

Top Ten Fictional Narratives in Early Modern Europe.
Translation, Dissemination and Mediality. Edited by
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The authors of the study volume *Top Ten Fictional Narratives in Early Modern Europe* have delighted the research community with an exciting, unique scholarly treat. The volume presents the most widely read and beloved stories of the early modern European readership – the most successful fictional narratives of the period. The list faithfully reflects the spirits of the time, a time when readers sought books for the sheer joy of reading, for entertainment, for adventurous stories rich in twists and turns that offered more or less moral lessons while addressing questions of fate without existential overtones—sometimes interwoven with threads of love or humour. The top-ten list includes two fable collections featuring animals, a maritime adventure novel, a parable proclaiming the life-saving power of storytelling, a Boccaccio novella, one tale rich in magic, and one about a trickster. To the editors' great surprise, only two romances and two additional stories with strong female protagonists made it onto the list. The ten most distinguished fictional narratives are therefore identified as the following: *Aesopus*, *Amadis*, *Apollonius*, *Fortunatus*, *Griseldis*, *Historia septem sapientum Romae*, *Melusine*, *Pierre de Provence et la belle Maguelonne*, *Reynaert*, and *Ulenspiegel*.

The authors of the volume praise the stories' adaptability to the centuries, but their main merit is having the essence of a good narrative, so in light of this, they identify the success factors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries based on the narrower list: the characters are steadfast individuals, coarse humour and entertainment are recurrent themes, the narratives are loosely connected, they reflect the impact of fate on family and romantic relationships, they reveal interest in supernatural and anthropomorphic creatures and they reveal the need for moral lessons and the manifold aspects of passionate love.

The unique character of this scholarly volume lies in the fact that earlier research has focused either on the bestsellers of individual linguistic regions or, conversely, on the publication history of a single bestseller across Europe. This collection, by contrast, examines multiple linguistic regions over several periods, allowing readers to encounter the continent's true bestsellers, from the age of incunabula to the late eighteenth century. The editors have defined European boundaries along geographical lines, including the island nations, and extending eastward to the Ural River and the shores of the Caspian and Black Seas.

The selection criteria consisted of six rules: each narrative had to have (1) been published in a European vernacular language; (2) been issued in at least six European vernaculars; (3) begun to be printed in the fifteenth or sixteenth century; (4) been continued being printed at least until the eighteenth century; (5) been in print for a minimum of three centuries in at least three linguistic regions; and (6) survived in at least six vernacular languages, either in complete editions or in fragments. Although this system of criteria may seem highly rigorous, the stories that made it onto the top ten list went through hundreds of editions during this period. Several of them also have ancient origins, manuscript traditions, or continue to inspire new adaptations nowadays.

Beyond its broad scope, the volume is distinguished by its “new methodology of multimodality”, which involves examining not only the stories’ textual formulation but also typography, layout, paratexts, title pages, and illustrations within the context of transfer studies. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that not only the circulation of the narratives but also “the networks of printers and the circulation of woodcuts and illustrations were »international« as well.” The genealogy and dissemination of the top ten stories are mapped through the comparative analysis of their paratexts and accompanying illustrations in ten dedicated studies, one for each narrative. This textual concept—which continually involves reframing the text through its paratextual elements—also allows for the reading of a history of interpretation alongside the history of publication.

Of course, the question of textual identity arises with such long-lived bestsellers. Alongside adaptation to Catholic and Reformed norms, for example, through the omission of certain scenes, the paratext proves to be the factor most strongly shaping interpretation. Local publishers, depending on time and place, could present the same story as popular fiction, high literature, or a parable with varying moral lessons, determined entirely by the paratext. Moreover, woodcuts and even the briefest paratexts inevitably highlight a central figure, so that—for example—*Historia septem sapientum Romae* could simultaneously be read as the story of an orphaned boy, of a just judge, or of the indispensable role of sages. The most striking trajectory of interpretation, however, is traced in the story of *Griseldis* in Rita Schlusemann’s analysis.

Boccaccio's novella was translated into Latin by Petrarch as a parable, and outside the Italian linguistic sphere, this Latin version served as the basis for subsequent translations. Putting aside the almost countless genre adaptations and focusing only on the novella's dissemination in multiple-text units, it can be said that in the first wave of interpretation, *Griseldis* was presented as a model wife whose exemplary quality was variously identified by the paratexts as being humbleness, obedience, patience or even steadfastness, for example. Generally, the emphasis on steadfastness and patience appealed to both female and male readers, yet some epilogues following the narrative demanded much more obedience from men. In the second interpretative wave, even more diverse readings emerged: the appendix of a 1644 Swedish edition already treated Griseldis's story as a counterexample and, in a gender-neutral manner, admonished married couples to appreciate virtue rather than pursue wealth or other earthly goods. Burman interprets this same Swedish appendix as a "social manifest", since its opening praises the imperishable value of virtues. A commendation that, according to Burman, alludes to social mobility in the historical context of the period, when members of the lower nobility and wealthier patricians were beginning to advance. In the story of the peasant girl becoming a countess, he sees the message that true nobility comes from virtue, not from artificial, feudal privilege. This interpretation is further reinforced by the later reprintings of the appendix. A similarly gender-neutral reading of *Griseldis* is offered by a 1477 Dutch edition, entitled *Vanden Kaetspele*. Its very title alludes to an allegorical interpretation that presents the volume as a book of parables for judges. The paratext of the *Griseldis* narrative in Chapter 21 explicitly addresses such judges, encouraging them to be steadfast and just in their work, because this is the way to receive recognition at a future time: "they will be restored and accepted and placed [elevated] as the aforementioned Griselde."

Through the publication history of these ten bestsellers, we get a glimpse into various early modern marketing strategies. First of all, we are reminded that early printed editions were sold without covers, so the title page and the preface served as promotional material. By browsing these, readers could choose the work that appealed to them the most. One of the most common and effective advertisements was emphasising that the volume in question was a translation—in other words, a cosmopolitan literary work. In line with this, publishers could use the word "foreign" as a call word—a marketing trick for highlighting that the story is an admirable, cosmopolitan work. Lydia Zeldenrust, in her study of *Mélusine*, traces how the mention of translation gradually shifted from the prologue to the title page in several European editions. Publishers also relied on nostalgia. When reprinting a bestseller, they did not always modernise it; instead, resisting updated spelling and using the new Roman type, they kept the *bastarda* and reproduced the book in its familiar old form. In her study of *Mélusine*, alongside the histories of publication

and interpretation, Zeldenrust pays special attention to the continuous recording of the new scholarly dilemmas that arise from comparing paratextual elements. This attitude and her study vividly demonstrate the extended impact of the volume's new methodology.

In almost every bestseller, we can observe different ways in which publishers adapted to Catholic and Reformed regulations. In some cases, scenes were removed to comply with the Church's expectations regarding public morality. In other instances, only the preface announced a corrected version of the story, while the main text remained unchanged, retaining elements such as coarse humour, criticism of the church, kissing scenes or other more explicit content. In the case of banned bestsellers, it was common to request permission to publish them in groups, with multiple titles at once. For instance, Joachim Wielandt, a printer in Copenhagen, sought approval for the Danish distribution of censored bestsellers. His argument was that the revenue from these popular works would provide him with the financial security to publish more serious books. As a result, he received a twenty-year privilege to publish several bestsellers, including seven works that belonged to the top ten. To prevent such monopolies, a group of English publishers—who were competitors—divided printing rights by court order, assigning, for example, the *Amadis* volumes among themselves. Beyond standard marketing strategies, we also gain insight into less ethical business practices. The 1626 French edition of *Fortunatus* falsely claimed on the title page that it was translated from Spanish, denying the story's German origin. The aim was to deliberately mislead readers and position the edition among the highly popular Spanish picaresque novels in order to increase sales. A London printing of *Fortunatus* was identified as a pirate edition, allowing the publisher to skip the approval process by using a fake imprint. In the case of *Mélusine*, some Parisian editions went through major changes in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Michel or Philippe Le Noir removed the episodes about Mélusine's son from the main narrative and published them as a separate volume. This strategy served both to double the profit and to meet the growing demand for romances.

The purpose of the studies in this volume is to demonstrate that the narratives selected for the top ten list genuinely meet the set of criteria. Therefore, the papers follow strict content guidelines: after a brief summary of each fictive narrative, the studies examine the stories' genealogy, major textual variants, and dissemination through the comparative analysis of woodcuts and paratexts. Although focusing on the ramified publication history may leave little space for broader speculation, these precise case studies have the merit of identifying new research directions. First, all the authors call for a shift in perspective, suggesting that later editions following *editio princeps* should not be regarded as mere reprints but as independent publications—distinct items within the portfolios of printers with varying business sense. Besides

this, the same narrative, depending on its paratexts, could evoke remarkably diverse interpretations even in the early modern period. Through the comparative analysis of paratexts, the intended readership can be identified more precisely—it becomes easier to see whether a story was meant to be a chapbook, a work of higher literary standard for educated readers, a school text, or was targeted according to gender. As a crucial consideration, the authors argue that simple, prosaic factors may also have influenced the dissemination of a story into new regions, such as whether the printer had woodcuts associated with the narrative. New illustrations were commissioned only when a commercial success was clearly expected. This also raises the question of to what extent narratives were adapted to local readers' needs when they appeared in a new linguistic area, and whether such changes were instead driven by the rapid evolution of printing techniques and trends. The case studies further highlight that the independent histories of printing dynasties, the competition between them, and the shifts in business practices observed across generations deserve research attention in their own right.

