



## The Two Confessions | Dȝ zwu peicht

### Text Information

Author | Anonymous

Language | Middle High German

Period | 15th Century

Genre | Fabliau

Source | Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, cgm 714

Collection | Gender, Sex and Sensuality: Writings on Women, Men and Desire

URL | [sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/two\\_confessions/](https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/two_confessions/)

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### Introduction to the Text

*The Two Confessions* (*Dȝ zwu peicht*) is an anonymously written story of which the oldest version dates from the second quarter of the 14th century. The manuscript on which this edition and translation are based was composed in the third quarter of the fifteenth century in the region of Northern Bavaria. The story belongs to the genre of "Märe", i.e. stories handed down anonymously, shaped by literary conventions, aimed at entertainment and without any higher rhetorical, religious or critical claims.

Some context concerning religious practice is in order here. Confession is a sacrament most frequently associated with the Christian faith of Catholicism. In confession, the believer confesses their sins anonymously to a priest, who as an ordained representative of God has the authority to absolve sin and assign penance. In the late Middle Ages, the sacrament of confession worked somewhat differently than in modern Catholicism. It was not anonymous, took place less frequently, and there was a kind of "emergency provision" for confessing to a lay person (someone who is not clergy). It is also worth noting that in the Middle Ages, priests were always men.

*The Two Confessions* tells the story of a husband and wife who decide to confess their sins to one another. The wife initiates the process and is the first to confess; her husband's question of whether she has had any other man leads her to confess to having slept with a total of twelve men in the village: the young shepherd, the lord's messenger, the priest, the judge, the cellarer, the lord's cook, the old shepherd, the neighbour's son and three of his companions, and finally the sacristan. Against the husband's complaints about her infidelity, the wife explains that each affair was to the advantage of their household: sleeping with the shepherd in lieu of making the traditional small payment for services, the lord's messenger will take them under his protection, the cellarer and the cook provide them food and drink, and so on. Accepting his wife's reasoning, the husband forgives her, and it is then his turn to confess. The husband confesses to having taken pleasure from touching their maid's hand while they were on the field together. For this, the wife demands as penance that he cut off his hand and undertake a pilgrimage to Rome. She argues that her actions were borne out of wanting to provide for their household and good standing, whereas his indiscretion was purely out of lust for the maid. The husband pleads with his wife for mercy, until she instructs him to lead his life more truthfully going forward and then, assuming the role traditionally reserved for a male priest, uses Latin to absolve him of sin.

The modern reader may appreciate the entertaining and comical depiction of married life in the German Middle Ages through reading *The Two Confessions*. The story is quite literally a "he said, she said": a man and a woman offer contradictory explanations of the same event with the reader being presented only with the spoken exchange and no kind of description. This simplistic yet direct style draws in readers, who might find themselves impressed by the extravagance of the wife's confession and her subsequent furor at her husband having touched the maid's hand. Gender, power, and the hierarchy of German society in the late Middle Ages all interrelate with each other in *The Two Confessions*.



## Introduction to the Source

*The Two Confessions* survives in five manuscripts dating from the fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth century: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. oct. 1430 (B), Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe 408 (K), Donaueschingen 104, (Do), Vienna (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 3027 (W), and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, cgm 714 (M), which is the text transcribed and translated here.

Because the versions of *The Two Confessions* in these five manuscripts differ to varying degrees from one another, scholars have divided them into two distinct groupings: *Die zwei Beichten A* (versions Do, K, W, and B) and *Die zwei Beichten B* (version M). Version M, the one presented here, is distinct in its setting, the role of the spouses, the number of lovers and the reason for the affairs. In *Die Zwei Beichten A*, the story is set at Easter. The couple is snowed in, preventing them from doing their yearly confession to a priest, which prompts the husband to suggest they confess to each other. This setting is absent in M, where the wife proposes the confession time while sitting at the fire. In M, the story ends with the wife taking on the role of the priest and, after a tongue-lashing, grants the husband absolution, whereas in the other versions the husband gets beaten with a broom. In some versions (Do and K), the story ends with a moral, either asking God to shame "false wives" (Do) or advising husbands not to ask questions of their wives that they don't want to know the answer to (K). The number of lovers in M is high (12) as compared to Do (4) and K (5), but not as high as in version W (21). However, the motivation for having slept with them in M is only economical; in the other versions there are a variety of reasons besides economical gain: violence, lust, pity.

*Die zwei Beichten* is titled *Dȝ zwu peicht* and appears in cgm 714, on fol. 431r-441v, which is housed in the Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek München (Bavarian State Library in Munich). With its 204 lines, it is one of the longer versions of this tale. The manuscript is dated to the third quarter of the 15th century and was written in Nordbairisch (a North-Bavarian variety of Middle High German) on paper. Cgm 714 is a compilation manuscript that contains rhymed couplet texts largely belonging to the genres of Minnerede (texts about love), Mären (comic tales) and Fastnachtsspiele (carnival plays).

## About this Edition

The diplomatic transcription in this diplomatic edition strives to retain the original manuscript's structure by recording scribal corrections and deletions. Crossed out letters and words in the manuscript have been kept and are crossed out in this edition as well. Abbreviations are expanded, indicated by square brackets ([ ]), and insertions are indicated with angle brackets (< >). Variations of the different renderings of the letter "u"- (likely included to indicate different sounds) have been unified to the modern "u" spelling. The descending s (ſ) is replaced with the round s; the sz-spellings are kept, but again, the descending s (ſ) is replaced with the round s. The spacing between prefixes and word stems are inconsistent and are frequently seen in instances where the preface "ver" precedes a verb. The inconsistencies in word spacing have been faithfully transcribed throughout. No punctuation has been added in the transcription of the manuscript.

What is interesting in this manuscript are inclusions of discourse markers which are known in conversation analysis as words or phrases that play a role in managing the flow and structure of discourse. The discourse markers in this edition are the words: "joo" translated as "oh" and "eȝ" translated as "well".

## Further Reading

"Die zwei Beichten A." In *Deutsche Versnovellistik des 13. bis 15. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Klaus Ridder and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler, 112–30. Schwabe Verlag, 2020.

Fischer, H. *Die deutsche Märendichtung des 15. Jahrhunderts. Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur Deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Beck, 1966. <https://books.google.ca/books?id=fuYfAQAAIAAJ>.

Rasmussen, Ann Marie. "Gender und Subjektivität im Märe die zwei Beichten (A und B)." edited by Martin Baisch, Jutta Eming, Hendrikje Haufe, and Andrea Sieber, 271–87. Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2005.

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Schröder, Werner. "Die zwei Beichten A und die zwei Beichten B." In *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, 2nd ed., 1615–17. Verfasserlexikon 10. Berlin, 1977ff.



## The Two Confessions | Dȝ zwu peicht

Es was gar ain guter man  
Der het ain frauen wol getha[n]  
Die was im lieb als sein leȝp  
Wann es was ein schönsz weȝp  
Zu einer zeȝt er peȝ ȝr sas  
In gutem mut on allen hasz  
Do sie nu ain weil sassen in dem gute[n] mut  
Die frau sprach nu dünckt dich gut  
So wil ich werlich peichten dir  
Das du wider peichtest mir  
Er sprach frau das solsein  
Beȝ den rehten treuen mein  
Du solt reht peȝhten mir  
Also wil ich auch dir  
Dȝe frau sprach das sol sein  
Das schwer ich auf dȝ treue mein  
Der man sprach nu sag mir an  
Hastu zu mir ȝendert kain[en] man  
Die frau sprach treun ja ich  
Des dorffs herten willen thet ich  
Do sprach zu ȝr der arm ma[n]  
Warümb hastu das gethan  
Die frau sprach ich tets ümb das  
Das er uns icht würd gehas  
Und uns der tzinsz liesz freȝ  
Darümb lag ich ȝm peȝ  
Hastus gethan ümb das  
So pin ich dir nit gehas  
Der man sprach nu sag an  
Hastu süst keinen man  
Do sprach die frau seuberlich  
Lieber herr traun ja ich  
Do kom des herrn pot  
Da gieng ich zu im trot  
Er pat mich ümb die mȝnne mein  
Da thet ich auch den willen sein

There was once a good man.  
He had an attractive wife.  
She was as dear to him as his life  
because she was a beautiful woman.  
5 Once he was sitting at her side  
in a good mood without misgivings.  
When they been sitting a while in this good mood,  
the wife said: "If you think it's a good idea,  
I will confess honestly to you  
10 so that afterward you confess to me."  
He said: "Wife that shall be;  
I vow to do so faithfully.  
You shall rightly confess to me  
and so I will likewise to you."  
15 The wife said: "This shall be.  
This I swear to you on my honour."  
The husband said: "Now tell me,  
did you have any man other than me?"  
The wife said: "Goodness me, yes.  
20 I did the village shepherd's will."  
Then the poor husband said to her,  
"Why have you done this?"  
The wife said: "I did it so that  
he would not treat us ill  
25 and not charge us the usual fee.  
That is why I lay with him."  
"If that is why you did it  
then I bear you no ill will."  
The husband said: "Now tell me,  
30 did you have no other man?"  
The wife said innocently:  
"Dear husband, goodness me, yes."  
"When the lord's messenger showed up,  
I went to him quickly.  
35 He begged me for my love,  
so I also did his will,



Das er unsz <nit>\* vorm herrn ver redt  
Und uns in seiner schirmung het  
Nu sih mein lieber man  
Darümb so hab ichs gethan  
Der man sprach hastus darümb getha[n]  
So musz ich dich unverdacht lan  
Der man sprach aber alls ee  
Ob sie het keinen mee  
Joo sprach die frau wol gethan  
Der pfaff ist auch mein man  
Er sprach liebe fraue mein  
Warümb thustu den willen sein  
Ich thetz in keÿm argen nit  
Neur das er got für uns pit  
Der man sprach iszs darümb geschehe[n]  
So musz ich dirs aber über sehen  
Die frau sprach ich habs ÿe drüm than  
Darümb scholtu mich unverdacht lan  
Er fragt dȳ frauen aber wider  
Ob sie keinen het gehabt sider  
Sie sprach joo pisz mir nit gefer  
Ich het auch den richter  
Eÿ sprach der arm man  
Warümb hastu das gethan  
Das thet ich ümb das  
Das er uns nicht wer gehas  
Und liesz uns des dienstz freÿ  
Darümb lag ich ÿm peÿ  
Und thet es auch umb das  
Ob uns ÿemant wer gehas  
Der über uns thet clagen  
Und uns gen ÿm thet versagen  
Das du der pusz werst rfeÿ\*  
Der man sprach das seÿ  
Nu sag liebe frau mir an  
Hasztusz darümb gethan  
So mag ich dirs verdenken nicht  
Ist es war ümb die geschicht

so that he would not bad mouth us to the lord  
and have us under his protection.  
Now see, my dear husband,  
40 that is why I did it."  
The husband said: "If that is why you did it  
then I must not blame you."  
The husband asked her, as before,  
if she had had any more.  
45 "Oh," said the attractive wife,  
"The priest is also my man."  
He said: "My dear wife,  
why do you do his will?"  
"I did not do it out of spite,  
50 but only so that he would plead with God for us."  
The husband said: "If that is why it happened  
then I have to overlook what you did."  
The wife said: "I have always done it for that reason  
so you should not hold it against me."  
55 He asked the wife yet again  
if she had not had another since then.  
She said: "Oh, don't be angry with me.  
I also had the judge."  
"Alas," said the poor husband.  
60 "Why did you do that?"  
"I did it so that  
he would bear us no ill will,  
and release us from service.  
That is why I lay with him.  
65 And I also did it so that  
if anyone bore ill will towards us,  
who brought a lawsuit against us,  
and denounced us to him,  
so that you would be absolved of blame."  
70 The husband said: "So be it.  
Now tell me dear wife  
(if that is why you did it,  
then I can't blame you for it),  
is that the truth about why it happened?"



Ja auff dÿ treue mein  
Ich thet es ümb den willn dein  
Der man sprach sag liebe fraue mir  
Schol ich schier pusz setzen dir  
Die frau sprach wie pistu ain kalp  
Ich hab kaum gepeichtet halp  
Der kellner und des herrn koch  
Die kamen auch zu mir doch  
Die prachten mir flaysch prot un[d] pir  
Das gab ich auch offft dir  
Damit spart wir unser gut  
Darümb so hab nit pösen mut  
Auff mich mein lieber man  
Die peicht wirt schir ain end han  
Wann wer sein sünd wil leichten  
Der musz sein sund ÿe gar peühten\*  
Ir ist kaum noch zwen  
Als ich in meim synn kan verstën  
Der alltt hirt kam mir auch zu  
Das was ainsz schmorgens fru  
Do ich das vih ausz traÿb  
Und verr da hinten playb  
Do warff er mich ÿns gras  
Und thet mir was sein will was  
Auff genad gethet ich das do  
100 Mein lieber wirt des glaub also  
Das hüt gelt hab ich verricht  
Mit dem selbigen geschicht  
Nu sag an wäÿstu icht mer  
Ja auff mein ër  
Unsers nachpern sun da peÿ  
Bracht er frischer gesellen dreÿ  
Die haben gelob[t]\* alle mir  
Sie wollen sein peholffen dir  
Ob dirsz gescheh ÿendert not  
So wollen [sy]\* gen mit dir ÿn[en] tot  
Sih das thet ich zu hilfpe dir  
Nicht lieber ma[n] verkers mir

75 "Yes, on my honour,  
I did it for your sake."  
The husband said: "Tell me dear wife,  
shall I now set you your penance?"  
The wife said: "How calf-like you are!\*" 80 I have hardly confessed the half of it.  
The lord's cellarer and his cook,  
indeed they came to me too.  
They brought me meat, bread and beer.  
I often gave that to you as well,  
85 in order to save our own provisions.  
So don't be angry  
with me, my dear husband.  
The confession will soon be at an end.  
Because whoever intends to lighten the burden of their sin,  
90 they must always fully confess it.  
There are only about two more,  
as far as I can tell.  
The old shepherd also came to me.  
It was early one morning  
95 when I was driving the cattle out  
and I stayed behind out there.  
Then he threw me into the grass  
and did to me as he wished.  
I did that there out of mercy,  
100 believe me, my dear spouse.  
I paid the tending fee  
with this same act."  
"Now, do you have anything else to tell me?"  
"Yes, on my honour,  
105 our neighbours' son; and the  
three young companions he brought with him.  
They all promised me  
They all promised me  
If any adversity came upon you,  
110 that they would be willing to go to death with you.  
See? I did it to help you.  
Dear husband, don't hold it against me."



Do sprach der gut man  
Wirt es icht schier ain e[n]d han  
Sie sprach ja herr zu diser stund  
Thu ich dir auch noch zwen kund  
Zu mir kam der meszner  
Gegangen auch da her  
Der hat auch mit mir gespilt  
Damit ich sein huld pehielt  
Das er mir dȝ kirch auff schlos  
Wenn ich wolt es ȝn nit verdros  
Für alle die in dem dorff sein  
Thut er auch den willen mein  
Des lonsz des geb wir nicht  
Also hab ichs ver richt  
Wann es ist ain guter kneht  
Er tet mirs dreu mal das ist sein reht  
Und thet es gar schier dar  
Das sein nyemant wurd gewar  
Lieber man ich wāysz nichtz dartzu  
Setz mir dafür dy pusz nu  
Nach genad des pit ich dich  
Mit faszten nicht peschwer mich  
Mit peten und auch nit mit wache[n]  
Noch süst mit andern sachen  
Wann ich pin ain kranckes weȝp  
Und hab einen schweren leȝp  
Er sprach mein liebs liep das sol sein  
Wann du pedenkst den frumen mein  
Er sprach nach genad setz ich dir  
Das scholtu fürwar glauben mir  
Dir seȝ nu ain urkünd  
Das du fürpas nȝmer thust sund  
Von gots gewalt seȝ dir ver geben  
Nu pehallt die pusz gar eben  
Sie sprach nu sag an lieber man  
Was sünd hastu gethan  
Er sprach lieber peichtiger mein  
Du scholt mir auch genedig sein

Then the good man said:  
"Will this ever have an end?"  
115 She said: "Yes husband, at this time  
I tell you of two more tidings.  
The sacristan also  
came over to me.  
He also played with me  
120 so that I would keep his favour  
and he would unlock the church for me  
whenever I want without him getting annoyed.  
For everyone who is in the village,  
he also does my will.  
125 We don't make any payment for this.  
That's how I've set it up.  
Because he is a good lad,  
he did it to me three times (that is his right)  
and did it there quickly and right away,  
130 so that no one would know.  
Dear husband, I know nothing more.  
Impose penance on me for this now.  
I ask you for mercy!  
Don't burden me with fasting,  
135 with prayer or with keeping vigil,  
or with other things  
because I am a weak woman  
and have a heavy body."  
He said: "My dear love, it shall be so  
140 because you care about my welfare."  
He said: "I now impose on you, mercifully,  
(you must truly believe me),  
let it be announced to you  
that you must never, ever sin again.  
145 With God's power may you now be forgiven.  
Now keep away from sin as your penance."  
She said: "Now tell me, dear husband,  
what sins have you committed?"  
He said: "My dear confessor,  
150 you need to show me mercy too.



Ich gieng mit unser maÿt auff's velt  
Das seÿ dir in der peicht gemelt  
Do gräÿff ich ÿr an dÿ hant  
Davon mir lust ward pekant  
Sie sprach mit ungedult  
Schlah ab dÿe hant für dÿ schult  
Er sprach du hast gethan vil mer den[n] ich  
Das über sach ich alles gütlich  
Die frau sprach hastu doch wol v[er]nu[m]en  
Das ichs neur thet ümb unsern frume[n]  
An deinem wir keinen frumen han\* neme[n]  
Ich müst mich gar ser schemen  
Das sie scholt mein frau sein  
Die selb pösz pfüllstosserein  
Bin ich nit vil schöner denn ich sie  
Das pekenn du selber hie  
Joo du liebe fraue mein  
Du pist gegen ÿr ain käÿserein  
Sie <sprach>\* warümb hastus denn gethan  
Du rechter schnöder pöser man  
Er sprach ich thets on allen arge[n] lÿst  
Wann du mir süst laÿder gram pist  
Wie möcht ich euch holt gesein  
Wenn ÿr so schier ver geszt mein  
Wist ich kan euch nit ver geben  
Die grossen sünd das merckt eben  
Gee hin gen Rom pald und trot  
Ümb die selben missetot  
Ir habt gesprochen eur ee  
Ich glaub euch fürpas nÿmer mee  
Er sprach frau thu sein nicht  
Es wer mÿr gar ain schwer geschicht  
Ich wils peÿ meinen treuen jehen  
Es schol dir nÿmer mer not geschehen  
Thu mir genad des pit ich dich  
Ich han dirs auch gethan sicherlich  
Sie sprach nain es mag nit gesein  
Du must darümb leyden dÿ pein

I went out to the field with our maid –  
this is reported to you in confession.  
Then I touched her hand  
and derived pleasure from this.”  
155 She said impatiently:  
“Cut off your hand for this transgression!”  
He said: “You have done much more than me  
and I graciously overlooked it all.”  
The wife said: “But surely you understood  
160 that I only did it for our benefit.  
Your action brought us no benefit.  
I would have to be very ashamed  
to have her as my lady,  
that common filthy tramp.\*  
165 Am I not much fairer than she is?  
Admit it right now!”  
“Oh yes, you, my dear lady.  
You are an empress next to her!”  
She said: “Then why did you do it,  
170 you truly lowdown, vile man?”  
He said: “My intentions were not evil.  
I did it because you are usually so cross with me.”  
“How could I possibly be well disposed to you  
when you forget me so quickly?  
175 Know this! I cannot forgive you  
these grave sins, mark my words!  
Go to Rome soon and get there quickly,  
because of this misdeed.  
You have broken your marriage vows.  
180 I can't believe a word you say anymore!”  
He said: “Lady, don't do this!  
It would be very difficult for me.  
I will swear on my honour  
that you shall never be in distress again.  
185 Show me mercy, I beg you!  
I have surely shown it to you.”  
She said: “No, it cannot be.  
You have to suffer the consequences.”





Genad liebe fraue mein		"Mercy, my dear lady!
Was du wilt das musz sein	190	Your will shall be done."
Sie sprach für das creutz leg dich dȳmütigklich		She said: "Lie down before the cross humbly
Nacket so wil ich mit gerten schlahe[n] dich		and naked and I shall beat you with a switch!"
Er sprach auf genad knie ich für dich		He said: "I kneel before you begging for mercy!
Und schlach und rauff und mörde mich		Go ahead, beat and whip and murder me,
Seýt es nit anders mag gesein	195	since it cannot be otherwise.
Es laȳd Jhesus auch für dȳ sünde mein		Jesus suffered for my sins too."
Sie sprach wol hin mein lieber kneht		She said: "Well then, my dear fellow,
Die genad ist pesser denn das got reht		mercy is better than justice.
Vor got sey dir ver geben		Before God, you are forgiven.
Halt fürpas pas dein leben eelichs lebe[n]	200	Lead your marital life better
Wenn du pis her hast gethan		than you have done thus far,
So will ich dir abschlahen den pan		and I shall lift your excommunication.
In gotes namen alsus		In God's name thus
O filius et spiritus sanctus		o filius et spiritus sanctus."

## Critical Notes

### Transcription

Line 35	From the context of the story, it is clear the scribe missed signalling a negation of the action. Hanns Fischer (1966) came to the same conclusion in his work. We have chosen to include the word "nit" (not) here in the transcript.
Line 69	In the manuscript, what appears to be the letter "r" precedes the word "freȳ." It was not crossed out by the scribe. We have included the letter "r," and show it here crossed out.
Line 90	This is a variant spelling of "peichten."
Line 107	This is a correction by the rubricator (the "t" was later inserted in red ink.)
Line 110	This is a correction by the rubricator (the "sy" was later inserted in red ink.)
Line 161	Crossed out by the rubricator (in red ink.)
Line 169	"Sprach" added to the text. It follows the convention the scribe has used to introduce speech.

### Translation

Line 79	To preserve source text imagery "wie pistu ain kalp" (how are you a calf) was translated as "how calf-like you are."
Line 164	The translators were unable to find another attestation of this vivid word which consists of three parts: <i>pfüll</i> which means filth; <i>stosser</i> which means tramp, and the <i>ein</i> which is the feminine ending.