From Revelry to Reality: Drinking, Poverty and Salvation in Hans Rudolf Manuel’s *Weinspiel*

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Hans Rudolf Manuel’s notable play, *Ein holdsäligs Fastnachtsspiel* *darinn der edel wyn von der Trunknen rott beklagt vonn Räblüttten gschirmbt vnd vonn Richtern ledig gesprochen wirt gantz lieplich zeläsen*, was reportedly first performed in Zurich in or around 1548, the same year in which Rodolf Wyssenbach printed the first edition of the play in that same city. This “Fastnachtsspiel” (or Shrovetide play), which has come to be known as *Das Weinspiel*, is, by several accounts, Manuel’s best known work and is one of the most noteworthy plays of the sixteenth century for its unusual length (over 4000 lines), strong but farcical social criticism and informed content. In keeping with the Shrovetide-play tradition, the work is mostly comical, but at the same time it reveals serious, underlying problems related to the customs and taboos surrounding drink and drunkenness. In addition, the play’s conclusion imparts several weighty, moral pronouncements based on Biblical examples. This paper endeavours to place Manuel’s notions about the morality, practice and repercussions of drinking among other contemporary views on the subject in German-speaking lands and to add to our understanding of the discussion of prevalent moral and social issues in early Reformation-era Switzerland.

As not all modern scholars are familiar with Manuel and his *Weinspiel*, it is perhaps best to begin the study with some background information on the author himself and a brief outline of the play’s substance. Hans Rudolf Manuel was born in 1525 in Erlach near Bern, Switzerland, the youngest son of artist and writer Niklaus Manuel. Like his famous father, Niklaus Manuel,
Hans Rudolf displayed considerable talent as an artist and statesman, in addition to being a gifted playwright. However, according to the prominent scholar Wolfgang Michael, Hans Rudolf Manuel’s artistic impulse differed considerably from that of his father, in that the former exhibited very little of the revolutionary fervour typical of Reformation-era artists. So strong is the critic Michael’s sense of disappointment in Manuel’s lack of religious fervour that he remarks, ‘From a son of Niklaus Manuel one expects unequivocal partiality in the religious struggle’. Indeed, in light of this criterion, as well as with respect to certain outmoded structural features that Manuel employs, Hans Rudolf’s play hardly seems to belong to the Reformation era at all. I will eventually provide some possible reasons for Hans Rudolf Manuel’s curious return to older, traditional dramatic qualities and his rejection of heavy polemic content.

In keeping with the long-standing, Shrovetide-play tradition, Das Weinspiel opens with greetings from fools and an admonition from the herald to be an attentive audience:

DAMIT MAN MÖG VON WORT ZU WORT/
HIE VND DÖRT/ VND AN ALLEM ORT.
EYGENTLICH VND WOL ERSÄHEN/
WAS RED VND ANTWORT WIRT BESCHÄHEN.
VND WAS DOCH SYGE VNSER WIL/
DRUMB HALTEND ÜCH EIN ZYTLIN STILL/
SO MÖGEND JRS DEST BAẞ VERSTAN.
NUN BLASEND VF SO WEND WIR DRAN.²

What distinguishes this seemingly traditional opening statement from many other, similar openings is its allusion to ‘blasend vf’, or sounding the trumpets (as also denoted in the word ‘Trummeten’ directly following it). In fact, a rarely appreciated feature of Manuel’s play is its frequent use of musical interludes (subsequently referred to in the play as ‘Musica’) as a means of defining certain scene changes and, as Michael notes, a way of adding structure to a play that otherwise has no designated divisions.³ The fact that this rather spectacular set of directions appears in print, adding interest to a reading of the play, seems lost.