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Uncovering ordinary life in early modern Europe/Germany through the lens of 16th-century German jest narratives in Georg Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*

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Abstract

Sixteenth-century literature witnessed a remarkable shift from the courtly sphere to the lives of burghers, innkeepers, lansquenets, peasants, and workers. In the countless *Schwänke* (jest narratives) published during this period, we are both entertained and instructed by listening to what ordinary people said to each other, what they fought over, and what mistakes they might have made in their social relationships, often leading to facetious situations meant to provoke our laughter. One of the most popular authors of this genre was Georg/Jörg Wickram, who effectively created the model collection with his *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), a work that runs almost parallel—but in prose—to Chaucer's much earlier *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400). Wickram's text primarily addressed the typical representatives of early modern society who were well-educated and wealthy city dwellers. Many other writers later followed Wickram's literary concept in crafting their jest narratives. This study closely examines the broad spectrum of individuals who appeared in the literary framework and served as the butt of the jokes. Such an approach makes it possible to understand how the reading audience viewed foolish peasants, clerics, aristocrats, prostitutes, merchants, physicians, or craftsmen who populated early modern cities and the countryside. In this sense, the *Rollwagenbüchlein* acts as a literary mirror of early modern society. While Sebastian Brant, in his famous *Narrenschiff* (1494), had ridiculed virtually everyone, Wickram offered satirical narratives on the individuals populating his world (primarily Southwestern Germany).

Keywords: *Schwänke*; Jest narratives; Everyday life; Georg/Jörg Wickram; *Rollwagenbüchlein*; Literary entertainment; Travelers; Lansquenets

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1. Introduction

The field of medieval and early modern studies has shifted radically in the last several decades. Historically, scholars have concentrated on the history of the social elites (i.e., the nobility, clergy, and merchant classes). Today, we have realized the great need to pursue a more inclusive line of inquiry, which requires a shift from using narrow and hierarchical concepts in analyzing pre-modern and early modern culture. This change has led to the discovery of a vast body of invaluable texts, paintings, chronicles, and other

documents often reflecting on numerous marginalized individuals—women, the poor, Jews, Muslims, the disabled, children, older adults, and others (many of whom remain in the shadow of contemporary literary and cultural studies). However, we can gain excellent access to the broad discourse on and representation of these often-ignored groups by examining the so-called *Schwankliteratur*—collections of jest narratives in which the poets reflect on ordinary situations in rural communities, taverns, private lives, churches, and along the roads. Since Georg Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555) achieved an enormous success in the early modern book market, offering entertainment and instructions, it lends itself well to a close analysis of everyday life during that period. While we cannot equate these often-hilarious prose texts with historical chronicle literature, understanding whom the contemporary audiences laughed at provides a good insight into the mental conditions, social and emotional aspects, and the common value system.

2. Previous research

Scholars such as Ariès *et al.*[1] laid the foundation for this critically important reorientation in pre-modern studies, primarily through their book series, *A History of Private Life* (1985; in English translation 1987 – 1991). Their focus rests primarily on ideals, values, patterns of behavior, social attitudes, the tension between the public and the private, the role of families, and similar instances. About a decade later, the Austrian historian Dinzelbacher[2] built on this work, as well as on the pioneering scholarship of Marc Bloch and the French *Annales* School, to create a theme-based collection of studies characterizing various aspects of the history of European mentalities.[2] Dinzelbacher took up a host of quotidian yet fundamental topics, such as the role of the individual in society, sexuality and love, religiosity, the body, soul, and illness, the various ages in human life, labor, festivals, nature and the social environment, space and time, and others. Here, we gain deeper insights into human attitudes toward these issues, as reflected in various sources. The latest research is leading to new theoretical and methodological approaches, from medieval anthropology, historical-cultural studies, and social and economic histories of the middle ages, to exciting hybrid fields such as medieval psychology,[3] determined by the attempt to penetrate more deeply into the mindsets of people in the middle ages and the early modern age. However, such an approach has remained highly problematic until today because it is predicated on too many assumptions concerning the validity of literary texts or images. To these, we can add the innovative fields addressing gender studies, intertextuality, mediality, performativity, the history of emotions, as well as the spatial and linguistic turns (for theoretical reflections on these topics, refer to Ackermann and Egerding,[4] who offer more abstract reflections).

Suppose we want to develop more accurate and profound analyses and understandings of pre-modern cultures in depth, we must try—following Geertz's[5] concept of "thick description"—to be involved and engage with the widest possible range of narrative, artistic, political, archeological, textile, culinary, and architectural sources.[5] Outstanding examples of this approach are the studies collected by Kühnel,[6] Arno Borst's essential monograph *Lebensformen im Mittelalter* (1973)[7] and his later *Alltagsleben im Mittelalter* (1983),[8] Hans-Werner Goetz's *Life in the Middle Ages* (translated (1986/1993),[9] Christopher Dyer's *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (1994/2000),[10] Arnold Esch's *Die Lebenswelten des europäischen Spätmittelalters* (2014),[11] and the contributions of *Festivities, Ceremonies, and Rituals in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown in the Late Middle Ages* by František Šmahel, Martin Nodl, and Václav Žůrek (2022).[12] The common feature of all these studies, as valuable as they certainly are, consists of the attempt to present specific tableaux of everyday life in the village, city, at court, and within the Church, but mostly not viewed through a literary-historical lens. A very impressive example of such an approach, valid by itself, is the recent study by Goliński,[13] who presents a rich panoply of ordinary events in late medieval and early modern Czech cities, involving crimes, worship of relics, famine, the relationships between Jews and Christians, linguistic aspects, indulgences, pilgrimages, and the work of many different craftsmen. The history of private life for specific groups has also been usefully covered by the contributors to the fundamental volume *Passions of the Renaissance*, by Chartier (translated 1986/1989).[14] Here, issues such as civility, intimacy, childhood, friends and neighbors, habitation and cohabitation, and family are of primary importance. Dülmen has also treated many different aspects of everyday life in the early modern period (1990 – 1994),[15] but as a historian, he mostly disregarded or neglected to consult literary evidence and examined mostly chronicles, letters, last wills, and paintings. In addition to those cultural-historical analyses, we must closely examine common opinions, thought patterns, ideals, values, or fears of foreigners, death, or God.

These prior studies make it possible (even imperative) to widen our perspective by including more source materials, addressing deeper semantic layers, and enabling the people whose stories have been long forgotten to come forward and have their lives known, at least refracted through a literary lens. Social and cultural historians have made significant progress, often by considering so-called ego-documents (see van Dülmen,[16] volumes 1 – 3; 1990 – 1994).

Fortunately, this research is possible—at least for figures in and around the 16th century— given the abundance of primary source material from this era, especially when we widen the perspective and include literary material. Today, perhaps more than ever, public culture is emerging in more precise detail, as many urban and clerical authors sought to entertain their audiences by drawing from their own experiences in the city, the countryside, during travels, in wars, in churches, and occasionally even at court.

The broadly defined genre of *Schwänke* (entertaining and didactic jest narratives) invites us to pursue a social-historical analysis of these literary texts, especially as they draw from a direct interaction between the author and his audience, gaining direct inspiration from oral accounts and lived experiences, as some of the authors repeatedly confirm. The literary quality of these jest-narratives might not be the most sophisticated, but we can use them very well for a careful analysis of how individuals representing social groups or genders were viewed and reflected in public discourse. Economic conflicts, excessive consumption of alcohol, violent exchanges, and aggressive husbands or wives are a few of the common topics covered in these jest narratives. We are regularly invited to laugh at individual misbehavior and foolish actions and words, which, in turn, offers a more detailed understanding of the general discourse of the time.

3. Jest narratives as an unexplored corpus of relevant sources for everyday culture

An important foundation for this study of 16th-century jest narratives is the vast genre of pre-modern short verse and prose narratives originating in 13th-century French *fabliaux*, Middle High German *mæren*, the Italian *novelle*, and similar literary forms. These narratives elicit their comedic effects by drawing from a diverse palette of real-life experiences, poking fun at the victims of life's infinite surprises and thus revealing to modern readers the assumptions and perceptions of medieval Europeans. Boccaccio, Chaucer, Kaufringer, Franco Sacchetti, and Poggio Bracciolini were among the sharpest and most influential jest narrative writers. Boccaccio was one of the crucial authors far into the early modern age, as many translations and adaptations of his tales in his *Decameron* formed the basis for English tales and German *Schwänke.*[17]

In the early 16th century, the early modern German jest narrative quickly became immensely popular, beginning with Herman Bote's *Till Eulenspiegel* (1510/1511), continuing with Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522), Jörg Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), Hans-Wilhelm Kirchhof's *Wendunmuth* (1563), Bartholomäus Krüger's *Hans Clawert* (1587), and reaching its apogee (in this century at least) with the anonymous *Lalebuch* (1597).[18] Most of this literature relies on a certain degree of familiarity with the subjects' lives, as can be seen in light of the contemporary Shrovetide plays by the famous Nuremberg cobbler poet Hans Sachs (1494 – 1576), often dealing with ordinary conflicts in marriage that concerned many people among his audiences. These jest narratives will allow scholars to gain deeper insight into early modern everyday life.[19] Here, we recognize what people laughed about during the early modern age, how they reflected on social conflicts, and how the more educated class felt about peasants, Jews, and clerics, as well as about children, older adults, pious individuals, or outsiders, criminals, homeless, fools, and simpletons.

Georg/Jörg Wickram has not been entirely ignored by modern scholarship since he was one of the major 16th-century German authors, having published novels, didactic narratives, and jest narratives. However, the focus has rested so far on aspects such as his intellectual background (Humanism and the Protestant Reformation), didactic intentions, dramatic writing, family roles, ontology, the typology of the figures in his works, the mixing of genres, love and truth, and the like.[20] He left a rather voluminous opus which includes strongly didactic texts (*Der Jungen Knaben Spiegel*, 1554; *Von guten und bösen Nachbarn*, 1556; *Die sieben Hauptlaster*, 1556/57), an early modern novel (*Historie von Reinhart und Gabriotto*, 1551; *Der Goldtfaden*, 1557), and even *Shrovetide Plays* (*Spiel von den zehn Altern*, 1531). Many works would lend themselves well to the same methodological approach, drawing from entertaining narratives to gain insight into the common popular culture. However, the *Rollwagenbüchlein*, much less studied until today, is ideal for a literary-sociological approach as many characters appear on the stage and are exposed in ignorance, foolishness, violence, or simplicity. In other studies, the topic has been the social interactions, the role of the neighbor within the urban context, God's plan for the world, craftsmanship, and the social position of this writer.[21] Most recently, the concepts of love and marriage have gained some traction, as discussed in Wickram's *Der Goldtfaden,*[22] which is not surprising at all, as the early modern period had witnessed a major paradigm shift in those regards with a more intensive discourse on marital issues.

4. The new focus on the ordinary people and situations in everyday life

This study will examine the various personal types appearing in the vast corpus of 16th-century jest narratives, especially in Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*. Those would be, for instance, the rich and poor peasants, foolish medical

doctors, lusty and witty housewives, prostitutes, waggoners (coachmen), mercenaries, ignorant councilmen, prankster and rogue, craftsmen, unlearned (if not stupid) priest or monk, innkeeper, merchant, lawyer, housemaid, and the old wife. The intention is to create a projection of everyday life in the early modern world drawn from highly popular narratives.

Relevant studies by social historians have already addressed, for instance, the world of peasants, mostly using chronicle accounts or other non-fictional material. Combining the critical review of this vast corpus of jest narratives with the examination of non-literary material, including contemporary art works (such as books of hours), will make it possible for us to gain deeper insights into social, economic, and political conditions during the 16th century, at least as perceived by the average citizens, and hence, the authors of jest narratives. The results will also allow us to reflect backward to the 15th century and forward to the 17th century. When laughter is intended, the audience—both then and today—has to recognize itself, at least somewhat, in the figures who are the butts of the joke.[23,24] By examining the sorts of assumptions, beliefs, and practices allowing this communal entertainment and laughter, we can enrich our understanding of *Alltagsgeschichte* and create meaningful connections between social-historical and literary analysis.

Many, so far mostly ignored, marginalized voices representing various classes, genders, religious minorities, and age groups will thus emerge and become visible again as they are identified as foolish speakers, ignorant individuals, or bumbling persons who make silly mistakes. As this analysis will show, laughter was a pervasive feature of the period, predicated on ordinary people's lives, statements, ideas, and behavior. The literary lens will make it possible to uncover heretofore ignored, yet essential, aspects of everyday life in the village, the city, on the road, and also at court as reflected in the fictional texts (for historical aspects, see the contributions of Kohler & Lutz,[25] van Dülmen,[26] and Schubert[27]). We can learn a great deal about early modern mercenaries, impoverished students, prostitutes, foolish peasants, and rich innkeepers, for instance, or at least about the popular attitude and mode of thinking about those groups.[28] This study thus promises to build much-needed epistemological bridges between the social sciences and the humanities by studying these fictional narratives that were very popular in the 16th century (for historical perspectives, see Roeck[29]).

When Wickram, Kirchhof, Lindener, Frey, or Krüger offered their entertaining tales, they also aimed at instruction, which was only possible if the audiences recognized themselves at least somewhat in the presented scenes, protagonists, or events. The literary evidence thus mirrors social, economic, gender, and religious issues during the 16th century. We could embrace the same concept when studying Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the anonymous *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, or Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*. Similarly, Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein* is predicated on the appearance of protagonists from many different social classes—men and women and Jews and Christians—so we are in a convenient situation to grasp more or less the public discourse in the countryside, the city, at court, and elsewhere since we are invited to laugh about the ordinary people in their foolishness or smartness (for a parallel approach, drawing from a different set of narratives, see Lundin[30]).

5. The example of *Rollwagenbüchlein*

Wickram offers a large number of entertaining stories that commonly deal with people spending time on the road, but he did not fully develop a narrative framework as Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400) had done.[31] As the print history demonstrates, his collection sold well in the early modern book market and could be identified as a bestseller.[32] Specifically, it was reprinted in 15 new editions until the end of the 16th century, and then at least four more times in the 17th century (1602, 1607, 1654, and 1665) (see the online bibliographies VD16 and VD17 for a comprehensive listing of all publications during the 16th and 17th centuries, respectively).

Wickram formulated explicitly that he intended to entertain his audience, and, by the same token, to offer instructions through his stories where the common reader within the urban class could be confronted with astounding, surprising, unusual, or extraordinary situations in which people from all social classes operate. When we include the stories contained additionally in the Frankfurt reprint from 1565, the *Rollwagenbüchlein* consists of 111 narratives (for convenience, this analysis primarily references the 1968 edition of Wickram,[33] which offers numerous helpful explanations. However, the critical edition by Roloff[34] has also been consistently consulted. The older edition by Kurz[35] is available online). Each time, the author focuses on different individuals who belong to specific social classes. Although there is no indication that Wickram might have embraced any populist ideals, he invites the audience to laugh about virtually everyone since he observes ignorance, foolishness, and stupidity in all corners of his society (for a recent study of Wickram in biographical and literary-historical terms, see Classen[36]).

The first story has revealed this new perspective, far removed from the courtly world, which still dominated

15th-century literature (Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, Eleanore of Austria, the anonymous *Malagis*, and to some extent, the anonymous *Fortunatus*). Here, by contrast, we are taken to the world of peasants in the vicinity of Strasbourg, one of whom gets seriously ill and pledges a pilgrimage to Saint Vitus if he were to recover soon. Indeed, he gets well again not long thereafter, but his work in the fields and vineyards keeps him so busy that he can never fulfill his own pledge. One day, feeling guilty about his negligence, he hires a man to do a proxy pilgrimage, but despite his best efforts, the other man fails because of his ignorance about the various saints. Saint Vitus is worshipped in a monastery on the top of a mountain, whereas another monastery, at the foot of the mountain, is dedicated to All Saints. The ignorant messenger returns home, claims the rooster that had been intended as an offering for himself, and explains that Saint Vitus did not hand out any pilgrimage certificate. Simple-mindedness, ignorance, and foolishness dominate this story.

The narrator comments in his epimythium that many people follow this model, worshipping and appealing to saints in times of need instead of addressing Christ as the only true savior. He mocks the strong belief in the practice of giving donations to saints who would not eat any of the food granted; instead, the monks or nuns would consume it all. In reality, there would be many true saints, that is, homeless people, suffering from hunger and sickness, and those would really be in need of food donations. According to Matthew 23[1], what people would do for those in need would be concrete service for Christ. Ultimately, Wickram urges his audience to quit all pilgrimages as useless and to accept one's social responsibility for the poor and miserable people at home, instead of spending money on the veneration of saints or relics, which would require an expensive pilgrimage.[14]

The peasant who had charged the other man to carry out the pilgrimage on his behalf is identified as naïve but well-meaning, being thankful and faithful. He does not attract our criticism in the narrow sense of the word, but he still represents the common people's foolishness and ignorance, who continue to practice the traditional Catholic customs of worshipping and believing in saints even long after the Protest Reformation. It is valuable to understand that the peasant owns various types of fields and a vineyard in the vicinity of Strasbourg. He represents, as the narrator emphasizes, "*gar vil guoter, frommer, einfaltiger baursleut*"[33(p11)] (many good, pious, simple-minded peasants). This man is a hard-working person who just does not find enough time to live up to his pledge, so he hires his proxy. The latter is as naïve and ignorant as he is, but clever enough to profit from the commission without achieving the goal of doing a pilgrimage on behalf of his master.

Although the peasant does not gain his certificate from the pilgrimage site, he is satisfied with the messenger's explanation and pays him the money agreed upon. The author's ultimate criticism is, of course, directed against people's false and uneducated faith, but the foundation and framework of this narrative sheds valuable light on the social and economic conditions in the countryside. The peasant was, undoubtedly, wealthy enough to hire this proxy pilgrim and stay behind so that he could tend to his farmwork. He displays a considerable degree of ignorance and a simple faith, unaffected by any of the protestant teachings. His representative or proxy proves to be no more intelligent or educated than himself, yet he knows how to profit from his commission in economic terms. Remarkably, there is no harsh condemnation of either person, and not even of the monks who are so foolishly dedicated to their saints, jealously guarding themselves against any criticism. Instead, the poet offered a fairly soft satire and invited his audience to laugh about such simple-minded people.[37]

As the third story illustrates, the situation in villages was rather crude and underdeveloped, as the local priest indicates, whom the narrator calls "*toller, voller, verlotterter, verspilter, gottloser pfaff*"[33(p16)] (crazy, drunk, unchaste, gambling, and godless priest). He spends more time in the inn drinking with the members of his parish than in the church.[38] The narrator, however, hastens to discriminate between the past and the present since he wants to avoid being criticized for slandering the current clergy. This priest is invited by a colleague to a church festival, where many other respectable clerics have assembled. They enjoyed listening to and watching this drunkard of a priest, but at one point, the protagonist goes beyond all measure in his disruptive behavior, and the host reprimands him, reminding him of his obligation to be a role model for the people in his parish.

Wickram apparently took the side of the Protestants by ridiculing this priest, but he also mellowed this criticism by contrasting him with the other priests attending the feast, who are abhorred by their colleagues. The comedy of this story comes to its gruesome conclusion when the drunkard at the end falls into a deep creek and drowns there.[33(p18)]

Religious values and ideals regularly became the target of the author's satire, such as in the fifth story, where a young man who has traveled to the pilgrimage site of Einsiedeln for some non-religious business shares with some of the pilgrims that the Virgin Mary is his sister.

[1] Refer the link: https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2025%3A40-45&version=NIV;KJV1

Everyone is deeply shocked by this sacrilegious remark, and the authorities have him immediately apprehended and imprisoned for the night. The next day, when questioned by the city council about the meaning of his claim, he doubles down on it and adds that the devil of Constance and the Lord God of Schaffhausen are his brothers. This horrifies the judges even further, but then they inquired of him as to the meaning of his alleged blasphemy. To all their relief and laughter, he explains that his father was a sculptor and had created all those objects, and had created him as well: "*auch mich; darumb sind wir geschwistert*"[33(p22)] (and me too; hence we are siblings).

As much as Wickram was a Protestant, he did not demonstrate any strong opposition to the Catholics and only commented on the fact that many pilgrims went to Einsiedeln to worship the Virgin Mary. We do not know what kind of business had brought the young man to that pilgrimage site. The heading identifies him as an "*abentheürer*"[33(p21)] (adventurer), but in the text, we are only told that he attended to his business in Einsiedeln and that he was not a pilgrim. He joined the pilgrims in the inn because that was the main location to get food and drinks, find entertainment, and meet people.[39] The subsequent section also introduces the city council that has to judge the alleged culprit, but there are no further details.

In story No. 14, however, where another criminal trial takes place, we gain more insights into that institution. Moreover, here the focus rests on two lansquenets, that is, mercenaries, a typical category of professional soldiers in the early modern age.[40] They are good friends, "*guot gesellen*"[33(p30)] (good fellows), but find employment in different military units. After a major battle, the military conflict is settled, and the troops are sent home. These two men then happen to meet again and exchange what they have experienced and profited from the war. One of them has not gained any wealth during the war because he had been content with his salary and pitied the poor peasants. The other one, however, has acquired more money because he has been ruthless, robbing wherever it has been possible. Mocking the first one, he advises him, "du muoßt es nemmen, wo duos findest, und dir niemants lassen zuo lieb sein"[33(p21)] (you must take wherever you can find anything and must not have any pity on anyone out of love). In other words, he urges him to steal wherever possible and to be ruthless, a reflection of the general situation with lansquenets who tended to plunder, kill, and rob to sustain themselves.[41] The first man could have done the same, gambling and pillaging among the peasants,[33(p31)] but he had observed his ethical principles in obvious contrast to the others in his company and elsewhere.

The subsequent development of the narrative illuminates the life of lansquenets, but now in a surprising turn of events. The poor man takes to heart what his fellow had advised him and robs the rich man—a robber himself who had been allowed to take from the poor victims whenever an opportunity arose during the war—in the middle of the night since they share the same room in an inn, and immediately leaves the house to get away from the fellow mercenary. The other one realizes his loss the next morning, quickly follows the other, reaches him in Nuremberg, and has him taken prisoner on the charge of theft. As in the previous story, the conflict is settled by the city council, "*ersamer radt*"[33(p31)] (honorable council). They question the poor lansquenet why he took the money and a valuable necklace from his companion and learn that the rich one had advised him to do so. Indeed, as the poor one can explain, "*er solt kein barmhertzigkeit mit niemant han, sunder solts nemen, wo ers funde*"[33(p32)] (he should never feel any pity with anyone but should, instead, take wherever he would find it).

In their Solomonic wisdom, the councilmembers or judges decide that the accused should return the chain to its owner but could keep the money so that he would be able to return home without financial difficulties. However, they also instruct the rich lansquenet never to teach anyone how to gain wealth by means of robbery.[32] Wickram thus voices considerable criticism of the lawlessness of those mercenaries and questions the entire institution of lansquenets. By contrast, he gives solid credit to the wise city council because they operated in a fair manner, allowed the poor culprit to explain and thus defend himself, and even granted him to keep the money that the rich man had obviously stolen from poor peasants during some military operation. In his typically brilliant strategy, Wickram addressed numerous social issues and topics in the short space of this one jest narrative: the lure of warfare, the terrible consequences of unrestrained mercenaries, the narrow spaces in an inn, the role of a city council, and ethics and morality. We do not learn to what social class the two men belong, but service as lansquenets was obviously a convenient way for them to find employment and gain riches, at least in the case of the second man.

Life as a lansquenet, however, was not necessarily profitable, as story No. 15 illustrates, where an impoverished soldier cannot even feed himself and suffers from hunger. In his desperation, he forces his way into the captain's headquarters, claiming that he can formulate his request by using just three words, "*Gelt oder urlaub*"[33(p33)] (Money or temporary release from duty). His rhetorical skill in all its brevity achieves the desired goal; everyone laughs about his smart statement, and the captain grants him a month's salary as an advance payment.

6. An aristocrat versus the peasants in a village

Truly revealing proves to be the 18th story in which an impoverished nobleman has taken a loan from a rural community. Contrary to our expectations, the peasants are wealthy; the aristocrat lacks money and pledge in a document to be fully liable for the credit. He even agrees to be subjected to the punishment of imprisonment if he is unable to pay back the loan. The amount of interest grows in the course of time, and the nobleman does not comply with his own promise, although the community sends him repeated messages and threatens him with being thrown into prison.[36] Finally, the peasants sent a messenger to him to demand repayment or take him as a prisoner. The messenger finds him at a barber who is shaving his beard. The nobleman promises to repay the loan if the messenger allows him to complete his shaving. Once they have agreed upon that, the nobleman immediately gets up and leaves the shop, with his beard still not yet shaven. The barber helps his customer to escape, so the peasants in the village never see their money again.

The narrator concludes with two recommendations: first, peasants should never loan money to an aristocrat; second, if any money is loaned, then it should come from the latter, "*die edelleüt sollen den bauren leyhen*"[33(p37)] (the noblemen ought to give loans to the peasants). The story itself sheds valuable light on the economic situation in the countryside, underscoring the peasants' wealth and credit business, whereas the aristocrat is badly impoverished and resorts to deceptive trickery to swindle his creditors out of their money. The barber plays only a secondary role, but he helps the nobleman to get away. Moreover, we also learn a little about the legal and administrative structures prevalent in southwestern Germany, with the city of Rottweil being the center of the regional justice system. There is also a reference to the "*schultheiß*"[33(p37)] (village mayor) whom the messenger asks for help in arresting the debtor, but once the nobleman has run away, there is no longer any opportunity for the messenger or the peasants to enforce the repayment of the loan. We recognize, thus, a complex portrait of the economic, legal, and political conditions in early modern Germany, where the rural population apparently enjoyed a higher financial status than the lower aristocracy.

7. Friars

This finds a certain confirmation in the 20th story, in which a Franciscan friar frequents a village where he regularly receives many alms from a rich peasant woman (widow?). She is pious and readily hands over cheese to him. He wonders where her daughter might be and learns that she has stepped into a thorn and now lies in bed because her foot has swollen badly. The monk offers his help, goes upstairs, and immediately overwhelms and rapes the young woman. The mother is naïve and believes in his goodness, and even prepares a soup for him while he tries to treat her daughter's foot. Although she hears her daughter's screaming, she is so innocent that she thinks that the friar works hard on the foot, which causes her pain, "*Leid dich, mein liebs kind! So wirt dir geholffen*"[33(p39)] (Calm down, my dear child. Then you will receive help).

As soon as the friar has raped the young woman, he gets out of the house as fast as he can, knowing only too well that he had abused the young maid and committed rape. He even declines the soup the mother had prepared for him, now claiming that it is his fasting day. However, the widow, having gone upstairs to her daughter, realizes quickly that a sexual crime has happened. In her resoluteness, the mother grabs a strong cane and tries to ambush the friar, who has continued begging in the villages. She pretends to have an extra cheese for him, but he fully understands the deceptive strategy and gets away, never to return to the village again because he is afraid the mother might not forget the crime he had committed against her daughter.

We can draw several conclusions from this short narrative. First, in the middle of the 16th century, begging by Franciscans continued unabatedly, especially in the countryside. Second, the peasant woman is identified as a rich person, but as naïve regarding the friar, pious in her attitude, and yet also ferocious in protecting her daughter, which she fails to do. The author badly criticizes this friar as voluptuous, immoral, criminal, and deceptive, but the criticism does not automatically extend to the Catholic Church and its clergy at large. Notably, rape was condemned as a severe criminal act, although the peasant woman does not resort to legal measures on behalf of her daughter. Instead, she wants to pursue her revenge with a violent strategy, but cannot achieve her goal of beating up the evil Franciscan.

8. Village life

In story No. 24, we find ourselves once again in a village where a young lansquenet is trying to beg for money from a peasant. At first, the institution of lansquenets is critically viewed, as the protagonist returns from his military service without having gained any riches. The war had not lasted for a long time, so the soldiers were quickly dismissed again, "*alß dann offt geschicht, das iren vil on gelt wider heimgeschickt werden*"[33(p45)] (it often happens that many of them are sent home again without any money/payment). He is truly impoverished and must beg for food and money. One day, he knocks on the window of a peasant's house who is eating the morning meal with his servants

and family. The peasant, however, claims to have no money available either. Yet, he invites the vagabond in to share their food, "*So wil ich mein armuot die mir gott beschert hatt, gern mitt dir theilen*"[33(p46)] (I will happily share my poverty with you that God has bestowed upon me).

Although the meal is simple and plain, he is very hungry and gratefully enjoys what he receives. He not only expresses his gratitude to the peasant but also laughs at himself and his foolishness, thinking that he would be wealthy as a lansquenet. He remarks, to himself and others, that he would have to digest the plain food for quite some time before any riches come his way. Wickram offers good insight into the harsh reality of poverty during the period, emphasizing that serving as a mercenary would not guarantee wealth. As much as we are invited to smile about this situation and the former lansquenet's late realization of the true generosity of the peasant, the story reflects powerfully the widespread poverty and economic misery in the countryside and among the vagrants on the road.

This provides a segue to the next story, No. 25, in which we learn about a young married couple; he owns an inn, and she is an innkeeper's daughter. After a short time, her pregnancy becomes visible, indicating that she had slept with another man before their wedding. He forces her to reveal the truth, that is, a waggoner who had stayed at her father's place had had sex with her. Although her husband curses her and her previous lover, he turns it all into a joke and lets it go, thus preserving all their public honor. Addressing the waggoner, he comments, "*Hastu also ein weite straß und muostu eben meiner frauwen, ich weiß nit wohin, faren!*"[33(p47)] (You have such a long road to travel, and yet you have to drive my wife, I do not know where to!). In the epimythium, the narrator praises the husband for avoiding the spread of the news regarding his wife's dishonor, and he urges other people to follow that example. There would be many who would only hurt themselves by publicizing their wife's transgression before the wedding, "*wann sy ire weiber genuog schenden und in ir eigen nest scheissen, nemmen sy die denn wider zuo inen und sitzen dann beyde ins bad*"[33(p47)] (there are many who greatly shame their wives and shit into their own nest. Then they accept their wives again, so both thus sit in the bath).

9. Didactic laughter

In general, Wickram intriguingly combines humorous comments, often of a satirical nature, with didactic remarks, offering serious teaching behind the mask of the literary entertainer. In No. 28, for instance, we come across a remarkable example of antisemitism as it was prevalent in the 16th century. A simple-minded peasant enters a church and takes a close look at a crucifix. It shows the Christ figure covered with streams of blood after His flagellation. The man feels considerable empathy for the Lord's suffering depicted there, and after having prayed his Pater Noster, he urges Christ to pay more attention the next time and stay away from the "*schnoeden boesen juden*" (p. 50; mean and evil Jews). He simply assumes that the Jews killed Christ and believes that he would be smart enough to give Christ advice on how to avoid His suffering in the future. While he demonstrates a good heart, feeling such sympathy with Christ's Passion, he is completely ignorant of the theological background and the historical reasons for the Christ figure being painted in such a brutal manner. For him, Christ appears like a real figure who might have to face the same situation during His Passion sometime in the future. Little wonder that this man reveals apparently common ideas about the reasons for Christ's crucifixion, which make him express strong hatred of Jews (for a useful global overview, see Eriksen *et al.*[42]; however, the authors do not engage with literary material and are entirely unaware of the testimony of Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*).

Story No. 48 expands on this topic, but it also diversifies the historical perspective considerably and makes us view the phenomenon of antisemitism in a different light. In this case, a group of peasants sits together in a tavern, drinking heavily. Then, a Jew appears and sits down with them after he has taken care of his horse. The peasants invite him to join them in drinking wine, but he refuses because his religious rules would not allow him to do so with Christians. Of course, this irritates the company, although he had agreed to take a large mug of beer. As they claim, due to a great drought, water would be in short supply. Finally, the innkeeper handed him a mug with water, and the Jew gulped down a large quantity. However, this makes him cough badly, which the other guests force him to explain. Foolishly, the Jew pretends that he is coughing up rain since he has kept it in for a long time. A drunken peasant takes it literally, takes hold of him, and drags him through the room as a punishment for his guilt in having caused the great drought. The Jew screams at the top of his lungs to defend himself, but it takes quite some time until the other fellows intervene and rescue him from the bad mistreatment. As soon as he is free, he gets on his horse and rides off.

A number of significant conclusions can be drawn from this at first rather silly story about the Jew and the drunken peasants. Here, we encounter an old Jew who travels across the country[33(p87)] and is wealthy enough to own a horse. He does not hesitate to enter the inn since he is not aware of the peasants' readiness to exert violence. He is careless in offering this highly metaphorical explanation for his long cough, not being aware that the drunken peasant would

take it verbatim as an explanation for the drought. The others do not join the violent actions against him and actually free him from the grip of the drunken peasant when they assume that the entertainment has reached its limit, "*deß Schimpf wer genuog*"[33(p88)] (it was enough with this joke).

As soon as he can, the Jew then leaves, being afraid of further violent mistreatment. The narrator does not comment specifically on the bad situation in the inn, but he invites us to laugh about the Jew and his foolish assumption that he could explain his strong cough with a facetious remark as if he had been responsible for the long dry spell that threatens all the fruit, wine, and grain as his attacker claimed. The drunken peasant also constitutes a silly figure because he does not understand metaphorical speech, but since he is stronger than the Jew and has apparently the full support from the other guests in the inn, he remains unscathed and is actually applauded by the others for having staged such a "humorous" scene for their entertainment.

From the start, the entire group of peasants viewed the Jew with some hostility insofar as they angrily responded to his request for water. They seem to know that he would refuse to drink wine with them since they are Christians, and immediately try to put him into a defensive situation. His counteroffer to share beer with them is not accepted, and the innkeeper brings him the desired water, which then leads to the events examined above. However, religious aspects do not surface, whereas the story is clearly predicated on the peasants forming a group of insiders that views the outsider or stranger as a hostile intruder. Hence, they abuse him and threaten to hurt him, making him the butt of their cruel joke. The same could have happened to any other person who would have come from the outside. Yet, his identity as a Jew makes the situation worse, especially because the Jew immediately makes it clear to them that he is different and cannot join them in drinking wine.

10. Violence and crime

In many cases throughout *Rollwagenbüchlein*, violence characterizes the social interactions both in public and in private, which is sometimes accepted as almost ordinary (see above), but more often not condemned outright. A most dramatic case is dealt with in story No. 87, in which we hear of a wedding in Pforzheim (between Karlsruhe and Stuttgart). The priest places himself at the entrance to the church to bless the young bride. He smiles at her happily, and she responds kindly, which immediately provokes her bridegroom to suspect that the two might have had a previous affair. In his rashness and brutality, he hits her face with his fist, causing her to fall down. All guests viewed this behavior with great discomfort and reported him to the authorities. They quickly determined that he had displayed physical violence without any justification and imprisoned him for several weeks, which the narrator comments with approval, "*sin verdienter lon*"[33(p153)] (his deserved "reward").

A most unusual scene with extreme violence is the topic of story No. 74, in which a group of children set up a game where they imitate the world of adults. In particular, they acted as butchers, cooks, and so forth. One of them pretended to be the pig. Once all things were arranged, the butcher approached the "animal" and cut its throat, whereas another child captured the blood, as they had observed their parents or others doing in their village. An adult happened to come by and observe the horrible situation. However, when the "butcher" was taken to the council, they were at a loss for how to approach this case since all the children were only 5 or 6 years old and would not have understood the ethical or moral implications of their actions, which they had simply replicated adult activities. Eventually, an old and wise man advises to offer the "culprit," on one hand, a delightful apple, and on the other, a valuable coin. Depending on the boy's choice, he should be declared innocent or executed for murder. He chooses, however, the apple, so he is declared innocent because he had acted only in his childishness and did not really understand the meaning and consequences of his actions.

In story No. 72, a young man commits himself to the life of a hermit, working for a long time voluntarily fixing the country roads. However, one night he has a dream in which a voice— maybe by the devil—tells him that God expects him to commit one of three possible deadly sins: Drunkenness, having a sexual relationship, or murder. We are not told where this dream or voice might come from, but he accepted it as a divine message, although the content seems rather dubious and untrustworthy. After much reflection, he decides to submit under drunkenness as the least dangerous sin and invites his sister to visit him one more time. She brought wine and bread with her, and they both enjoyed a good time together. However, at one point he becomes enflamed and raped his own sister. Once he had committed this crime, he decided to murder her to keep his evil deed a secret, and so he carried out all three sins because he had believed that drunkenness would be the least sinful. The narrator warns his audience to be alert to the danger of alcohol because many other sins could result from it,[33(p129)] as we have already seen in the story with the Jew and the drunken peasants.[43]

Apart from violence, Wickram criticizes arrogance, pretentiousness, foolishness, stupidity, and many other

human vices. He does not take on the role of a preacher, and his stories do not serve specifically the purpose of enriching or illuminating a sermon, as was still the case with Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522),[44] certainly an influential source for Wickram and many of his literary contemporaries. However, in ethical and moral terms, Wickram pursued the same line of argument as his famous predecessor, even if he embedded his stories in a more humorous framework and more specifically targeted fools and other ignorant and vicious individuals, exposing their shortcomings in rather concrete terms.

In story No. 42, for instance, we hear of an arrogant individual who constantly pretends to be more courageous and daring than anyone else. He used to be a lansquenet and now pretends to have accomplished the greatest heroic deeds. However, just that day, an old and weak woman had died, and she was not yet buried in the cemetery, as it was already nighttime. This causes great anxiety among everyone, especially in the braggart, since she is said still to be alive and haunting anyone who might dare to traverse the cemetery without carrying a light. As the narrator emphasizes, when alive, that woman would not have been able to hurt anyone, and yet, now, being dead, her corpse frightens them deeply.[45] The former lansquenet is finally forced to take up the challenge. He pays his bill and walks home across the cemetery because there is no alternative.

As the narrator emphasizes, the dead woman had been a weak and mute person during her life and could never speak up. Now, being dead, however, she deeply scares the protagonist, who is afraid of her ghostly appearance. Hence, he covers his head with his coat and plugs his ears with his fingers, hoping not to hear the dead woman groaning and wailing. However, the more he tries to walk steadily away from the site where she is placed on a bier—the ossuary, of all places—the more he approaches the scary place and eventually falls down the stairs, breaking his legs, getting no help at all because his drinking companions are still in the inn. He screams and howls for a while, but since this has no effect, he limits himself to loud sighing and crying. Late at night, the others returning home, found him in the ossuary, and took him to the doctor, laughing about the reasons for his accident, that is, his fear of the ghost of the old woman. The narrator hence concludes with the observation that this fool earned an insult to his injury.[33(p72)]

11. Public life

Many times, however, Wickram did not target specific social or religious (Jewish) groups. Instead, he reflected on ordinary situations in public, at festivities, at home, on the road, and the like. For him, like all other authors of jest narratives, the normal human shortcomings deserved the most attention, and not major religious or religious concerns. Even though we often hear of peasants and their interactions with others, which invites us to laugh about those foolish and ignorant people, the basic concern for this author of jest narratives was to expose general human shortcomings wherever he could recognize them. In story No. 52, for instance, the author takes us to a festive party following the burial of a craftsman. They ate and drank among a larger group of people, and no one even thought any longer of the dead person.

At one point, however, one of them needs to relieve himself. His friend and neighbor, however, dismisses this request and tells him simply to urinate into his hat, which would make it unnecessary to get up and seek out the toilet. The simpleton does so but he does not know what to do with the soaked and leaking hat. He asked the fellow for advice on what to do with the hat, who wondered aloud why he would not know where the hat belonged. Hence, he places the urine-filled hat on his head and thus soaks himself with all the dirt. The entire company laughs about this terrible joke and urges them to observe peace, especially because the second person had given him the hat and had urged him indirectly to place it back onto his head.

The narrator has nothing to say about the dead person, the funeral, the grief, or the ceremony. All that matters here, which might also reflect practical customs at that time, is the feasting and heavy drinking, all of which resulted in crude and boorish behavior. However, since the entire scene concludes with communal laughter, there is no rancor and aggression; instead, the company urges them to observe peace and to forgive each other because fault would rest on both sides.[33(p94)] Both here and in many other cases, the focus rests on excessive consumption of alcohol and the subsequent crude behavior, which was, however, not necessarily limited to the social class of peasants.

12. Eating and drinking

The most dominant theme seems to be the consequences of extensive eating and drinking, that is, excessiveness, drunkenness, and also consumption beyond one's financial means. This is impressively illustrated in story No. 53 that deals with the highly respected composer and singer Gruenewaldt, who works at the court of Duke William of Munich and spends some time at the imperial diet in Augsburg. The artist spends most of his time enjoying social company and soon faces an enormous debt to his innkeeper, who demands to be paid when Gruenewaldt's patron is about to return home. The poor man does not know what to do and faces the danger that the innkeeper might take his valuable coat in lieu of money. In his

desperation, the singer quickly composes a song and presents it to the wealthiest man in town, the famous merchant Fugger. In this song, he describes his financial woes and his fear that the innkeeper might take his coat as payment for his debt. The rich patron enjoys the song, understands Gruenewaldt's predicament, pays the debt, and gives him extra money, which solves the situation.

In contrast to many other stories contained in the *Rollwagenbüchlein*, here we are situated both at court and the inn, both within the city and in the world of the literary and musical arts. Gruenewaldt manages to get out of his emergency because of his creativity, which uniquely sheds light on the actual situation for singers, composers, and other artists at that time. The protagonist reveals a tendency to eat and drink too much, enjoying the company of other drunkards and gluttons. As we observe here and throughout, much of public life took place in the inn where people assembled to eat and drink excessively. Gruenewald managed to pay his debts because of his artistic skills and because he did not display crude behavior or a bad character. Instead, we are invited to smile about him and enjoy the situation as a beautiful new song resulted from it.[46]

13. Conclusion

Wickram was one of the most influential authors of jest narratives (*Schwänke*), and his literary models influenced many other successors in early modern Germany. Of course, the interest in entertaining and didactic narratives also existed in other cultures, such as Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1558/1559) or Gian Francesco Straparola's *Le piecevoli notti* (1555). Our study of *Rollwagenbüchlein* gains more global perspectives, so we can firmly argue that the literary discourse in the late 16th century allows us to reflect on the social and cultural conditions of that period.

Anticlericalism, ridicule of peasants, antisemitism, comments about gluttony and alcoholism, conflicts between representatives of the various social classes, reflections on childhood, comments on poverty, remarks on the situation of lansquenets, especially after they had been dismissed from service, observations about crude language (cursing), bragging, superstition, married life, adultery, premarital sex, and even about the legal system occupy this volume. We commonly observe a specific interest in entertaining the audience with accounts about stupid or smart remarks, actions, or behavior.

A final example might suffice to illustrate the complexity of the thematic range of Wickram's rich volume of jest narratives. In story No. 36, a man is brought to court and fears that he might lose his case unless he hires an attorney. They agree on a certain amount of payment, and then the protagonist learns that he should say nothing but the word "blee" when asked by the judges. This turns out to be successful because he is soon identified as a fool who cannot be regarded as responsible for his actions.

Once the court has dismissed the case, the attorney wants to receive his payment, but the client says nothing to him but "blee" (a nonsensical expression), which badly irritates the former. But when he takes him to court over his payment, the judges remind him that this man had already been identified as being nothing but a fool. The attorney's advice to his client thus makes him a loser as well. The former had basically resorted to a deceptive strategy and lied to the court, so he is now beaten by his own game, as the narrator emphasizes, "*und traff untrew iren eygen herrn*"[33(p61)] (so disloyalty hurt its own lord). Witticism, or its very opposite, foolishness and ignorance, occupy many of the stories, and the author drew from many different examples in his society, laughing both about clerics (No. 38, No. 47) and waggoners (No. 41), naïve and foolish wives (No. 49), noblemen (No. 50), and innkeepers (No. 54). The poet also included stories about horrible domestic violence leading even to murder (No. 55), smart thieves (No. 56), travelers facing shipwreck (No. 58), lansquenets (No. 61), medical doctors and barbers (Nos. 61, 66), a dentist in Italy (No. 65), fishermen (No. 67), children skilled in bowling but lacking in piety (No. 69), a neglectful bishop (No. 76), the riotous peasants in the Peasant War from 1525 (No. 85), and so forth.

In the majority of cases, peasants, clerics, and lansquenets are the author's targets, but he did not hesitate to include members of the city council, even princes, as objects of his satire and sharp criticism. We face an excellent opportunity to investigate social conditions, everyday life situations, common human interactions, conflicts between the genders, antisemitic sentiments, and concepts of childhood. Undoubtedly, Wickram proves to be a highly skillful writer, presenting unique and yet common cases of miscommunication, aggression, excessive drinking, courtly and urban entertainment, financial problems, domestic violence, and the suffering of lansquenets once they had been dismissed from their military service.

We face here, in other words, an ideal opportunity to examine many different social conflicts, economic topics, and cultural conditions. Social life most commonly took place in the inn, where people tended to drink excessively. But we also encounter many other situations with people on the road, at work (fishermen, waggoners, messengers, peasants, singers, barbers, etc.). Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*, very similar as Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522) and numerous other collections of jest narratives from the late 16th century and beyond, can thus be identified as a first-rate literary source for the

study of early modern everyday life in all its complexity, both in public and in private, regarding the situation in the countryside and the city, and in the church and inn.

Wickram deliberately highlighted human folly, shortcomings, failures, vices, and stupidity so that the audience could laugh about the various protagonists. However, there were also wise councilmen, humble and virtuous peasants, hard-working individuals, creative poets and singers, clever lawyers, and insightful and reasonable mayors. In short, *Rollwagenbüchlein* represents an extraordinarily rich mirror of early modern life in all its complexity, taking us from the lowest social level to the highest, from the countryside to the city, from children to old people, from men to women, from Jews to Christians, from rogues to virtuous peasants, from intelligent medical doctors and foolish messengers.

Studying Wickram's collection of stories invites us to apply many different analytic perspectives, both literary and sociological, religious and cultural, historical and anthropological. Other works by him, such as *Von guten und bösen Nachbarn* (1556), would also lend themselves to the critical investigation of ethical and economic concerns.[47] The world of the peasantry emerges as much in front of our eyes as that of the clergy, the medical and legal profession, public entertainment (inns, drinking, feasts), and the military (post-war, lansquenets). Altogether, this fully confirms the claim that the *Rollwagenbüchlein*, like many of its successors, serves exceedingly well as a narrative source for the study of everyday culture in 16th-century Germany and elsewhere. While most other scholars dedicated to that period have focused on the theological debates—Catholics versus Protestants—and hence on the relevant textual evidence,[48] here we can identify a secular source highly appreciated by the reading audience, which found its own world well mirrored in it. Of course, we have always had to consider the narrative filters between literary fiction and the social reality on the ground, but the enormous popularity of this genre at large allows us to grasp more specifically what people laughed about and were concerned with.[49]

If we then widened our perspectives and included contemporary entertaining literature such as Giovan Francesco Straparola (*Le piacevoli notti*, 1550), we could easily gain strong support for the argument developed here.[50]

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