CHAPTER 4

New Books for a New Reading Public: Frankfurt “Melusine” Editions from the Press of Gülfferich, Han and Heirs*

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Frankfurt as a Publishing Centre in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the imperial city of Frankfurt am Main, which in the first century of printing had only been significant for the book trade inasmuch as books were among the goods that were traded at the Frankfurt fairs, rose to become a printing and publishing centre of the first degree. Christian Egenolff and Hermann Gülfferich belonged to the first generation of printer-publishers who initiated the upswing just prior to and around mid-century. In the following generation, Weigand Han and heirs, the Egenolff heirs and the workshop of Nikolaus Bassée and André Wechel were particularly important. In the last third of the century, Sigmund Feyerabend rose to international significance as a large-scale publisher.1

Compared to the older printing centres of Basel, Cologne, Strasbourg, Augsburg and Nuremberg, it is striking how German-language editions constituted a large part of the titles produced in Frankfurt from the beginning. In this way, Frankfurt followed the example of Strasbourg and Augsburg, but established a specific profile for itself through a broad and diversified selection of German literature that reflected the interests of a reading public that had grown larger. The emphasis lay on titles that popularised developments in particular fields of knowledge and theology, and on edifying and entertaining material such as the prose novel whose roots reached back in part to the late Middle Ages. Egenolff’s and Gülfferich’s editions were particularly important

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* Translation: Jonathan Green.
for the development of the ‘Schwankbücher’, collections of humorous tales, a new genre that became extremely popular in the sixteenth century.\(^2\) Frankfurt’s specialisation on ‘popular’ factual works, entertainment and books for daily use may have contributed substantially to the city’s rapid establishment as an equal of the traditional printing centres. The publisher-printers addressed the needs of an urban, German-reading audience that increasingly included women and craftsmen in addition to citizens from the upper and middle classes. Tendencies that had already appeared in the book trade of the early sixteenth century became prominent: the regionalisation of trade and production along with simultaneous differentiation of material, and an incipient specialisation of the printer-publishers, who had to address a less homogeneous reading public. The publishing business of Hermann Gülfferich, his stepson Weigand Han and heirs in Frankfurt adapted its printed output to the interests of these readers with a heterogeneous range of products: while primarily theological works were produced during the early years under Gülfferich, the selection of works printed after 1549 and especially under Weigand Han became much more varied. The profile of the workshop, which would not change substantially during the firm’s lifetime, comprised medical writings for a lay audience, novels and German books for the crafts and trades.\(^3\)

Commercial success proved the soundness of this rigorous orientation towards the needs of the readers. There was a downside, however: only a few new works by contemporary authors that could have satisfied the demand for such reading matter were added to the standard titles. The result was intense competition as popular German literature was reprinted at an accelerated pace. Beginning with Egenolff, there were countless disputes and lawsuits because of prohibited reprinting. The Frankfurt printing statutes of 1588 attempted to impose a legal framework on the practice of reprinting, but they remained ineffective, as there was no means to implement them in practice.\(^4\) The Frankfurt printers found themselves on both sides of the issue: their works were reprinted, but they also reprinted the works of others.

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