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**[REVIEW]:** RITA SCHLUSEMANN, HELWI BLOM, ANNA KATHARINA RICHTER AND KRYSZYNA WIERZBICKA-TRWOGA, *TOP TEN FICTIONAL NARRATIVES IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE: TRANSLATION, DISSEMINATION AND MEDIALITY*, DE GRUYTER, BERLIN–BOSTON 2023, PP. 429.

Since the time of Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach and Ernst Robert Curtius, comparative literature in a medieval or early modern chronological framework by Western European or American scholars has tended largely to dwell along the Rhine, cross the Alps or make forays into the Iberian Peninsula or the British Isles. Rarely has there been a systematic effort to reach out to the east, north or south-east of the continent. As a result, for the English-language reader, the medieval and early-modern literatures of Central and Eastern Europe in particular represented a *terra incognita*. On the other hand, since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the accession of new EU member states, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have witnessed a resurgence of scholarly interest in the study of literary transfers and contacts between their respective national literatures and those of Western Europe. However, these studies have largely expressed a preference for the binary relationships that have been the standard model of comparative studies for decades. Although they have contributed enormously to the accumulation of valuable knowledge, such studies have, out of necessity, tended to focus on minute details rather than the big picture. And it is precisely because of this accumulation of material that a broad synthesis, spanning multiple languages and geographical regions, has understandably seemed beyond the reach of a single author.

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Recently, however, a refreshing new contribution has appeared that seeks to affirm the European unity of comparative studies in the ‘long fifteenth century’ and beyond. Thanks to an inclusive methodology and collaborative framework, this new publication has the potential to unsettle the cemented image of research in the field as either (largely) Western European-centric or restricted to binary exchanges.

Written by a competent, international team of scholars, *Top Ten Fictional Narratives in Early Modern Europe* (subtitled *Translation, Dissemination and Mediality*) offers the reader a range of well-developed and practical methodologies from the field of cultural transfer studies. Equipped with these, it approaches a large, multinational corpus of texts that circulated throughout Europe from late antiquity (or in some cases even earlier) to 1800 (the chronological boundary chosen by the editors). Although the scope of the book extends well beyond the long fifteenth century which is the theme of this volume of *Acta Mediaevalia. Series Nova*, the subject matter is consistently grounded in that transitional period when so many narratives, hitherto transmitted orally or in manuscript, were about to receive a new lease of life thanks to the printing press. In attractive ‘multimodal’ publications with woodcut illustrations, popular tales such as *Aesop’s Fables* or *Septem sapientium Romae* were reworked and marketed to new audiences. It is this openness to a wider, diachronic perspective that should make this study attractive to medievalists interested in literacy and intellectual culture. Since vernacular narratives have generally received less scholarly attention than canonical works of ‘high’ literature, the edition breaks new ground in the study of these not quite well-known products of the late medieval and early modern book market. Last but not least, thanks to the contributions of Krystyna Wierzbicka-Trwoga (for Polish sources), Csilla Gábor and Ágnes Maté (Hungarian), Matouš Jaluška and Jan Pišna (Czech), the circulation of literature to and from Central and Eastern Europe has, perhaps for the first time, received so much attention in an ambitious comparative study in the English language.

The central aim of the book, expressed in its title, is to trace the routes taken by popular bestsellers to reach European audiences. The structure of the book is designed to achieve this aim, i.e. to provide a solid theoretical foundation while leaving the authors of the individual chapters plenty of scope for their individual explorations. The introduction defines the criteria for the selection of the “Top Ten” narratives,

which emphasise in particular a combination of wide print circulation (at least six European languages) and a print tradition spanning several centuries. Essentially, the book identifies and develops the *longue durée* of many of the tales known and loved throughout the medieval world. Before plunging into the main body of the text, the reader can easily consult a capsule summary of the most important aspects of these bestsellers (*Aesop*, *Apollonius of Tyre*, *Septem sapientium Romae*, *Griseldis*, *Reynaert*, *Melusine*, *Pierre et Maguelonne*, *Amadis of Gaul*, *Fortunatus* and *Ulenspiegel*), while enjoying a “Survey of First Editions,” anticipating the results of the research carried out by the team led by Rita Schlusemann. The introduction provides a very solid account of the state of research, including a much-needed discussion of the differences in the terminology used in several European languages for this type of literature. The editors eventually settle on ‘narrative,’ an elegant solution that does not conflict with existing usage (especially in English, the language of the book), but aptly highlights the fact that the common denominator of these works is their firm grounding in the art of storytelling (a small side note: while the Dutch term ‘volksboek’ or the German ‘Prosaroman receive all the necessary attention,’ I missed a comment on the English term ‘chapbook,’ which some of this book’s authors use in their respective chapters). The introduction also does a good job of setting the scene for the more specific studies that follow, providing points of reference with regard to the chronological and geographical scope, the factor of linguistic diversity and, finally, stressing that it was not only the textual level but also the “medial and material aspects” (p. 47) that contributed to the success of the adaptations.

Since the authors of the individual chapters did not follow a pre-determined format, their contributions have a somewhat different structure, but this does not hinder the reader’s ability to find his or her way through the complex material, since the overall concept (literary-historical background followed by an analytical presentation of book-historical data) generally remains the same. There are some minor omissions, which is understandable in a book of this size.

It may be a little disappointing, at least from a Central European perspective, that the chapter on *Aesop* (by Julia Boffey) does not include more information on the Polish verse adaptation by Biernat of Lublin, its poetics or multimodality, especially given its reputation in Polish literature as being innovative. Stanisław Szarfenberger’s 1578

edition is mentioned, but without much background on its origins or specific features that would have clarified its relationship to Heinrich Steinhöwel's German version published in Ulm between 1476 and 1477. Yet while there seems to be a slight imbalance here between the rather scant information on this subject and the highly detailed, concise accounts of the Polish, Czech or Hungarian adaptations of the works discussed in other chapters, fortunately this is an exception in a book that otherwise excels in delivering what it promises.

Anna Katharina Richter's chapter on *Apollonius of Tyre*, a tale originally from late antiquity but disseminated in Latin from the ninth century onwards, provides concise surveys of both the Western and Central European circulation of this tale (for the latter region, Czech, Polish and Hungarian versions are discussed). Similarly, Rita Schlusemann's chapters on the *Seven Wise Men* and *Griseldis*, and Lydia Seldenrust's on *Melusine*, are rich in information on Central European printers and their editions. Helwi Blom's chapter on *Fortunatus* is a model of balance between the wealth of knowledge about the original Western European literary tradition and its Central and Eastern European offshoots, while Krystyna Wierzbicka-Trwoga's extensive section on the Polish reception of that tale provides a window on the tale's reception in Poland. The final chapter on *Ulenspiegel*, also by Krystyna Wierzbicka-Trwoga, will be of great interest to scholars of Germanic literatures, as will Rita Schlusemann's chapter on the transcultural adaptations of *Reynaert*, while the chapters on *Pierre de Provence et la belle Maguelonne* (Helwi Blom) and *Amadis de Gaule* (Jordi Sánchez-Martí) make an important contribution to transmission studies in the domain of Romance literatures.

The facsimiles of the title pages of many of the editions which are included, which makes this book an indispensable study tool. The handy graphs illustrating the circulation of the tales in print are also a welcome addition. Besides that, reading the book in the digital version, I found it very useful that the bibliography included links to the available digital facsimiles of many of the early editions. The book has been published in Open Access. This will certainly ensure that it reaches a wider audience. All this makes *Top Ten Fictional Narratives in Early Modern Europe* an essential new publication for scholars and students of medieval and early modern literature, especially those whose research crosses the boundary between the two periods.