

Emperor Maximilian I's Theuerdank:

Constructing a Legacy

by Charlotte Haley

Like most people, Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519) of the Hapsburg Empire wished to be remembered for good deeds and achievements in his lifetime. He thus ordered the *Theuerdank* (1517), an epic poem figuring Maximilian himself as the titular hero, to be composed. The luxurious copy at Dr Jörn Günther Rare Books combines the highest quality of early printing with a story of chivalry and adventure.

One might expect a book created for the preservation of the Emperor's legacy to be widely printed and distributed, but only 40 copies of the first edition were printed on vellum and 300 printed on paper. Moreover, few of these parchment copies were decorated with dazzling colour, as the one at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books is.

In fact, the Emperor never intended the edition for sale, and these vellum copies are referred to as 'Princes' editions', given to sovereigns of the German realm. With the fairy-tale setting and Germanic, rolling hills as a background, the *Theuerdank* became a monument of Maximilian's dominance in the kingdom, creating the impression of a 'Golden Age' having begun with his reign. As the Holy Roman Emperor from 1508, Maximilian was greatly concerned with his image and renown, wishing for the fame of his reign to continue long after his death.

The story of the *Theuerdank* adapts the journey of eighteen-year-old Maximilian on his way to Burgundy to meet his bride, Mary, daughter of Duke Charles the Bold. Though in reality it was only a three-month excursion, it clearly had a profound impact on the young man, as thirty years later Maximilian used the journey as his literary inspiration.

He created the allegorical figure of *Theuerdank* in his own place - a noble, quick-witted knight before whom obstacles of courtly corruption and malevolence arise. His opponents, powerful vassals of the recently deceased King Romreich (for whom we read Charles of Burgundy), are threatened by *Theuerdank's* imminent inheritance of the kingdom, and serve as tests to his physical and spiritual strength. Over these three vicious Burgundians, the meddlesome Fürwittig, Unfalo, and Nidelhard, *Theuerdank* painstakingly triumphs, and the story ends with *Theuerdank* preparing for his crusade against Ottoman forces. This ending avoids a conclusion to the knight's exploits, and suggests that Maximilian's life had been one of constant adventure.

Though *Theuerdank's* success in these ventures is almost guaranteed by Maximilian's oversight of the narrative composition, his chivalric qualities receive the highest praise. He has great skill, endurance, and practical knowledge, all of which highlight the



Theuerdank with Ehrenhold on horseback meeting Fürwittig



Theuerdank before Lion with Unfalo and Ehrenhold



Tournament knights and horses with coloured caparisons lie in tangle on the ground

honourable way in which he acts. Maximilian, a leader keen to encourage humanist learning and promote national vernacular literature and Latin poetry equally, drew from classical models and took advantage of the assets of book printing for this large-scale work.

Thus, it is not only the poetry itself, printed in a specially-designed fraktur called 'Theuerdankschrift', but also the illuminated woodcuts which emphasise these qualities. Noted to be the finest series of German Renaissance book illustration, seven of the best-known woodcut artists of the time contributed to the designs, which were amended to the Emperor's liking. Hans Burgkmair, Hans Schäufolein, Leonhard Beck, and others collaborated to create lively images full of action, often changing the designs of their fellow artists to adhere to the Emperor's whims.

Due to the eminence of these artists from the circle of Albrecht Dürer, the high-quality visual narrative was as important as the poetry, and the woodcuts allowed readers to understand and admire the art as a compliment to the text. In the coloured version of the *Theuerdank*, highlighted with liquid gold and silver, main characters wear bright colours to make them recognisable to the reader, and *Theuerdank* himself, when not clad in the shining armour of a knight, wears dark violet.

Maximilian ordered two other narratives to be composed, the *Freydal* and the *Weisskunig*, to document his heroic journey through life, attempting to emulate further the knighthood and chivalric standard of Arthurian legend. However, it is in *Theuerdank's* constant triumphs over tests of his physical and spiritual strength - the poisoning attempts, bad weather, and dangerous combat - that the Emperor presents his carefully-selected audience with proof that he embodies the qualities of a truly noble knight.

A vellum first edition of the *Theuerdank*, an epic poem celebrating the heroic deeds of Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519). With luxury colouring, a xylographic title and 118 woodcuts, this copy features contemporary hand-colouring, highlighted with gold and silver.

Theuerdank, Maximilian I, edited by Melchior Pftzing, printed by Johann Schönsperger, Augsburg, 1 March 1517 c. 362 x 247 mm, 289 vellum leaves.

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