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The Early Novel in the History of Pre-Modern German LiteratureThe Emergence of a New Genre During the Transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period

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Abstract

Since the early fifteenth century, prose gained the upper hand also in the field of fictional narratives. Before then, all romances, short narratives, and other fictional texts had been composed in verse to facilitate the oral presentation with musical accompaniment. Of course, in theology, philosophy, law, and medicine, for instance, prose had always been the dominant mode, but not in literature. This transformation can be observed all over late medieval Europe, and so also in the German-language areas of the Holy Roman Empire. This brief analysis outlines the progress in the literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, offering short interpretations and an outline of the major texts' content to convey a broad understanding of what contemporary audiences found to be so intriguing and relevant. In other words, even before the discovery of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in Mainz ca. 1450, the conditions in the book market were undergoing fundamental changes, which then accelerated tremendously with the technological innovation.

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Introduction

This short analysis offers a critical evaluation of the emergence of a new literary genre, the prose novel, in the history of German literature [Straub, 1974]. Various terms have been used in the course of time since the beginning of philological and literary research in ca. 1800, such as *Volksbuch* – by now completely outdated – prose romance, or novel. There are especially debates about the notion of the latter term because most of the texts to be considered here were simply prose versions of a medieval verse narrative [Gotzkowsky, 1991]. The terminology is a bit tricky since we tend to talk about verse romances when we discuss medieval courtly narratives, such as Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec* or *Yvain*. Many of those texts were subsequently rendered into prose, hence prose romances. But only in the course of time, especially since 1500,

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true novels as we understand them today emerged, written in prose, relating a comprehensive account of a protagonist's life. The novel is not be confused with the novella, a short prose narrative in the vein of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) or Chaucer's *Canterbury* Tales (ca. 1400).

For the first two hundred years, from the early fifteenth to the late sixteenth century, authors considerably experimented with various genres, relying on quasi courtly romances in prose, developing episodic narratives, and trying their hands at the novel proper. In parallel, the genre of short prose narratives also emerged, either as sermon narratives (Johannes Pauli, *Schimpff und Ernst*, 1522) or jest narratives (*Schwänke*, see, for instance, Georg Wickram, *Rollwagenbüchlein*, 1555). This led to a rich development of what we used to call the *Volksbuch*, a rather Romantic term (chap book), whereas today the technical concept is simply identified as the 'prose novel' [Classen, 1995/1999].

Historical Development

While the Constance notary public Heinrich Wittenwiler still had relied on verse for his allegorical poem *Der Ring* (ca. 1400), his contemporary Johannes von Tepl in Bohemia was one of the first late medieval German authors to rely on prose for his dialogue treatise *Der Ackermann* (also ca. 1400) in which Everyman debates with Death about the meaning of life and death. Whereas the Ring constitutes a drastic satire on peasants' foolishness which quickly leads to violence and then a bloodbath, the latter reflects on the meaning of life, the relevance of love and marriage, and, ultimately, the essence of human existence as granted by God [Roloff, 1983] [Roloff, 1970]. But the first major prose texts, whether we call them novels or prose romances, were composed as translations from the French by the Countess Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken around 1437: *Maller und Loher, Herzog Herpin, Huge Schepple,* and *Königin Sibille* [Burchert, 1985]; see the editions [[Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken] 2014], [Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken] 2018], ([Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken] 2013). Here we confront conflicts between the Frankish ruler, Charlemagne, and the novel's protagonist, or the rise of the low-ranking hero to the position of the king of France. Recent scholars have argued vehemently regarding Elisabeth's role as the author because she had originated from France to marry the count of Nassau-Saarbrücken and might not have been competent enough with German at such an early point in time, but it does not matter for us whether she was only the patron and commissioned those translations, or whether she was personally involved in the creation of those works. The language used proves to be fairly simple, and the events closely follow similar structural patterns, but apart from *Sibille* (one manuscript), they enjoyed considerable popularity and were printed and republished numerous times well into the sixteenth century, being some of the more popular items in the book market. It is worth mentioning that an earlier and quite popular version of the latter novel (twenty manuscript copies) had been written in verse by Hans von Schondoch under the title *Königin von Frankreich und der ungetriuwe Marschalk* (The Queen of France and the Disloyal Marshall, ca. 1400), and song version were also widely disseminated far into the late sixteenth century. Even though Elisabeth's version was not successful, the theme itself was deeply appreciated far into the late sixteenth century.

Charles's wife Sibille is harassed by an ugly dwarf who wants to seduce her sexually but cannot achieve his goal. We are not told anything about his origin, but he soon becomes an instrument in the hands of a hostile faction at the king's court who believe that if they can get rid of the queen, her husband would become so distraught and weak that they could take over the control. In his frustration, the dwarf sneaks into her bed during the king's absence early in the morning and falls asleep. Once Charles has returned from Mass, he discovers the miserable creature under the blanket and immediately believes that his pregnant wife had committed adultery. In his male inferiority complex, he disregards the facts that she carries his own son, the future heir to the kingdom, and that the dwarf is tiny and a most ugly figure, all of which makes it rather absurd that the king would suspect his wife of adultery even under those odd circumstances.

He immediately wants her to be burned at the stake, which creates a major raucous, with the hostile faction at court attempting to get her executed to hurt the king, while another faction, with less influence, defends the poor woman. Eventually, the dwarf is thrown into the flames, and Sibille is expelled from the court despite her condition. Another evil courtier

then follows her and tries to rape and murder her in the forest, but she manages to escape, although her protector, a young knight, suffers his death. His killing has the consequence that his dog badly mourns him, and eventually tries to avenge the murderer, which astounds everyone at court. Eventually, the king orders an ordeal in which the dog indeed manages to overcome the evil man who is then executed, but the dog also dies subsequently out of grief over the loss of its master.

Sibille roams the world and finds a slew of supporters, some being rather odd characters, but they all, including her father, the emperor of Byzantium, the pope, and her own son, Louis (years have passed), demonstrate great pity with her and ultimately help her to defeat Charles who in his desperation and ignorance finally has to accept that he had been the victim of courtly cabals. So, at the end, he accepts his wife again and has the hostile faction at his court executed. Justice wins out, although it takes much time to overcome all those criminals and evil characters. The other more popular novels from Elisabeth's pen also engage with Charles and his political conflicts, or with the rise of a butcher's son to the throne of France by means of his manliness and ethical ideals.

The next step in the emergence of the early modern novel was a long narrative about love and knighthood by Eleonore of Scotland who had married the Tyrolean Duke Sigmund in 1449 and also seems to have adjusted quickly to the German environment in Innsbruck. She translated or commissioned the translation of the novel *Pontus und Sidonia* sometime before 1465 (Eleonore von Österreich, 1997), faintly based on the Anglo-Norman *Horn et Rimenhild* (ca. 1180) and then fully on its later French adaptation, *Ponthus et la belle Sidoyne*, perhaps by Geoffroy IV de la Tour Landry (d. 1391). Eleonore's work, which has survived in one manuscript only, was first printed in 1485 and experienced a considerable success subsequently far into the late sixteenth century (four incunabula and eleven early modern prints, plus two seventeenth-century reprints).

This novel tells a love story with a happy outcome after numerous challenges have been overcome, especially treason, slander, and military conflicts pitting Christian against Muslim forces involving Galicia in northwestern Spain, Brittany, and England. Love, virtues, and chivalry triumph, and there are no problems left, so we face here a 'classical' happy end. The young protagonist at first loses his homeland, finds refuge in France and England, wins the princess's love, and proves his superior knightly accomplishments beating back the Saracen armies and regaining his home kingdom.

The *Melusine* Tradition

In 1456, the Bernese citizen Thüring von Ringoltingen rendered the French *Mélusine* originally written by Couldrette in verse in ca. 1401 – a prose version had already been published by Jean d'Arras in 1393, which indicates that the turn toward prose had set in a bit earlier in France than in the Holy Roman Empire – into German discussing the life of the young courtier Reymund and his marriage with Melusine, a creature from another world (Thüring von Ringoltingen, 1990). The protagonist is rescued by the fairy Melusine from a catastrophic situation, having killed his uncle by accident during a hunt in the forest. He is completely despondent and does not know at all how to cope under those circumstances, until he encounters this mysterious woman and her two sisters. She offers him, however, her hand in marriage and enormous wealth on the condition that he never spy on her during Saturdays, without him knowing the reasons for her mysterious requests. The couple experiences much happiness and prospers well due to her almost magical potency. She has numerous castles built and delivers twelve sons to her husband, all of whom carry signs of their monstrous origin in their face, but eventually Reymund, driven by foolish jealousy instilled into him by his ignorant and suspicious brother, breaks the taboo discovering that his wife is really a hybrid creature being half a snake/dragon and half a human, at least when she spends time in her bath. The poet has the husband drill a hole into the door to the bathroom where he discovers his wife having turned into half a snake or dragon from the belly button down, while she is still a woman in the upper part. At first both keep it a secret, him believing that she had not realized his misdeed, but when later one of their sons commits a terrible murder of one of his brothers, the father publicly exposes Melusine and blames her for this devastating development which he attributes to her monstrous being.

The poor victim had joined a monastery, which was an egregious error and embarrassing for the other

brother. To remedy this situation, he simply sets fire to the entire monastery and burns all monks and the abbot. Reymund is so distraught that he exposes his wife's true identity, thus breaking the critical taboo. This forces her to leave humanity for eternity. She would be allowed to return only on the Day of Judgment, but we are not told anything about that. Instead, the narrator turns his attention to the surviving husband and the sons. Indeed, as predicted by Melusine, Reymund experiences his quick mental and emotional collapse, which is subsequently followed by the demise of the family, although the dynasty of the Lusignans (Cyprus) survived and thrived, at least outside of the narrative context, which connects the literary account with the historical reality. The mythical account of this fairy woman Melusine greatly appealed to subsequent authors, translators, printers, and readers, so we can identify here one of the first true bestsellers in the early modern market.

However, the first novel in the modern sense of the word, not derived from a medieval verse version and not entirely situated in the world of knighthood and chivalry, was the anonymous *Fortunatus*, probably composed around 1470 and first printed in Augsburg in 1509 on behalf of the publisher or patron, the apothecary Johannes Heybler (*Fortunatus,* 1990). It enjoyed vast popularity, as demonstrated by thirty reprints in the sixteenth century alone, the dramatized version by the famous Nuremberg cobbler and poet Hans Sachs in 1553, and an English translation or adaptation by the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Dekker (ca. 1572–25 August 1632).

Although we can identify many different sources, as is always the case with major literary works, *Fortunatus* constitutes, as scholarship has repeatedly confirmed, a monumental step forward in the history of the German novel (Kästner, 1990). Hence, a brief paraphrase would seem appropriate here. The young protagonist departs from Cyprus leaving behind his impoverished parents – his father had squandered the family properties through excessive wastefulness. He runs into a number of problems and at one point, while working in London, would have been almost executed innocently like the other servants of his lord, a Florentine merchant who is falsely accused of having stolen the king's jewels. However, innocent Fortunatus he is let go in the last minute as being innocent in this case; yet, he is forced to leave the country. His fortune then suddenly changes to the better when a fairy grants him a wish, but instead of wisdom, long life, or health, he chooses money. From that day on, his purse is always filled, so he can embark on much traveling across Europe, which, however, also entails some life-threatening experiences because he repeatedly runs into envious individuals and criminals. At one point, he even explores a mysterious cave in Ireland where visitors can allegedly take a look into Purgatory, but none of that is true. Fortunatus and his companion Lüpoldus would have almost died from hunger when they are finally rescued by an old monk. Eventually, he manages to settle back in Cyprus, marries, and has two sons.

At the end of a second major travel, this time through the Middle East, he returns home having stolen from the Egyptian sultan a miraculous cap that immediately transports its wearer to any place he wants to be. Upon his death, Fortunatus hands those two magical objects to his sons but warns them about the dangers if they might misuse them or separate them from one other.

Tragically, that is exactly what happens next, and while unambitious Ampedo stays home, his brother Andolosia travels to various courts and tries to rise in social class with the help of money. This, however, awakens bitter envy in two courtiers who finally kidnap and torture him until he dies a miserable death. Ampedo grieves so much about his brother's disappearance that he also passes away. The author finally and strongly advises his audience that wisdom matters so much more than wealth and that they should choose more wisely than his protagonist.

The novel's major success resulted from its focus on money as a serious threat to one's happiness, the world of merchants, travel, and social conflicts, all of which obviously appealed to an urban audience of administrators, traders, and bankers. However, Fortunatus and his sons do not fully belong to the merchant class and yet can also not break the glass ceiling separating them from the traditional aristocratic circles, which basically leads to the miserable collapse of the entire family. Fortunatus represented the first major travel novel tracing the protagonist's journey throughout Europe and later also to Egypt and India where he encounters the

fabled Prester John (for a recent close reading, see Kiening, 2021).

Contemporary authors such as Hermann Bote (from Brunswick, *Till Eulenspiegel*, ca. 1510/1511, originally *Ulenspiegel*; see Bote, 1966) and Johannes Pauli (from Alsace, *Schimpf und Ernst,* 1522; see Classen, trans., 2024), who also resorted to prose, presented more anecdotal narratives for didactic and entertainment purposes. However, *Till Eulenspiegel*, though divided into short anecdotes, still traces the protagonist's life from early childhood to his death in separate episodes, him constantly acting as a rogue who carries out pranks, often resorting to his own body's excrements to shock the audience.

Veit Warbeck, diplomat at the court of John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony, in his very close translation of the Old French *Magelone* in 1527 (Warbeck, 1990; first printed in 1535), finally opened the door for the sentimental novel-like prose narrative about the love story of the young couple Peter of Provence and Magelone of Naples, both suffering from their tragic separation, Peter's enslavement and then his liberation, and Magelone's establishment of a hospital where the lovers can finally meet again. However, the first major and independent sixteenth-century novelist was, by contrast, Georg/Jörg Wickram (Colmar, 1503–ca. 1561; see Wickram, 1967-2017). He was particularly famous for this collection of jest narratives, the *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), but he also wrote a number of novels that set the stage for this genre to develop fully in the history of German literature. However, his early novels, *Ritter Galmien* (Knight Galmien), published anonymously in 1539, and *Reinhart und Gabriotto* (Reinhart and Gabriotto), appeared in 1561, still somewhat followed the tradition of the courtly romance in the sense that the young protagonist rises from a low status to a well-respected rank among the nobility. This finds its even more specific reflection in the novel *Goldfaden* (1554, printed in 1557; The Golden Thread), where the protagonist can climb from being nothing but a kitchen boy to the count's son-in-law and then his successor. However, at his wedding, it turns out that he was, after all, of noble descent, which he had not known until that moment, which creates a happy end.

The novel *Von guten vnd bosen Nachbaurn* from 1556 (Of Good and Evil Neighbors) covers the life of the goldsmith and merchant in jewels, Robertus, and then of his son, Richard. As the author illustrates, good life within the urban context can be achieved when virtues such as loyalty and trustworthy neighborliness are pursued, leading to the development of true friendship, whereas evil characters threaten the enjoyment of harmony and wealth. As much as the city here assumes central importance, the individual's well-being appears to be threatened in the urban context because of the neighbors' jealousy and envy.

The only other major prose text from the late sixteenth century that we could consider a representative of a novel was Johann Fischart's *Affentheurliche und Ungeheurliche Geschichtsklitterung* (Adventuresome Narrative Scribbling) by Johann Fischart (1546/47–1590/91), based on the French novel by François Rabelais, Gargantua et Pantagruel (1532–1552). However, the term 'novel' might be inappropriate in both cases because the narrative moves into many different directions and is determined by a whirlwind of narrative threads, quotes, use of languages, and motifs. Nevertheless, the foundation for the early modern novel was set by then, later represented best by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's famous *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* (1668; The Adventurous Simplicissimus), which reflected the horrors of the Thirty Years' War.

Conclusion

Although the annals of the history of early modern German literature are not overly rich with novels from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, we can clearly outline the development of that genre which grew out of several major translation projects by Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken and Eleonore von Österreich. The emergence of the early modern book market, flooded by new titles since the invention of the printing press, strongly encouraged authors to turn their attention to writing in prose.

Of course, the full development did not reach its apogee until the seventeenth century, but the foundations were solidly set already by the middle of the fifteenth century. However, we must not forget in that context the strong influence from Italian and

French literature on German texts. Only by the late sixteenth century did German works also influenced English literature, such as *Fortunatus*, which Thomas Dekker translated, or rather adapted, when he published his *Old Fortunatus* in 1599, which was a play consisting of prose and verse. Altogether, we can identify to emergence of the early modern novel as the result of European-wide cross-fertilization process (Ertzdorff, 1988).

Some scholars have emphasized a certain trend toward trivialization and sentimentalization in these prose works (Melzer, 1972), but this is certainly not always the case. Altogether, however, we are on solid ground when we specify the key characteristics of these new novels as the results of literary experimentation in a new historical-cultural context (Seeber, 2017). At closer analysis, we recognize here also concrete reflections of a changing world since we increasingly learn about the novel threat by the Ottomans against the European heartland and about efforts by individuals to rise to the highest level of society through monetary means and military might (Solbach, 2007).

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