

## Why time matters for Medieval (German) Studies

by Dr Stefan Seeber, Medieval German Studies, Freiburg University

Augustine's memorable quote: *What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not* (Pusey's translation) has not deterred Medieval Studies from elucidating philosophical, philological, theological and other medieval theories of time. Much has been said about time's significance for medieval literature. Yet, Medieval Studies and Medieval German Studies in particular today stand at a threshold: My discipline offers a solid base of own thinking on the meaning of time, but could benefit extensively from interacting with other Humanities and the Sciences to broaden its horizon and develop new insights. This is why I am applying to participate in the International Academia on time.

What I have to offer are conclusions drawn from my own recent research. In June, I completed my second book (habilitation) bearing the title "Ahead of their time. German romances and their intended percipients, 1314-1587". In the context of this book, I was confronted with two aspects of time-perception on which I am planning additional publications in the near future: one is with regard to the concept of pastime; the other is focused on the hybrid blending of literary concepts of time.

My book is concerned with late medieval and early modern romance (often translated from the French like the Maguelonne story, or from Latin like the Aithiopika) and its reader perception. This means that I work with texts written between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century – and this covers a time of enormous political, scientific, and religious change. While old convictions get challenged and new sciences are being developed, the genre of romance, and later the novel, emerges as the favourite form of entertainment for an ever growing number of people who are able to read and to pay for the joys of fictional stories. This means a far-reaching addition to the daily life of the masses: pastime becomes an economic asset that is capitalized by publishers offering romances and novels for educational as well as recreational purposes. The new market for romances grows under the cloak of the old Aristotelian justification for entertainment as recreation, but soon develops an independent existence. This highlights how literature comes to play a new and decisive role in the early modern society.

My second field of interest is intertwined with the first one, but goes into detail of the texts in question. It is a striking feature of medieval and early modern German texts that they form hybrids out of old-established and well-known literary genres and patterns. This means that "new" literary entertainment makes use of "old" phenomena like heroic epic (and its idea of doom and the end of all times) or of myth (with its cyclical concept of time). It combines eschatological legends and worldly politics, love stories with their Bachtinian chronotopos (Bachtin argues that fictional stories are divided between the biographic lifetime of characters and the time of adventure during which the life of the characters is put to a halt) and religious devoutness. All this mixing results in a muddle of time concepts. These, at first sight, do not even seem to fit together properly. If you take a closer look, however, you soon discover that these mixed up concepts of time form a new and unique pattern of time perception in the texts. Thereby they engage with the percipients in a particular way, they open up new perspectives for

reading and interpreting the romances. It is possible to collate the use of time concepts in texts like e. g. the German Prose Tristan (first printed in 1484) or the Maguelonne story (translated into German in 1527) with their concept of pastime for percipients – and it is tempting to read the mixture of time concepts as an expression of the volatile understanding of time in the world outside of books. This what I am pursuing at the moment, and it would be my starting point for contributions from my field of study, especially with regard to similar developments in other vernacular literatures, especially in the field of English studies.

I would like to interact with specialists in the field of biology, sociology, history, physics and other modern and ancient languages to refine the approach German Studies are currently taking to the concept of time in romance and novel. I also see this International Academia as a unique opportunity to establish new interdisciplinary collaboration on strong disciplinary basis. It will open up new possibilities of interaction in the scientific community that will have manifold implications for future research. In addition, it will also serve as a model for future models of research collaboration, and as such of research policy. It is scientific history in the making, and I would be honoured to take part in the International Academia.