

The Phenomenon of a Literary Bestseller in Sixteenth-Century German and European Book Markets

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Abstract

Although it took several decades for the new printing press invented by Johann Gutenberg around 1400 to achieve the necessary maturity to supply the book market with ever-greater numbers of items for the reading audience, by ca. 1500 a major paradigm shift occurred that mostly left the history of the manuscript behind and allowed the rise of mass-produced books, hence the emergence of bestsellers. One of those will be introduced and discussed here through the lens of its reception and print history. The Franciscan preacher and author Johannes Pauli produced with his *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522) a highly successful compilation of entertaining and didactic sermon tales that apparently managed to appeal to a broad audience throughout the entire century and far beyond. This study examines the subtle but also significant transformation of the book covers and marketing strategies facilitating the effects of a bestseller.

Keywords: Early Modern Printed Books; Johannes Pauli; *Schimpf Und Ernst*; Bestseller; Book Market.

1. Introduction

Research on literary history depends on many different factors to establish solid data and a critical awareness of the corpus under investigation. Those interested in creating a corpus of literary texts relevant especially for teaching endeavors, above all, must work hard to offer critical interpretations and specific aesthetic and narrative categories that justify the preference of one text over another one. Others might argue for the historical importance of certain narratives or poems as representatives of a 'national' culture, whatever that might mean in specific terms. But there is also a very simple category that allows us to determine the true impact of a text on the wider readership, that is, the sheer quantity of copies either in the form of manuscripts or in print (incunabula, early modern prints). There is no doubt at all that the Bible, for instance, was the one book copied the most throughout the entire Middle Ages. Parallel to it, the famous allegorical poem *Roman de la rose* by Guillaume de Lorris (ca. 1230) and Jean de Meun (ca. 1270), also greatly appealed to its audiences, with ca. 300 manuscripts still extant today. But even when a literary work was copied only in four or five manuscripts, we still believe that this fact underscores the text's popularity and significance.

There are, however, remarkable exceptions to those rules. The famous *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, written by the Bozen toll keeper Hans Ried between 1504 and 1516, contains many Middle High German texts from the high and late Middle

Ages that do not exist in any other manuscript, such as *Kudrun* or *Mauritius von Craûn*. However, recent research has fully confirmed that those two poems belong to some of the literary masterpieces of their own time (thirteenth century), as the flood of modern interpretive studies confirms [1]. We can also turn to other evidence concerning the relevance of an individual text, whether it was enjoyed by the contemporaries or not. The history of reception informs us exceedingly well about the impact of a narrative on future generations, even if there might exist a troubling gap between the original and the much later response to it. As to the situation in the late Middle Ages, it would not matter centrally whether a text was published as an incunabulum or survived in the form of manuscripts, as the case of Christine de Pizan's highly popular *Livre de la cite des dames* (ca. 1404-1407) illustrates, which was never printed but was regularly copied by hand until the end of the fifteenth century (twenty manuscripts) and seems to have been known also during the following decades [2].

Due to the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg ca. 1450, a profound technological paradigm shift affected all of late medieval Europe, and the book markets were soon flooded with incunabula and then early modern prints [3]. Significantly, increasingly, the interest in printed books also included, apart from the Bible and many other religious texts, entertaining and didactic literature. These can be grouped into the following categories: translations

from the Italian; translations from the French; translations from Latin-Humanist and classical antique texts; didactic texts; adaptations from medieval heroic epics and courtly romances; autochthonous German literature; and German jest narratives [4]. The modern book market, however, included many other types of texts as well, which scholarship has diligently recorded, examined, and analyzed, obviously because they reflected exceedingly well the transition into a new age and a new cultural context. The famous *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* (most recently, vol. 98, now edited by Philip Ajouri, Julia Bangert, Gerhard Lauer, and Nikolaus Weichselbaumer), has been the most important scholarly platform for a wide range of relevant research approaches toward that topic. Catalogs compiled by book traders such as Michel Harder (1569) provide an excellent insight into the public interest in printed books [5].

Considering the enormous output of recent scholarship on this topic, we can also recognize a political and cultural interest in the history of the early modern book since it represented economic, literary, religious, scientific, medical, and pragmatic traditions underscoring technological, scientific, and other developments [6-10]. In fact, the early modern book is treated today as a 'national' icon of greatest importance.

1.1. Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522) as a Bestseller

With the invention of the printing press, it was possible for individual titles to reach a mass audience if the content and the marketing strategies were right. Here I want to examine the case of the collection of entertaining and didactic tales, *Schimpfund Ernst* (Jest and Serious Matter) by the Franciscan priest Johannes Pauli from 1522 (Pauli 1924/1972). Research has already examined this enormously popular work from a variety of perspectives, such as the author's criticism of the clergy and the Church, the relevance of sermon literature for public entertainment, the role of the story collection as a genre, the element of humor, and Pauli's strong sense of justice and legality in all social conditions [11-15].

The author's biography is fairly well known from internal self-references, and for our purposes it suffices to point out that he was a popular Franciscan preacher in the region of Alsace and neighboring territories. He edited the famous sermons by Geiler von Kaysersberg and also wrote some treatises, but his true fame rests in his *Schimpfund Ernst*, which proved to be, highly remarkably, a bestseller far into the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries and was reprinted again many times subsequently [16, 17]. During the long reception process, some of the texts were eliminated, new ones were added, but in essence, *Schimpf und Ernst* preserved its textual integrity and proved throughout the ages its timeless value because a vast number of the 693 tales included in the original print from 1522 apparently address universal themes of great significance, such as truth, justice, hatred, foolishness, violence, war and peace, gender conflicts, cheating and deception, intelligence, witticism, ignorance, and the most trusted ways toward physical healing.

Both Johannes Bolte (ed. 1924/1972, 141-54) and Bodo Gotzkowski (1991, 536-61) have already listed the most important reprints of *Schimpf und Ernst* in the sixteenth century and have detailed the specifics of the respective impressums. Following, I intend to examine that data to draw more information from them regarding the book's enormous success in the early modern market. First, let us review where the work was published, and by what printers, then it will be useful to examine possible changes in the titles and also the instrumentalization of those by other authors for different purposes. After all, *Schimpf und Ernst* quickly emerged as a bestseller, for which there are many good reasons considering the content of the large number of stories, most of them fairly short, not extending more than half a page in Bolte's edition.

The 1522 version addressed the audience by emphasizing that these stories engage with the wide range of topics relevant in human life ("durchlaufft es der welt handlung," 141; runs through the history of this world; here and below I do not replicate the common virgule in the sixteenth-century texts; these references pertain to Bolte's second volume). The many different parables, exempla, and histories ("hystorien") would be profitable for the reader and contribute through their satirical content – here not expressed explicitly – to the improvement of humanity. Johannes Griening (or Grüninger) published this book in Strassburg, a major center of early modern book printing. Only three years later, Johannes Knobloch – here identified as Erasmus Johannes Knobloch – came out with a new version, giving primarily credit to the city itself: "Getruckt in der loeblichen Statt Straßburg" (141; superscripta are here written out) (for the early modern book printers, see Benzing) [18].

The 1533 edition copies the wording of the 1522 edition closely, but here we also encounter a direct didactic message: "ab Woelchen der Mensch, so er die lesen ist, sich billich Bessern wuert" (142; from which the person who, when reading these stories, will certainly improve [in his character]). The printer, Bartholomäus Griening, emphasizes that this collection is now richly illustrated, whereas that had not been the case in the past. New stories have been added, and the entire work would be "kurtzweilig zu Lesen" (142; entertaining to read). In the 1535 edition, we are again alerted to the fact that this volume contains a variety of narrative genres, especially "schoene[] vnd kurtzweilige[] Gleichnuesse" (142; wonderful and exciting parables). As to the serious accounts (*Ernst*), those are identified as "nit minder nutzlich dann kurtzweilig" (143; no less useful and entertaining). Moreover, the potential customer is reminded that the edition contains attractive illustrations by Hans Baldung (1484 or 1485–September 1545; also known as Hans Baldung Grien, Albrecht Dürer's most gifted disciple) and that the editor made great efforts to clean up the text and to expand it with new additions. To make it easier to identify specific tales, an index has been added at the end.

When we consider subsequent editions, we notice both the repetition of the advertisement text and the continuous

emphasis on the moral-didactic and entertainment purpose of the collection. The appeal of the included woodcuts obviously contributed strongly to the phenomenon that the reading audience happily picked up copies for purchase. The anonymous 1545 edition (also without the city of publication and the printer) adds some significant phrases on the title page: “vil weiser hoeflicher Spruech, Historie, Exempel, vnd Lehren, Zu Vnder-weisung vnnnd Manung in allem thun vnd leben der menschen. Auch zu Kurtzweil, Schertz vnnnd Froelichkeit des gmuets” (145; many wise and courtly/polite comments, accounts, exempla, and lessons for instruction and admonishment concerning all kinds of actions and situations in people’s lives. Also good for entertainment, jokes, and joyfulness of the mind). The two-pronged approach remained the same with every new version, and this for obvious and very good reasons.

The Frankfurt a. M. printer Hermann Gülferich copied the traditional cover page verbatim in his 1546 edition. However, in 1550, Cyriacus Jacobus in Frankfurt, expanded his version considerably by adding narratives in German translation from classical antiquity (Plautus) and the late Middle Ages (Albrecht von Eyb). The cover is decorated with a woodcut borrowed from a contemporary satirical work, the *Reineke Fuchs* (with a long historical pedigree going back to the late twelfth century). The 1563 edition, published by Christian Egenolffs Erben (heirs) breaks with the tradition and offers the following title: “Schertz mit der Warheyt. Kurtzweilige Gespräche In Schimpff vnd Ernst Reden” (147; Jokes with truth. Entertaining talks in jest and earnest).

In the 1570 edition, the printer emphasized that the accounts would represent “Warhafftige Historien” (148; true accounts), without dropping the usual descriptor of “kurtzweilige Exempel, Gleichnisse vnd merckliche Geschichten” (148; entertaining exempla, similes, and noteworthy narratives). In 1583, Christoff Raben in Frankfurt changed the wording again to “Kurtzweilige vnd Laecherliche Geschicht Vnd Historien Die wol in Schimpff vnd Ernst moegen gelesen warden” (149; Entertaining and laughter-inducing stories and accounts that can well be read as jests and serious narratives). We also notice the increased use of the epithet of “nuetzlich” (1570, 1582; profitable) to underscore the direct applicability of the teachings contained in this collection. At the same time, the publisher assumed that the book would be read, either by an individual to a group of listeners or by individuals for themselves: “moegen gelesen werden” (1583; p. 149; can be read). Raben also highlights that the events or situations mentioned here could be easily recognized everywhere in the world because people do not change that much and perform more or less the same way “wie es gemeinlich in allen Landen pflegt zuzugehen” (149; as it tends to happen usually in all countries).

The 1583 edition also stands out because the publisher expanded it considerably with stories from other jest narrative collections, such as the *Centio Nouvelle* (*Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, ca. 1460), Georg Wickram’s *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), Martin Montanus’s *Gartengesellschaft* (ca. 1560), and *Wegkuertzer* (1557; 149). The 1609 edition attempts

to pursue a slightly different marketing strategy, identifying these stories additionally as “anmuthige vnd lustige Historien” (150; graceful and funny stories). In 1677, an unnamed editor introduced himself as a “Liebhaber” of those narratives (151; lover, or fan). The 1699 edition (s.l.: n.p.) employs the term *Der ergötzende Schimpf und Ernst* (The delightful Jest and Earnes). In 1822, the title page begins with these words: “Sinnreiche und unterhaltende Geschichten” (151; Meaningful and entertaining stories). And in 1856, the printer employed the term “Anekdotensammlung” (151; collection of anecdotes), which changes the nature of this collection in a subtle but specific manner.

It also deserves mention that Johannes Pauli’s *Schimpf und Ernst* appealed to non-German audiences as well, as documented by a good number of translations: 1568 into Latin, 1576 into Dutch, 1591 into French, 1625 into Danish, 1677 into Swedish, 1701, 1749, and 1781 into Danish (Bolte 1924/1972, 152-54). It remains inexplicable why this so highly popular work did not find an English, Spanish, Italian, or Polish translator, not to speak of Russian, Arabic, Chinese, or Portuguese experts (cf. now Classen forthcoming, trans.; a Japanese translation appeared in 1999).

Numerous other authors drew from Pauli’s model and composed their own collections of tales with the same title, *Schimpf und Ernst*, although they produced then rather different compilations. These included Georg Stöhr (1550–1630) with his *Geistlicher Schimpff un[d] Ernst* (Leipzig 1608), Otto Melander (1571–1640) with his *Joco-Seria Das ist Schimpff und Ernst* (1605 and 1617), Johann Rist (1607–1667) with his *Hochzeitlicher Schimpf und Ernst* (1643), Samuel von Butschky with his *Hochdeutsche Venus-Kanzeley: darinnen allerhand schimpf- ernst- und wahrhafte Brife in Libes sachen* (1644), or Christian Funke (1626–1695) with his *Schimpff und Ernst. Von Widerwertigkeit des heutigen Freyens / belachet und beweinet* (1653, translated from Danish to German), Ernst Christoph Homburg with his *Schimpff- und ernsthaftte Clio* (1638 and 1642), and *Politischer Schimpff und Ernst: in unterschiedlichen Discursen* (anonymous, 1669).

Since the early nineteenth century, *Schimpf und Ernst* from Pauli’s pen has been re-issued many times, so in 1822, 1839, 1856, 1866 (reprinted in 1967), 1876, 1877, 1886 (according to Bolte, ed., 1924/1972); other editions – to be as comprehensive as possible for the record – not mentioned by Bolte had already appeared in 1579, 1644 (in Dutch), 1723, and 1777. Additional new editions (also not listed by Bolte, ed.) appeared in 1839, 1856, 1866, 1876, 1877, 1880, 1887, 1890, 1893, 1900, 1904, 1911, 1913, 1916, 1920, 1923, 1924, 1943 (a selection), 1949 (also a selection of modernized tales), 1957 (in a collection titled *Minutenspiele*), 1967, 1972, 1994 (in Dutch), 1999, 1999 (in Japanese), 2012, 2014, and 2022.

There would be many opportunities to reflect on the internal reasons why this collection of tales experienced such a broad reception even far beyond the German-speaking lands (see, for instance, Classen 2023, “Humorous Treatment

of Prostitutes”; Classen 2023, “History of Early Modern Society”). But to gain at least a preliminary notion of what Pauli really achieved as a narrator and soon as a bestseller author, we can be content with examining the third story, identified as a “Schimpff” (sic; jest), which provides both entertainment and ethical and moral, if not philosophical lessons.

A peasant encounters a vagrant outside of his house and takes him in for the evening out of pity because no one else in the village had been willing to help him. The reason for this inhospitable treatment by the others is simply that the vagrant can only tell the truth, and no one wants to hear it. The peasant finds this curious, and during dinner he encourages the stranger to demonstrate his odd attitude. The vagrant is resistant at first, apprehensive of the almost guaranteed consequences. However, since the peasant insists, he no longer holds back and, observing physical problems in the faces of the peasant couple and also their cat, he simply states that. This, however, enrages the host so much that he chases him out of the house, threatening to kill him.

Quoting from the Old Testament, the narrator laments that there is no truth and no mercy left here in the world (vol. 1, 9). Yet, the author subsequently adds an interesting twist to that simple lesson, warning especially preachers not always to blurt out truthful statements where those are not asked for and are also inappropriate. Sometimes, it would be better to keep quiet instead of saying directly what is on one’s mind because it would too easily lead over to “Kriegen und Zancken” (9; warring and fighting). Truth would be such a noble matter that it could not be handled well by all people at all times. According to Saint Paul, a servant of God (a priest) ought not to bicker; he ought to be kind and soft toward all people, teaching them patiently, and criticizing them only modestly, especially those who would resist the truth (9).

There are many other narratives that make the audience laugh about foolish and ignorant people. Then, the collection also contains drastic warnings about shortcomings and human failures, about breaking the law, the principles of justice and fairness, violence, mistreatment of marriage partners, waging wars, causing harm and destruction. It would go beyond the purpose of this paper to explore the many ethical, moral, and religious messages contained in *Schimpf und Ernst* (see, for instance, Classen forthcoming, “Johannes Pauli and His Social Criticism”). These few comments, however, already suggest why this intriguing collection of sermon narratives experienced such universal and long-lived appeal among German and other northern-European audiences. The emphasis of the volume appeared to shift slightly in the course of time, but in essence, Pauli’s work contained its universal value over the following centuries. It is rather puzzling and disturbing to realize that modern publishers refuse to re-edit *Schimpf und Ernst*, apart from one recent on-demand publisher.

2. Conclusion

As it has become clear, Johannes Pauli was a most successful and skillful narrator. However, he hardly produced original

work; instead, he culled extensively from ancient classical and medieval literature, and he also drew from near contemporary texts such as the famous Till *Eulenspiegel* (first printed in 1510/1511), certainly also a bestseller (Gotzkowski 1991, 488-88). We could call him an ingenious collector, a brilliant commentator because with his anthology, he set the stage for many more jest narrative collections, such as Georg Wickram’s *Rollwagenbüchlein*[19].

The evidence available to us confirms that *Schimpf und Ernst* became a true bestseller that sold well not only over the next decades after its first publication in 1522, but over the next centuries. The early modern printers and publishers understood clearly that this work was a guaranteed success in the book market, especially because Pauli addressed universal themes, criticized even the Catholic Church, pursued very similar themes as Martin Luther, but was not a radical revolutionary. There is always a sense of humor, humility, and humbleness in all of the tales contained in *Schimpf und Ernst*, and since laughter was regularly entailed, the audience responded with enthusiasm and joy, and this well into the nineteenth century (Classen forthcoming. “The Continuity”) [20-29].

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