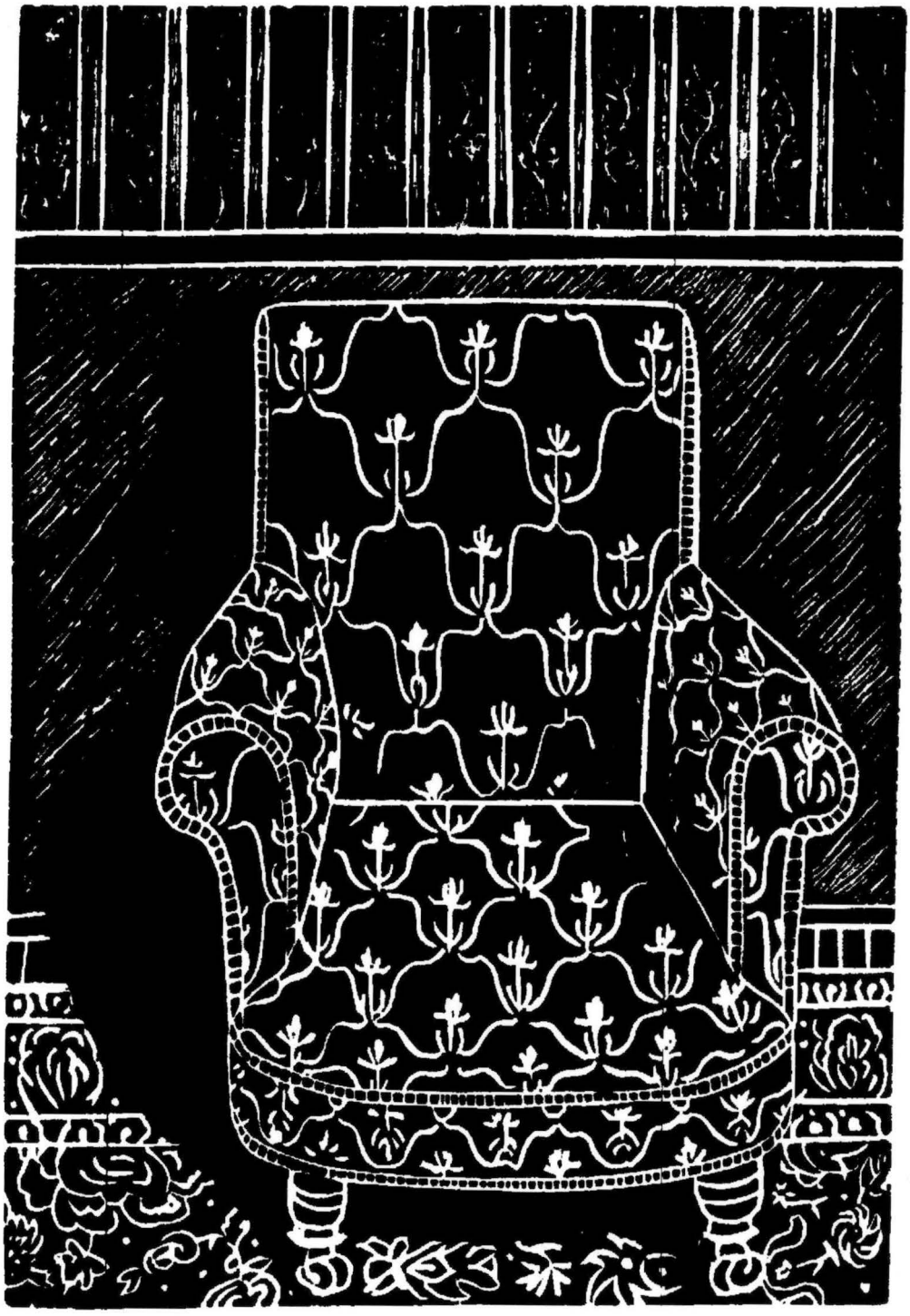

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THE MANIA FOR NOVEL READING IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY GERMANY

Michael S. Batts

THERE WAS A SURPRISING AMOUNT OF TRAVEL between monasteries in the middle ages, and those who journeyed from one monastery to another frequently carried with them books so that these could be copied in places that lacked them. Monasteries also, for obvious reasons, compiled careful catalogues of their books, no matter how small the collection, and there was even an attempt in England, by the Franciscans, I believe, to compile a union catalogue of monastery holdings. Unfortunately, for those of us who prefer secular to religious literature, monastery catalogues are less than useful; in fact they are sometimes downright frustrating. Although monasteries may have preserved works of classical Latin, they were not interested in secular vernacular literature, so that phrases from monastery catalogues, such as "libri gentilium poetarum" or "libri Theutonici" give us no clue as to what these works were. In fact, we know very little about the literature of the later middle ages, and even those who collected vernacular literature in the form of manuscripts apparently had their problems. One example only: according to the opening lines of the *Cligés* by Chrétien de Troyes, the most famous poet in France, that poet wrote a version of the Tristan legend, of which, however, no trace has survived. Shortly thereafter, Gottfried of Strasbourg also wrote a version of the Tristan legend without mentioning Chrétien, but listing as his source Thomas of Brittain, a poet whose work has survived partially in French but completely only in an Old Norse translation. Gottfried did list, however, as one of the best writers of epics in German a certain Bligger of Steinach, of whose epic not a single line has survived. In other words, whatever theories there may be about the number of manuscripts that must have existed, the fame or otherwise of any given work seems to have played only a minimal role.

The first of my four book collectors around the time that printed books began to circulate is Johannes Trithemius, abbot of the monastery of Sponheim, northwest of Mainz, and later of Würzburg, where he died in 1516. His work, *In Praise of Scribes*, was published in an English translation by the Alcuin Society in 1977, and in that work he decries printed books as ephemeral, paper, he claims, not lasting as long as parchment; and he recommends the work of the scribe: "For printing is on paper and perishes utterly in a short time; but by committing his writing to parchment, the scribe extends over a long period of time the life of both himself and of what he writes." Johannes was able to combine business with

pleasure inasmuch as he devoted his whole life to the pursuit of learning and the acquisition of knowledge through books. Through his connections (and the pressures he could exert?) he amassed a library of two thousand volumes, and scholars came from far and near to marvel at it and to use it. Unfortunately, we have no catalogue of this library, which was broken up and dispersed after he left the abbey. We do know, however, from Johannes's writing in fields as diverse as theology, history, astronomy, and even cryptography, that it contained many books in the humanities and the sciences, but apparently none of German vernacular literature, an assumption that is confirmed by his otherwise valuable bibliographical works.

The new learning at the end of the fifteenth century was not favourable to works in the vernacular. The printing presses were after all primarily in the hands of the humanists and, if anything was published in the vernacular, it was translated from a French or an Italian source. The attitude of a professional man, a medical doctor in Nuremberg by the name of Hartmann Schedel, is therefore very similar to that of Johannes. Schedel died in 1485 and had been a devotee of the new learning, but at least we have a catalogue of his library. This contained six hundred and sixty-seven volumes, and these represent, presumably, about a thousand works. The vast majority are still theological, and there are naturally many medical books, as well as some in the areas of the humanities and the sciences. But out of this relatively large collection there are only twenty under the heading "Libri vulgares in lingua theotonica." Even then, these works are hardly representative of German literature, being mostly translations from the romance languages. One wonders, in fact, at the ignorance of, or lack of interest in, vernacular literature by an educated man in one of the most important cities in Europe.

For a real bibliomaniac one has to turn to Jacob Püterich of Reichertshausen (near Munich), who died probably around 1469 and who was prepared to risk body and soul for books. In his poetic epistle to the Archduchess Mechthild in Heidelberg, written when he was sixty-two, he claims that his library of one hundred and sixty-four works had "been brought together by stealing, robbing, and also borrowing; donated, copied, bought, and also found. But only old books, I have no use at all for the new ones." The Archduchess only had ninety-four works in her collection, but when writing to her, Jacob lists twenty-three works

that she had in her library, but that were completely unknown to him. Admittedly, some of these were translations from the French, for example, *Melusina* or *Pontus and Sidonia*, but among these twenty-three are the *Moorish Queen* by Hermann of Sachsenheim, who was not only a contemporary of Jacob (he died in 1458), but lived not far away. Jacob's major preoccupation was with works of old German chivalry, with Wolfram von Eschenbach's (supposed) *Titurel* at the head. However, he also says that he has examined thirty versions of this poem on Titurel and rejected them all as false. Altogether, he has about thirty works that can be described as chivalric, hardly a very large collection for someone who has devoted forty years to the subject, a collection that did not include, for example, the German version of the Siegfried story, although manuscripts of this work were plentiful in Bavaria.

Finally, it seems reasonable to look at the library of an "average" man, at the collection of someone who was neither a bibliophile nor a bibliomaniac, but simply a booklover in a modestly situated aristocratic family. By 1466 the Count of Öttingen had collected seventy-six books, and, while one may regret the lack of order and vagueness of the catalogue, it has a certain human quality that is lacking in Schedel's list. The Count obviously had broad interests: half of his books may be classed as religious, but he has also books on history and law, as well as practical books for everyday life. While the catalogue may have a human quality, it can at times be frustrating to find a work described as "a book of all kinds of poems" or "a chronicle about popes and emperors written on parchment and illuminated throughout." But one is again amazed at the paucity of vernacular literature. Wolfram is there and Conrad of Würzburg, but neither Hartmann of Aue, nor Gottfried of Strasbourg, nor the *Nibelungenlied*. Nor are there even translations or more recent works from France of the type of *Melusina*. In all, there are only about a dozen volumes of secular literature out of seventy-six.

Looking over these few collections, three factors emerge that made it extremely difficult for booklovers such as Püterich of Reichertshausen to find the manuscripts they wanted. In the first place, fashions had changed and what was wanted and what was printed by early publishers, apart, that is, from Latin texts, were translations of contemporary literature from France and Italy. German vernacular literature of the chivalric kind was no longer in vogue. Secondly, there were no useful catalogues

that anyone could consult, and news travelled very slowly, if at all, with the result that Püterich, for example, knew nothing of the writers in his neighbourhood. And thirdly, expensively bound or illuminated manuscripts and printed books were often viewed as valuable assets, that is, as important physical objects, and were carefully preserved as such. There is even evidence from later times, for example, from the court in Vienna, that such books were bestowed on visitors as gifts, regardless both of the content and of whether the recipient could read or not. All in all, it must have been very difficult for anyone to collect works in German from the older period and, despite the efforts of the emperor Maximilian I, who attempted to revive the tradition of chivalry in the sixteenth century, it was not until the eighteenth century, when an interest in the past developed, often for legal or patriotic reasons, that scholars began to unearth the German vernacular literature of the middle ages.

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