog*, a number of books of prayer (*bønnebøger*), and *Jesu Barndoms Bog* (The book of the childhood of Jesus), show similar use of colour terms, comparable to that of the verse romances. On the other hand, texts containing florid descriptions of the exotic, like *Mandevilles Rejse* (Mandeville’s Travels) and the famous *Letter to Emanuell Comnenos* by Prester John use analogue expressions to describe impressive phenomena. All these texts (with the early exception of *Mandevilles Rejse*, which is earliest extant in a manuscript dated to 1459) can be dated roughly to between the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century.

Colour terms in K 47

Before interpreting the use of the colour terms, a table specifies the occurrences in all six romances. The individual length of the six romances differs considerably (DL 882 vv., PK 1581 vv., KD 1238 vv., FB 2202 vv., HF 2421 vv., IL 6410 vv.), so it is not surprising that the colour terms' frequency will differ as well. In all, colour terms occur 81 times, divided as can be seen in the following table:

	IL ¹¹	KD	PK	DL	HF	FB	Σ
<i>røth</i>	4 ¹²	4	–	5 ¹³	10	9	36
<i>hvit</i>	2	–	3 ¹⁴	– ¹⁵	5	4	15
<i>svart</i>	7	–	1 (<i>sorte skole</i>) ¹⁶	–	1 (<i>kape</i>)	–	9
<i>grøn</i>	4	–	–	1 (<i>lund</i>)	3	2	6
<i>gul</i>	3	–	–	–	–	–	3
<i>brun</i>	2	–	–	–	1 (<i>lys</i>)	–	3
<i>gra</i>	–	1 (<i>hest</i>) ¹⁷	–	–	1 (<i>kape</i>) ¹⁸	–	2
<i>bla</i>	1 ¹⁹	–	–	–	–	–	1
<i>blek</i>	2	2 (<i>rød ok blek</i>)	–	–	–	2 (<i>blek ok rød</i>)	6

What is worthy of being described in colours?

- *Bla* occurs only twice, once of which in a compound, both in the same passage of IL, in the detailed description of the scary shepherd: his complexion and lips are *bla* (IL 6r).
- *Blek* always denotes complexion, and mostly in combination with *røth*, although it occurs once together with *gul* (IL 82v), and once as a single colour (IL 93v).
- *Brun* is rare. Twice it depicts fabric (*skarlogh*, IL 5r and 72r), and once light (HF 117v).
- *Gul* occurs in only one text, *Ivan løveridder*, for herbs (both yellow and green, IL 5r), eyes (IL 6r, *gule som topaciws*), and complexion (IL 82v).

11 In the following, the titles of the six romances are abbreviated: *Ivan løveridder* (IL), *Den kyske dronning* (KD), *Persenober og Konstantianobis* (PK), *Dværgkongen Laurin* (DL), *Hertug Frederik af Normandi* (HF), and *Flores og Blanseflor* (FB).

12 The name *Vadian røde* occurs twice.

13 Of which 4 *roser*, 1 superlative *guld*.

14 The name *Hvidrok* occurs 15 times.

15 The expression *sne hvid hest* occurs once.

16 The name *Sorterok* occurs twice.

17 The compound *apeld gra* occurs once.

18 The compound *apeld gra* occurs once.

19 The compound *blaman* occurs once.

- *Gra* is used once for a horse (KD 206r), twice as *apeld gra* (KD 206r, HF 149v), and once for the grey colour of the Franciscan cowl (HF 152r).
- *Grøn* occurs mostly in the phrase *grøn lund* (DL 156r, IL 38v, 47v, and 77r). In HF, it describes a precious stone (*smaragdws*, HF 118v), light (HF 117v), and a mountain (HF 118v). IL features both green and yellow herbs (IL 5r). FB describes an artificial bird's claws (223v) and marble (235v) as green.
- *Svart* is used for the Dominican cowl once (HF 152r), and a Dominican school (PK 169v), and twice for a name (*Sorterok*, PK 190r, 196r). The term is used the most in IL (7), thrice to depict the scary shepherd, (IL 6r). Of the other four cases, two describe black bread (*thet sorte brødh sa sødeligh aadh, som thet war then beste madh* (IL 39r), and two black complexion: Ivan's *jomfru* falls silent in shock, and the colour of her face changes to that of soil (*tha wortæ hwn sorth som jen jordh*, IL 96r), and Ivan's face turns so black that he is unrecognisable (IL40r). In the last case, the adjective is used for black earth (*pa sorten mold*, IL 97v).
- *Hvit* occurs as a single word three times in PK, where it specifies tablecloth, sand, and armour, all parts of the courtly world (PK 173r, 188v, and 191r). In the same text, Persenober's pseudonym is *Hvitrok*, Whitecoat, which occurs 15 times. IL features a lady's white arm, hand and fingers (25r, 86v). In HF it describes clothes, twice *hosser* (breeches, HF 112r, 113v, the second time compared to *filben*, ivory), and once *svandser*, the white trains of the ladies' dresses at the feast (HF 150v). Lights are also described as white, sometimes as white as snow (HF 117v). HB features white a bloom²⁰, a half-white horse, white marble, and white sand (FB v. 104, 227v, 235v, and 253r). The dwarf king Laurin's horse is *sne hvit* (158r). In all cases, everything white is closely related to the world of the court.
- *Røth* is the most common colour in all romances (36 occurrences), except for PK (in which there are no occurrences at all). Red is used for roses (4 times in DL, 155v, 157r, 159r, 167v), but most often, it is used for clothes and fabric, i.e. *skarlogh* (4 of 7, KD 203r, FB 253r, HF 149v, IL 86v, *kiortel*, FB 241v, *kledher* HF 134r, *waben rok* HF 138r), followed by gold (5, DL 158r, FB 229v, 235v, HF 119v, IL 32v). Blood is special in that it is described by a colour term only twice (IL *brynies* 13v, *waben* 46r), otherwise it occurs in compounds (4) as a horse's colour (3, FB 227v, HF 113r,), of water that turns red (FB, 238v), and as the colour of lights (HF 117v). Ruby is red (3, *solen* HF 118v, 148v, IL 8v), as is face colour (4, KD 212v, 216v, FB v. 88, 246r), always in combination with *blek*. Flames or fire feature once in KD (202r), and red is used once for specifying the colour of a castle (HF 115r). Vadian the Red is named twice (IL 11v, 25v).

The things or phenomena described by colour terms can thus be organised in roughly six groups. The first of these is fabric and clothing are described as red, white, black, grey, and *brun*. The second is horses, presented in such colours as (snow) white, red, white and red, and (dappled) grey (see below). Our third group are the five colours used to describe human skin: *blek*, red, black, *bla*, and yellow, while our fourth group, nature, according to the K 47, is described in five colour terms as well: red roses, white sand, green grove, black soil. Plants

20 The passage is missing in K 47, but was added by Brandt in his edition, from the 1509 Ghemen print.

and parts of plants that could be defined as a subgroup of animate nature, comprise only four colours: white, red, yellow, and green. Fifth are precious stones (including marble), in red, green, white, and yellow. The last group gathers phenomena exclusively described as red which are gold, fire and flames.

Blood, fire, snow, and soil are typical for use in colour comparison: *røth som blod*, *som eld*, *som solen*, *hvit som sne*, *svart som jorth*, but *gul som topacius* also appears. The last of these forms part of a colour cluster, of which we find a few in the romances (see below).

How does this aggregation of colour term data fit into the neighbouring literary systems? Limitations of space restrict our focus to only a few cases, of which I have chosen two colours (*bla* and *blek*) for comparison with Old West Norse. For the comparison with Middle High German courtly literature, I have chosen two aspects: colours of horses and colour clusters.²¹ The West Norse cases shall be treated first.

blár* vs. *bla*, *bleikr* vs. *blek

Just like the Old Danish *bla*, the spectrum of the Old West Norse term *blár* covers a gradient of dark blue to black. Kirsten Wolf was able to show that *blár* initially only denoted a dark colour and shifted its meaning when a term for the hue of a dye was needed. This she deduces from the fact that *blár* is used frequently for fabric and clothes. Though the Old Danish *bla* is also used for fabrics, as is shown above, at present it is impossible to determine whether it, too, evolved to meet a parallel need to that of its West Norse cousin. The frequent phrasing of *bla ok blodhugh*, definitely has its parallel in Old West Norse *blár ok blóðugr*, and is likewise used in legal texts (Brückmann: 21, though he seemingly does not pay attention to its occurrence in legal texts) and for complexion in both languages. Though there are cases in which *blár* has negative connotations, Wolf gives them little attention (Wolf 2006b) as her data shows a more frequent negative connotation for *svart*. The Old Danish evidence similarly suggests symbolic negative connotations for *bla*, but as in Old West Norse, *svart* was the favoured term for describing a menacing being, be it a 'blackest devil' or someone 'sort som et troll'. I would therefore support extending the framework of Wolf's findings also to Old Danish. This said, there are instances of *bla* with negative connotations in the verse romances consistent with the negative uses of West Norse *blá* that Wolf overlooks, namely the colour-clustered passage on the scary shepherd in *Ivan løveridder*, which will be treated in more detail below. The shepherd's lips are *bla*, and the whole figure is described as *jen hierde sorter en jen bla mandh*, which includes the other occurrence of *bla* in the romance, in a compound. Black *blamen* feature on three slips of the *Seddelsamling*, all placed close to a description of devils.²² A matchable combination of black and blue occurs in Old West Norse in a variation, where the comparative degree is used to describe the intense colour of the figure: *blámaðr biki svartari* (*Barthólómeuss saga*, ed. Unger 1874: 736.28), and *blámenn hrafni svartari* (*Tveggja postola saga Símons ok*

21 The two comparisons make use of data that strongly differ from each other.

22 *grymme dyr, diæfle scapels, sort blomænd utalle* (Suso: 143.20); *diæfwle sosom sorte blomæn* (Suso: 130.10); *mange vtalige dieffle smaa som røtter oc sorte som blaamend* (ChrPedSkr I: 304.1).

Júdass, ed. Unger 1874: 791.9–10, both cited from Wolf 2006b: 72). Both examples are from Christian legendary texts just as the Old Danish examples mentioned.

As the occurrence of the term *bla* in K 47 is so sparse, conclusions can only be drawn if it can be aligned with the evidence of other sources. However, when considered together with the devotional literature extant from about the same time, the negative connotations for *bla* appear only in a very few examples, and most of them in the compound *blaman* (see above). Thus, the general evidence of the usage of this term does not carry this notion alone, as it shows proof of being used to denote exquisite fabrics and clothings both in literary and non-literary texts.

The West Norse term *bleikr* could possibly be regarded as a kind of macrocolour, ‘covering, at least partly, the category of pale or light colors’ (Wolf 2006a: 187). These include its main use for a pale human face, as well as of light red, the light colour range of domestic animals, and of human hair (blond) (Wolf 2005: 253, citing the Arnamagnæan Commission’s Dictionary).²³

The Old Danish evidence for *blek* shows that the term’s dominant use is for complexion, which is consistent with the Old West Norse. But in Danish there is no evidence for *blek* being used to describe either a human hair colour or the colour of an animal. Conversely, there seems to be no evidence of *bleikr* being used in West Norse to denote the colour of a stone as it does in Old Danish.

In the K 47 texts, as we have seen, *blek* is used exclusively for a colour of the face, frequently in instances of facial colour changing. Isabelle Ravizza has discussed similar changes of facial colour in sagas of Icelanders, especially *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, as non-verbal indicators of emotional changes (Ravizza 2010: i.a. 44–47). This interpretation can equally be applied to the four instances in K 47 in which mostly women, but also one man, blush and blanch. A blackening of the complexion is also caused by strong emotions: Ivan’s mistress turns black and falls silent when she hears that a knight who treated her badly is back at Arthur’s court: *tha wortæ hwn sorth som jen jordh, och stodh och talet ey jeth ordh* (IL 96r). KD features two instances of colour changes reflecting emotion. The first of these is when the queen turns red and pale when she is uncertain of the identity of the knight who wants to fight on her behalf (*dronningen worte bode rødh och bleg, ther the begynte thenne legh*). In the second, the king of Bohemia explicitly becomes angry (*han giorde segh wred wedh hinnæ i gien*) and leaves because of the queen’s hostile behaviour. FB includes a scene in which the change of facial hue is connotated positively when Flores’ mother-to-be feels the foster in her belly: *hun glædes tha oc ey aff leg, hun war bade rød oc bleg* (then, she rejoiced, and not for fun, she was both red and pale, FB v. 87–88). FB’s other facial hue change is caused by fear, when Blanseflor’s German friend at the harem, Klares, fears that the king of *Babilon* will have the two lovers Flores and Blanseflor killed after catching them red-handed in Blanseflor’s bed in the harem’s tower: *klares worte bodhe bleg oc rød, hwn reddes tha for thieris død*. The order of the two colour terms shifts, but this is presumably caused by the rhyme.

23 As a non-basic colour term, *bleikr* is not included in Brückmann’s study.

Interestingly, K 47 also features a change to a black complexion as a sign of both geographical and spiritual distance from the court. when Ivan becomes a lunatic in the woods, *hans hwdh war sort thet seyer iech, thy war han jnkted kenneligh* (his skin was black, as I say, therefore he was irrerecognisable, IL 40r).²⁴ Black complexion also indicates counter-courtly disposition in the description of the scary shepherd (see below).²⁵

A change in facial hue can also reflect physical health. IL describes an encounter Ivan has with a group of poor women at Pineborg: *thiære farigh war bodhæ gullæ och blegh, thet war aff hongre och ey aff legh* (their colour was both yellow and pale, this was due to starving, not for fun). A yellow complexion is frequently mentioned in medical texts as a sign of illness, so the allusion here was commonly known. Another instance of pale complexion indicating illness occurs when Ivan's lady has been fairly ill, but then learns that the knight will come to fight for her. She feels better immediately and gets up to meet him, but, visible to all, her cheeks still are pale: *blegæ war hinæ kinnæ, thet mattæ the wæl aa hinnæ finnæ* (IL 93v). To sum up, the occurrences of the term *blek*, although it is always used in descriptions of facial colour, its notions differ considerably: it and can both denote illness, fear, joy, and anger.

Coloured horses

K 47 shows six quotes pertaining to the colours of horses. Horses are part of the world of the court in the broader European system, and this is clearly true in the the Old Danish system, too, where the horses are white, red, or dappled. Horses are depicted in a simple grey only when their owners are travelling in disguise (in KD, this is the king of Bohemia masked as the Pope's legate KD 206r). In most of the cases, extraordinary horses are portrayed with extraordinary saddlery, praised in detail as masterpieces of handicraft and precious materials that help to stress the wealth of their riders. Usually the rider is a knight, but in the K 47 texts, the riders are dwarfs four of six times, and even females appear on horseback.

The precious steed that Flores gets from his stepfather when he sets out in search for Blanseflor is both white and red. In the late medieval Middle High German version of FB, Konrad Fleck's *Flores und Blanscheflur*, Udo Friedrich attributes the colours white and red to the ideal of courtly love, and calls Flores' horse a „Minneferd“ (a horse of courtly love, Friedrich 2012: 84).²⁶ In the Old Danish version, this chromatic combination is introduced at the beginning of the text when the names of the two protagonists are said to signify a red and a white bloom respectively (*hans naffn en rød blomme lyder, hennes naffn eth hwit*

24 During that same far-from-court episode, Ivan eats black bread, and it tastes like the best of foods (*thet sorte brødh sa sødeligh aadh, som thet war then beste madh* (IL 39r).

25 Ulrich Ernst draws the same conclusion for Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*. Furthermore, he comments on this interpretation that it is already intended in Chrétien's de Troyes *Yvain* (Ernst 2007: 176).

26 The colour combination of red and white as a symbol for violence is put forward by Brügger for the case of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Brügger 2012: 219), but this does not apply for the cases found in the K 47 texts. Only in one case, in IL, a fight, between Ivan and Gavian, features red (*thiære godhæ swærdhæ saa fast biedh, the tryktæ vdh then rødhæ swedh*, their excellent swords bit powerfully, they evaporated red sweat, IL 97v), and later on, black (*han kastæ fra sægh bodhæ swærdh och skiold langh wey borth pa sorten mold*, he threw away both his sword and shield onto the black soil, IL 100r/v).

blomster tyder, v. 103–4²⁷), which is not stated in Fleck’s version. The horse’s colours parallel this: *then hæst war vnderlig til lydh, som sne war halff dielen hwid, annen hans sidhæ war rød som blod thet maa wel wæææ jen ganger god* (FB 227v), and the saddle is described in all its precious details of fine fabric and noble metal, all shining bright and splendid.

In HF, Hertug Frederik goes hunting mounted upon a blood-red horse and dressed in white breeches, which could likewise be interpreted as a dichromatic sign of chivalry and courtship (HF 113r, 113v). At Hertug Frederik’s and Floris’ wedding at the end of the romance, horses feature once more, this time participating in the royal dwarfs’ solemn procession. Both women and men are on horseback: the ladies horses are dapple grey, those of the knights are blood-red: *the gonger the frwer redhe appa, allæ war the abild graa, the ridder ørss waræ allæ goth, allæ rødæ som jeth blodh*.

Only a single white horse is mentioned in K 47. This is the dwarf king Laurin’s steed which is snow white: *hesten han war sne hwidh* (DL 158r). As stated elsewhere, dwarfs figure as ideal in courtly behaviour and appearance, which will also become clearer in the following investigation of colour clusters in the K 47 texts.

Colour clusters

“Die ideale höfische Welt ist bunt.” (The ideal courtly world is multicoloured; Quast 2012: 171). In Old Danish literature, an abundance of colours marks extreme impressions either of splendour or of fear, but both in relation to the ideals of the court.

The most extensive scenery of all the romances is the description of a palace in FB, wherein some colours are named and many more are implied, creating a lavish image of the court. The overflowing description of the tower in Babilon where Blanseflor is held prisoner is a splendid and courtly (if slightly excessive) one:

aff malmer stiene grøne
 the ther gode ær och skiøne
 al then hwalff aff then same stien
 ther bode ær skier och ren
 jen knap owen pa torned stoor
 aff røt guld øwert stor och klar
 giømmen knapen gaar jen stangh
 tredugæ alnæ ær han langh
 owen aa knapen jen karbwnkel stien
 som solen allæ klarestæ skien
 saa skien then stien om myrke nat²⁸ (FB 235v)

The description begins with green and white marble, red gold, and a sun-like shining carbuncle (surely red), and goes on to appeal to all of the senses, the eye, the ear, even the

27 Cited after Brandt’s edition, where the missing passages are inserted from the Ghemen print of 1509.

28 Of green marble stones, which are outstanding and beautiful, the whole arch of the same stones that are both bright and sheer, there was a huge orb on top of the tower, made from red gold, truly great, and clear. Through the orb, a pole is set, which is thirty cubits long. On top of the orb, there is a carbuncle stone, which shines like the sun at its brightest, thus this stone shone in the dark night.

intellect, through abundant references to encyclopedic knowledge of the rivers flowing from paradise, and of all the different kinds of precious stones to be found there. These stones, though not described by colour terms, evoke colour, much as the following account of plants and spices evoke smell without describing it with scent terminology. Shockingly, this narrative is turned into a scene of horror, for the waters flowing there, earlier conjuring images of paradise, are soon used for a trial and turn as red as blood if a girl who wades in them is not a virgin any more (*ær hwn ey mōø ower wanned wod, wannet wordher rød som jet blod*, FB 238v). Her punishment is to die at the stake. Thus, the sensitised, overwhelmed listener is suddenly confronted with a scene of horror and death. The exaggerated, multicoloured presentation of the palace is to be interpreted as a sign of non-courtliness in a non-Christian ruler's realm. Such exaggeration features in two other scenes in the K 47 texts as well, where a dwarf king and his court are described in detail.

In the beginning of HF the eponymous duke is described; he bears a precious necklace, he is dressed in white, his helmet is made from hard, white steel (... *too hwozer the war hwidhe, the war giordh medh mygel flydhæ, hans hielm war hwidh af stol och hordh*), his horse is red, and his shield features a massive, golden hoop (*jen trindh bøghel aff guldh sa bredh ower andræ skioldhæ war han tiedh*). All of this illustrates Hertug Frederik's wealth, but all of it is outmatched by raiment of the dwarf king, Malmrikt. His pants are as white as ivory, and his shining gold helmet is decorated front and back with a meticulously-described assortment of precious stones crowned by a splendid carbuncle.²⁹

The superiority of the dwarf king's wealth over Frederik's becomes a motif repeated in a comparison of the two figures' dwellings. Hertug Frederik's castle, Kallidæs, is not described in detail, but it is said that he lived in rather poor conditions (*then tidh then edelæ hertwgh frederik, leffdhæ i werdhen sa ønckeligh*). His hunting trip is cut short by the speed with which his hounds are able to return from running through the small area of his estate (*the løbe jckj vdhen jen agers bredh, the wendhe them affther then samme leedh*), and though he is able to provide courtly entertainment, *gammen*, it is modest. The splendour of the dwarf's palace, on the other hand, is visible to Hertug Frederik long before he reaches the castle. Upon his arrival, the description of the gorgeous palace mirrors the earlier description of the dwarf king. The brightness of the precious stones on his helmet and shield is reflected in the mountain, at the top of which is his castle, shining as red fire just like the carbuncle crowning his helmet.

them tømte alth som bierighet mon brenne
 aff the stiene som dwerighen førde
 j skioldh och hielm ther han segh rømde
 the fwnne jen porth giømnen bierighet sa bred
 ath hertogen madeligh i giømnen red

29 For an investigation of the notions of precious stones in the Old Danish evidence, see Jucknies (2015).

the sowe vdhen bierighet jen fower grøde
 och jet hws skiendhe som jeld hin røde³⁰ (HF 2.114v.1–115r.3)

A more elaborate description of the palace follows after an interlude depicting the lavish fashion of the dwarf queen: the gold decorating her mantle jingles and is adorned with clear and shining gems. Her golden crown is emblazoned with precious stones, and her girdle is of great value. Duke Frederik of course has no wife at all, much less one so richly adorned. The resumed depiction of the palace matches the royal couple in splendour. Built of marble, it is illuminated by four hundred colourful lights, each hundred of them in a different hue, and it has windows made from cristal:

firæ hwndredth lyws ther jnnen skien [...],
 jeth hundredh lyws war hwidthæ som sne
 thet aneth grøne thet matte man see
 thet tridi war bronæ farige goth
 thet fierdhe war rødh som jeth blodh
 the windugh war aff cristallæ allæ³¹ (HF 117r–117v)

The interior of the palace is also described in an intensive burst of colours, sparkling with gold, precious stones, and noble fabric. A sumptuous table is described, and on it a board game bordered with green emerald and made half from rubies as red as the morning sun, *sa rødh som solen om morigen skien*, half from skillfully engraved jasper (*then annen diel aff jaspis war, grawen medh mange sielsøne par* (HF 118v). The wealth of his palace is said to oustrip that of Prester John's easily. Malmrikt is also lavishly outfitted for war: his magnificent tent is made from precious fabric and topped with a golden eagle. The king's and the queen's tents set up later at Hertug Frederik's wedding are also described in splendour, and the queen is dressed in scarlet. The ladies of their entourage ride dapple grey horses, and the knights blood-red ones.

Despite all the the gorgeousness and colour of their court, there is an imbalance of status between dwarfs and people. Notwithstanding all his glory, Malmrikt needs the duke's help as a warrior, which Frederik grants for free despite the dwarf king's offer of wealth. The dwarfs need Frederik's explicit permission to attend in his wedding. In the end, they make the richest gifts of any guests at the feast. Though the dwarf king, his queen, and their castle bear proper courtly names (king Malmrikt, queen Gunidor, and the castle Karlefinth), they remain approximate rather than full equals to the human nobles. It seems as though their courtliness and splendour must vastly exceed those of a human court in order for them to be acceptable for human company.

In the second romance starring a dwarf king, the splendour of eponymous King Laurin's court is again described at length, but this time without colours. Only three colours occur

30 To them, the hill seemed to burn when the dwarf moved, caused by the gems on his shield and helmet. They found a gate leading through the mountain, which was so vast that the duke could pass through easily. Outside the mountain, they saw a beautiful cover of vegetation, and a castle shining like red fire.

31 Four hundred lights shone inside [...], one hundred was as white as snow, one could see another [hundred] green ones, the third [hundred] was in an excellent purple, the fourth [hundred] was red like blood, all the windows were made from cristal.

in this romance: *rød*, *hvit*, and *grøn*. Red is used almost exclusively for describing Laurin's famous roses. Four quotes encapsulate the germ of the narrative's drama, e.g. death penalty for whoever should pick the dwarf's roses, either uttered by the criminal (King *Dyderik*), or the prosecutor (King Laurin). The colour term ends the verse and mostly rhymes with *dødhe*, and the distich resembles the refrain of a ballad with minor variation, e.g. *jech skal bryde the roser rødhe, skulde jech ter om bliwe døde* (I will pick the red roses, even if I die for it, DL 157r). The only outlying occurrence of the hue is in superlative degree in the stereotyped, relative phrase *rødistæ guld* (DL 158r). This also symbolises courtly glamour, and is used for a horse-shoe that is made of an extraordinarily precious sort of gold.

The second colour term, *hvit*, occurs in the same passage: Laurin's horse is not only splendidly shod, but also bears a flawless, courtly-coloured coat of snow white (*hesten han war sne hwidh*, DL 158r). The third colour, *grøn*, occurs as the protagonists ride through the woods: *thy rede I giømen skowe oc grøne lwnde, at ingen man them fyllige kwnne* (DL 156r). Note that the conventional phrase, *grøne lunde*, has to serve the rhyme in an overlong verse.

Though these two splendid kings may be imperfectly courtly figures because of their deviant status as dwarfs, the infamous black shepherd in IL, reads as an entirely uncourtly caricature in contrast to them. In him the features that make a perfect knight are utterly negated, both in complexion and lineament, constitution and posture, garments and fabric, armour and equipment. Colours feature as well, and they are the antithesis of the courtly red-white-multicoloured colour scale illustrated above. The shepherd owns only the dark shades *svart* and *bla*, apart from his eyes that glow in an unnatural, luminescent yellow compared to the colour of the precious stone, *topatsius*. The references to this stone compiled in *Seddelsamling* do not indicate a fixed hue, but rather seem to connote a bright, shining property, whether it is red gold, or yellow-green,³² and in Prester John's letter, explicitly cited in the romance³³, *topatsius* is likened to the shining stars. Besides his ugly colours, he is hairy, black-cheeked, with a misshapen face and the teeth of a boar set in his wide, blue-lipped mouth. His garments, described as troll-like (*jen leder trolldh*) and strange (*hans kleder war vnderligh*), are made from two cattle hides cut into straps (*the ware aff nøde huder two, alle skorne remme*, and described in a mocking manner as the *rigeste kleder* (most rich), as if to emphasise their remoteness from the courtly world (IL 6r). This description and its colour combination mark out the shepherd as a clear antipode to the courteous body.

To sum up, the Old Danish world of the court is described in terms of precious items, both natural (stones) and handcrafted (cloth). The colour(s) of the items, in comparison with the Middle High German evidence, is only rarely mentioned. Though precious stones, for example, are identified by name, their colour spectra are seldom included in their descriptions. Conversely, colour is an important part of descriptions in other texts such as

32 *Topazius hetær en ærlyk stehen. oc ær twinnækyns. En hauær lyt sum skært sylf. Annæn ær lutæth sum haf oc ær grønlyk gul* (Topazius is the name of a capable stone, and it is of two sorts. One has a colour like bright silver. The other is coloured like the sea and it is greenish yellow, HarpStenb (K): 192). *Han [Topazius] ær ligh røt gul a lyt* (Its colour is like red gold, HarpStenb (K 4): 231,1). The compiler(s) of K 47 could well have had the manuscript K 4 at their disposal, cf. Jucknies (2015).

33 This citation is already present in the Old Swedish original, and the Danish adaptor chose to not leave that passage out, while (s)he is not reluctant to abridge the text otherwise.

medical recipes. Colour plays a secondary role to other properties of lavish materials (eg, the brightness of gems) in defining the splendour of the court. Notwithstanding, colours are used to accentuate and emphasise especially important scenes, spectacular views, and both positive and negative phenomena. Negatively connoted colours can serve to contrast the colourful courtly world. The use of colour terms is after all only one of several possibilities to describe the splendour of the court.

Human complexion is also an important subject for colourful description in courtly narratives. Blushing or blanching is described most but, as shown above, faces can also turn *bla*, *svart*, and even *gul*. The term *hvit* for human skin is not used for facial colour, but exclusively for ladies' limbs, such as fingers, hands, and arms.³⁴ Though restrained in comparison with those of the broader European system, the Old Danish system's colour descriptions are nonetheless thematically consistent with those of European courtly schemes, even as Courtly splendour is conveyed more by costliness of materials than by gaiety of colours.

Courtly Colours?

Colours in East Norse literature are the topic of this article. This study reasserts that colour terms do not correspond tightly with single significances, but rather can have a range of connotations, positive or negative, depending on their context. They can represent the courtly sphere or a sphere far from it. Extensive descriptions of lavish decor can feature in the courts and palaces of potentates who do not belong to the Christian courtly world, like the two dwarf kings and the king of Babilon.

Further studies will need to investigate the way colour terms are used in religious and theological texts and compare them to their usage in courtly romances. Other text that will require investigation are 'non-fictional' such as medical treatises depicting stones, herbs, human and animal liquids, and skin, as well as economic documents like charters, accounts, and inventories, that describe the colours of items sold or paid, especially of clothing and fabric. The inevitable exception to the *determinata* of typical colours are the colour descriptions of human liquids in both medical and devotional texts – in the romances, blood is always red.

"If any one era could be singled out as being the most obsessed with colour, it would be the Middle Ages." (Pleij 2004: 4). Does this claim of obsession also hold true for the six Old Danish courtly romances transmitted in the manuscript K 47? As has been mentioned in this study, the courtly romances only make limited use of colour terms. Splendid descriptions of courtly decoration, though described in detail, often give little specification of colour, which would be uncommon in Middle High German romances. The occurrence of colour clusters in Old Danish romance is reduced to a few intense scenes such as FB's description of the tower in Babilon or the portrayal of the shepherd in IL. These reductions may have

34 The white hue is a sign of courtly beauty. In Middle High German, it is represented by *wîz* and by *blank*, and is attributed to skin, hands, arms, and breasts (cf. Brüggem 2012: 214). The latter do not feature anywhere at all in the Old Danish romances, probably in censorship for educational reasons.

been made to suit the tastes of the reading or listening public, but the motive for them may lie beyond the speculative abilities of modern scholarship.

The same colours are used to describe most of the courtly items or phenomena in Old Danish romance, regardless of source, which could be the result of poetological causes such as a preference for set phrases like *grøn lundh*, and stereotyped end rhymes like *rødhe –dødhe*. These features could also have mnemonic functions for oral performances of the texts. A closer investigation of formulae and phrasing in Nordic ballad tradition is a *desideratum*. Thus, with the field of colour studies opened to the East Norse text world, a lot of challenging but nonetheless promising research lies ahead.

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