

Printing the Heroic Age: *Heldenbuchprosa* in Context

Practicum Summary by Florian Mueller

In my Book History practicum, I worked on the printed transmission of a late medieval German text called “Heldenbuchprosa.” The term “Heldenbuch” (Book of Heroes) denotes a specific German text tradition and is used in an unsystematic way to talk about medieval miscellaneous manuscripts compiling epic poetry on the one hand, and a particular collection of four epic poems that was printed together, on the other hand. In my project, I focused on the printed editions of the *Book of Heroes*, although I plan to also examine the more complex and diverse manuscript tradition in my dissertation project.

The *Book of Heroes* was printed first in 1479. This first edition was followed by five subsequent editions in 1491, 1509, 1545, 1560, and 1590. Each edition was produced in a different printing/publishing house, with the exemption of the last two editions (1560, 1590), which were published by the famous Frankfurt publisher Sigmund Feyerabend. Although all six editions, in principle, contain the same four epic poems plus the prose text my practicum was about, they differ in their prefaces, illustrations, colophons, and other paratexts as well as typography, page layout, sequence of texts, and all the details we would associate with the materiality of texts. The *Book of Heroes* demonstrates a characteristic feature of early printing: no two editions look the same, even the two editions produced under the same publisher are completely different in format, illustrations, typefaces, and mise en page. It was also not what we would call a bestseller nowadays. The long intervals of time between the various editions, together with the publisher’s forewords in later editions attest that the *Book of Heroes* was only ever re-published when copies of the previous editions were hard to come by. In other words, there was a continuous, but fairly low demand. The *Book of Heroes* is characterized by the persistence of a traditional genre, rather than the appeal of innovative literature, in times of an emerging book market and economical structures starting to be shaped by supply and demand.

All editions of the *Book of Heroes* include an enigmatic prose text, which was the subject of my practicum: the so-called “Heldenbuchprosa.” The name itself attests the difficulties scholars have faced in categorizing this text: it is the only prose text in the *Book of Heroes*. The text narrates the beginning and the end of the Germanic heroes, some of whom are featured in the four epic poems of the collection. However, the prose is full of incoherencies, inconsistencies, gaps, under- and overdetermination. For example, two different and completely unrelated origin stories are told at the beginning, and the great demise of the heroes at the end of the text combines incommensurable elements from different text traditions as well. In addition to narrative incoherencies, we are faced with syntactical challenges. Most of the so-called “prose” is actually just a list of great heroes and their most important deeds. German medievalist Jan-Dirk

Müller has coined the term “precarious textuality” to describe the difficult status of the “prose.”

In my practicum, I tried to approach this “precarious textuality” by analyzing the transmission context of the *Heldenbuchprosa*, the six distinct editions of the *Book of Heroes*. I examined how different printers/publishers structured the *Book of Heroes*, whether they placed the “precarious” prose text at the beginning or the end of the book, what headings and running titles they used to distinguish it from the other texts and describe its content. Moreover, I looked for clues about the printers/publishers position on the prose’s textual status in forewords, rhymed prefaces, and other paratextual material. The benefit of this approach was that the “prose” could be situated in its changing textual and material context. Previous research on the *Heldenbuchprosa* was generally based either on the first printed edition, its lost, but reconstructed, manuscript predecessor, and facsimiles/scholarly editions of these two objects. The text was interpreted as a narrative framework for the (literary) heroic age, an index of the most important heroes, and even a remnant of a (speculative) lost chronicle about Dietrich von Bern, a famous Tyrolean hero whose adventures are at the heart of the *Book of Heroes*. All these interpretations have in common that the “prose” offers either too little, or way too much material, to validate their claims. Furthermore, they fail to take into account the concrete historical context of the prose’s material manifestations. By trying to determine the prose’s origin, or original motivation, they neglect that it was printed throughout the late 15th and the entire 16th century, at a time when heroic poetry had long outlived its time and the *Book of Heroes* was in itself a remnant of archaic traditions. However, the printers/publishers, while constantly updating the physical appearance of the *Book of Heroes*, did not cut out or change the increasingly enigmatic text. They came up with various solutions to justify the text either as an appendix or an introduction to the collection, but they never directly address its “precarious textuality.” The fact that they preserved this text as a part of the *Book of Heroes* can be linked to an understanding of epic poetry as authorless, collective storytelling; a genre that by its very nature is no one’s and everyone’s property at the same time. The persistence of the *Book of Heroes’* prose can also be tied to its roots in manuscript culture. The text itself stays stable; typesetters act like scribes faithfully reproducing their copy-text; publishers do not seize the chance to reduce the already immense cost of the book by cutting out the only part that is arguably expendable, but instead establish the prose as an integral element of the printed tradition of the *Book of Heroes*.