Summary

The monstrous and fantastic elements in Herzog Ernst B function as a literary device employed to elucidate the crisis of the tale and chart the hero’s progress in overcoming the personal flaws that precipitated the crisis. By evaluating the language and motifs in their own historical context, a surprisingly simple and innately medieval solution to interpretive problems emerges. Contrary to more recent scholarship, a focus on the monstrous as literary device allies the structure of the poem with contemporaneous Arthurian forms and bolsters, albeit with some modification, some traditional critical assumptions concerning the narrative function and design of the tale.

Readers justifiably laud the Herzog Ernst legend as “Germany’s most durable literary property”, which, in terms of longevity, even surpasses the Faust tradition.¹ Extensive research into the pedigree of this account of banishment and reconciliation has uncovered a multitude of historical threads, but the attempt to identify the core fable informing the story remains inconclusive.² On the surface, the

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² Very little in terms of possible historical threads has come to light since Karl Bartsch’s ground-breaking work. Herzog Ernst. Ed. Karl Bartsch. Vienna 1869. Bartsch’s contribution, especially comparisons of this tale to the legends surrounding Henry the Lion, has not yet been fully exploited even almost a century and a half later. See also Hans Neumann: Die Deutsche Kernfabel des ‘Herzog Ernst’ Epos. In: Euphorion 45 (1950), pp.140-164. Friedrich Neumann: Das Herzog-Ernst-Lied und das Haus Andechs. In: Zeitschrift für deut- sches Altertum und deutsche Literatur 93 (1964), pp. 62-84. Hans Simon-Pelanda: Schein, Realität und Utopie: Untersuchungen zur Einheit eines Staatsromans (Herzog Ernst B). Frankfurt am Main 1984. See also Walter Johannes Schröder: Spielmannsepik. Stuttgart 1962 (Sammlung Metzler 19), pp. 39-40. Given the fact that the tale exhibits several parallels to contemporaneous figures like Henry the Lion, the author would not have lacked examples of baronial insurrection. Two early historical events in particular, however, are commonly accepted as the most likely sources for the tale. The first one is the
historical events and the simple plot they inform hardly account for the persistence of this pre-modern literary material well into the last century. The fantastic and the monstrous, the potpourri of medieval and ancient legends of people and places on the outer edge of the known world, would seem to play the deciding role in the dynamic appeal and longevity of this story. Certainly, a look at the historical context of the successive manifestations of the tale demonstrates how the monstrous figures and fantastic places in the text provide a space for exploring questions of national identity, dynastic legitimacy, political economy, and cultural and racial difference. Recent theories of cultural creation and of desire production articulate the need for the monstrous as an arena for engaging social anxieties. A focus on the monstrous as cultural expression allows us to interpret the subtle shifts in the historically contiguous transmission of this


3 The legend of Herzog Ernst serves engagements with political realities and perceptions of Otherness from the Middle Ages to the Volksbuch prose version of 1560 and subsequent so-called Volksbuch versions, especially in the nineteenth century (Schwab, 1843; Simrock, 1869/1887) and well into the Third Reich (Kranz, 1935). Other modern variants include Ludwig Uhland’s ballad (1817) and tragedy (1818), Felix Dahn’s novel (1902) and Peter Hack’s satire (1957). Finally, the recent animated film, Herzog Ernst (1993), engages the material in the context of a re-united Germany. The material provides an opportunity to map the transformation of a literary engagement with issues of individual, society, and the Other in German-speaking cultures over a millennium of history.