Spotlight on Fabulous Fables in the Middle Ages

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Ulrich von Pottenstein, *Das Buch der natürlichen Weisheit*, the German translation of the *Speculum sapientiae*, attributed to Bongiovanni da Messina. Illustrated manuscript on paper, written by Johannes Mör of Constance and dated 1453. The Ashburnham copy.

Fables are a literary genre of satires that feature humans, animals, legendary creatures, plants, objects, or forces of nature. All have human qualities, such as the ability to speak.

Illustrated *Volksbücher* on paper were so popular that only a few copies survived the passage of times. Nowadays, these manuscripts are rare and precious.

This, so-called Ashburnham copy is named after Bertram, 4th Earl of Ashburnham (1797-1878), who acquired the book in 1849. It is the only known illustrated copy in private hands.
Ulrich von Pottenstein, *Das Buch der natürlichen Weisheit*, .... Illustrated manuscript on paper, written by Johannes Mör of Constance and dated 1453.

The scribe signed and dated his work in the colophon on f. 88v: “Et sic est finis per mano Johannis Mör de Costancia Anno 1453.”

Mör, presumably, named himself ‘of Constance’ as he, at that time, no longer lived there. We know of no other manuscripts signed by him. The dialect of the text is Bavarian with a touch of Alemannic.
Ulrich von Pottenstein, _Das Buch der natürlichen Weisheit_, in German translation ..... Illustrated manuscript on paper, written by Johannes Mör of Constance and dated 1453.

The 84 animated scenes highlight as many stories. Drawn in bold outlines and coloured in wash, the artist added great character to his creatures.

Interestingly, some rubric headings for the fables function as instruction to the illustrator.
Humans and animals are drawn with equally energetic gestures and lively expression. Some figures overlap the frames, and others are kept partly out of the picture, which increased liveliness and movement.
Originally created in manuscript form and printed only later, Volksbücher like the book at hand, may not often have been available to the rural population, yet these texts played a vital role among townspeople, for instance via the Meistersinger schools.

Festivals with open singing and storytelling on urban podia as well as individual performances on markets continued the influence of oral traditions of these stories.

Large audiences were familiar with the stories of both classical and medieval European literature. In the abundant Volksbücher ‘folk books’ with popular witty satires in fables, illustrations gave audaciousness to the weak confronting the strong.

This is the only illustrated 15th-century, printed edition of the Pottenstein version in German. There are 68 woodcuts with careful contemporary colouring.

The opening full-page woodcut shows eight scholars representing cardinal virtues and vices, each identified by a banderole in his hand.
Similar to our manuscript, the stories in the printed edition are illustrated, but in this case with inventive woodcuts. Here we see ‘a mouse walked through a cellar... where a snail was sitting’ and ‘a whale raised his head above seawater...’. These stories derived from the bestiary tradition, from books as the *Physiologus* as well as from ancient fables.
Ain walsisch erhüb sich iber die wasser des mörs alsob er ein veste porten ware unde da.... ‘a whale raised his head above seawater as if he was a steady port... when a fisherman arrived’.

The story of the boatman and the whale in Book I, chapter 8, tells the adventure of a sailor, who in great distress seeks safety at an island. From the first sentence the reader already understands that the island is in fact a whale. When the man lights fire, the animal moves. The sailor flees back to the boat and rebukes the whale because he had granted him only deceptive security. The whale explains that things on earth are by their very nature not what they appear to be, and that man must seek a real safe haven.

The author/translator Ulrich von Pottenstein gives the animal the opportunity to point out the deceitful wisdom, hypocrisy, and insincerity of scholars, clerics, and judges.
A hungry fox wandered and ran back and forth, tortured by great hunger...

The acting beasts are introduced using direct speech, and are often engaged in long and learned moral discussions.

These books were therefore also a source of information for preachers. The stories would help them to illustrate their sermons with ‘exempla’ from the world of animals and natural phenomena.
The engaging woodcuts are designed by anonymous artists likely working in Augsburg.

On page xxvi (26), Chapter xxiii (24), the fox goes on a pilgrimage to Rome. Various animals offer their company but he rejects them because of their vices...

Mit einem auszerwölten gesellen soltu handlen oder geen....

You should do things with a select company or none
Ein Aff sah wie ein Schiffman gar schnall an dem Masspaum in dye hoehe staig.... A monkey saw how a sailor climbed the mast very quickly....

Ulrich von Pottenstein (1360-1420), who translated these fables into German, was for years priest at Pottenstein, not far from Vienna.

Since c. 1390 he was a canon of St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna, where he also became chaplain to the court of Albrecht IV of Habsburg, duke of Austria (d. 1404).
This edition is very rare. The International Incunabula Shorttitle Catalogue (ISTC) records only twenty copies extant (five of which are imperfect; plus one missing).

Between 1975-2015 no sales had been recorded...
John of Capua’s Latin translation of the so-called ‘Fables of Bidpai’, *Directorium humanae vitae*, is an intriguing piece of world literature. Ultimately traced to Buddhistic teachings, these fables are said to have their origins in a famous collection of Hindu tales, the *Panñatntra* (c. 3rd century BC), a treatise on political and human conduct.
Between 1263 and 1278, John of Capua, a man of Jewish origin, translated the Hebrew version of Rabbi Joel into Latin as *Directorium vitae humanae*. Subsequently, the ‘Bidpai’ tales were translated into nearly every Western language.

The edition at hand is the very first printed edition of the *Fables of Bidpai*.

In fact, seven German editions appeared before the first Latin edition was printed (c. 1489).
Nothing is known of the supposed author Bidpai beyond his name. In the 6th century, a physician at the Sassanian court of the king of Persia, translated the old fables from Sanskrit into Pahlavi (Middle Persian).

Two centuries later they were translated into Arabic by Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa. His version, known as the *Book of Kalilah and Dimna*, from the two jackals of the first story, became the channel for the introduction of the fables into Europe.
The ISTC records only twelve copies of this edition worldwide (one of which is a fragment). We can trace no other copy on the market in the last four decades (ABPC 1975-2016).
Johannes de Capua, *Directorium humanae vitae*, in German: *Buch der Weisheit der alten Weisen*. Translated by Anton von Pforr. Published in Urach by Konrad Fyner, c. 1480/1481 - 1st edition. - With 125 woodcut illustrations. In the original binding by Johannes Zoll of Tübingen.

Our book comes from the library of Wolfgang, count of Fürstenberg (1465-1509, contemporary inscription), at Donaueschingen.

His collection of books formed the central core of the renowned Donaueschingen court library.
In this Spotlight


Spotlight

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