



The Song of Gutenberg | Gutenberglied

Text Information

Author | Hans Folz

Language | German

Period | 15th Century

Genre | Didactic poetry

Source | Mayer, August. *Die meisterlieder des Hans Folz aus der M chener Originalhandschrift und der Weimarer Handschrift Q.566*. Berlin: Weidmann, 1908.

Collection | Making History: Chronicles, Legends and Anecdotes

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/folz_song_gutenberg/

Translation by Christopher Hutchinson.

Introduction to the Text

The Gutenberglied (Song of Gutenberg) is a song composed sometime before 1480 by the Nuremberg poet and barber surgeon Hans Folz (ca. 1437–1513). The song is an example of the genre of the *Meisterlied* (master song), a form of art song prevalent in various German cities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These vernacular songs were typically created by artisans who composed new texts according to strict rules concerning rhyme, meter, and word choice. They set these texts to existing melodies and performed them in meetings of poets' guilds.

This song is especially interesting as one of the earliest texts commenting on Johannes Gutenberg's recent introduction in Europe of printing with movable type, which set the stage for the mass production and distribution of books, pamphlets, and other forms of printed works. Folz's song is both supportive and suspicious of the new technology. Folz praises print for spreading the word of God, as print has made copies of the Bible more affordable for monasteries. However, he also criticizes it for allowing those who deny God—particularly the Jews—to spread their ideas. On balance, Folz concludes, print is a positive development and Gutenberg deserves praise for his invention.

Introduction to the Source

While Folz himself printed many of his own works (he operated his own small printing operation), he did not print this song (or any of his other master songs). The source survives in a late-fifteenth-century manuscript, possibly in Folz's own hand, containing a number of Folz's master songs, Shrovetide plays, and treatises on theology, fencing, and alchemy. The manuscript also contains a number of poems by the fourteenth-century poet Heinrich von M geln.

About this Edition

This translation is based on August Mayer's 1908 edition of Folz's master songs, available on Archive.org. I have maintained the original manuscript's division of stanzas but have elected not to divide the transcription and translation into lines as the manuscript itself does not do this. I have also not attempted to recreate the rhyme scheme of the original German. The manuscript in which this song survives is available online on the website of the Duchess Anna Amalia Library in Weimar.

Further Reading

Baldzuhn, Michael. "The Companies of Meistergesang in Germany." *The Reach of the Republic of Letters: Literary and Learned Societies in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Arjan van Dixhoorn and Susie Speakman Sutch, Brill, 2008, pp. 219–55.

- *Introduction to genre of master song.*

Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

- *Account of positive and negative reactions to print in early modern and modern Europe.*



Flood, John L.. "Hans Folz zwischen Handschriftenkultur und Buchdruckerkunst." *Texttyp und Textproduktion in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*, edited by Elizabeth Andersen, Manfred Eikermann, and Anne Simon, de Gruyter, 2005, pp. 1–28.

- This essay documents Folz's printing career and contextualizes the Gutenberglied in Folz's wider work as a printer. Includes a translation of the song into modern German.

Huey, Caroline. *Hans Folz and Print Culture in Late Medieval Germany: The Creation of Popular Discourse*. Ashgate, 2012.

- Study of Folz's literary works and his work as a printer.



The Song of Gutenberg | Gutenberglied

Vor langer frist gesprochen ist von konig Salamone wie
fort auff erd nicht newez werd nun ist sey[t] auß dem
trone got komen und mensch worden hie daz doch seit
waz ein newez ye ye doch ez die geschriff vor hin besane

Long ago King Solomon said that, from that moment on, there
would be nothing new on earth. Since then, God has descended
from His throne and become human, which was indeed
something new, although the scriptures had foretold it.

Daz aber sunst hie dise kunst puch drukes sey gewesen
auff erden vor glaub ich nit zwor wer hat dar von gelesen
doch west ez kunfftig got der werd also ist doch nicht
newz auff erd lob mit begerd spricht im in seinen zesen

I truly doubt that this craft of book printing has existed on earth
before. Has anyone read about it? But God knew it would exist,
so there is not anything new on earth. Praise him ardently in his
eternal reign.

Was aber nucz und wider drucz von diser kunst bekomen
do merket von: ein geistlich man hat in einr stim vernumen
wie der entcrist in seinem dracz her nech in eim papiren
schacz der nach dem gsacz vort wert der cristen frumen

It is clear what usefulness and worry has come from this craft.
A spiritual man has heard it said that the Antichrist, full of hate,
would arrive in a trove of paper that the Bible claims is useful for
the faithful.

Und mit dem dunst gancz fallscher kunst werd in der
dewfel fullen / do von all schriff in kaum furdrifft sein
poz[eit] zu verhullen daz macht groz straff, die er an went
er meczelt martert wurkt und prent deupt und auch plent
all die nit glauben wullen

And the Devil will fill him with the fumes of this perverted craft
and everything that has been written will scarcely be enough
to conceal his evil. He will punish us harshly: he will slaughter,
torture, strangle and burn and deafen and blind all those who do
not believe him.

Do wirt sulch schriff im dan ein gift wider sein falsche
rete wan waz allein und ungemain die schriff von
puchern hete do sint all stift nun mit gezirt daz macht
die cristenheit¹ gefirt dar durch geirt wirt sulch deuflisch
unstete

But this writing will also be an antidote against his false
proclamations because all monasteries are now adorned with
all the books of the Bible. This makes Christianity strong and
stands in the way of the Devil's deceit.

Ye doch so sprich ich sicherlich ein sach dunkt mich gar
swere und drifft an geistlich persan die disen schacz der
lere der heillgen schriff um ringez gelt hie deutschen zu
verfun die welt daz doch weit felt ich furcht daz sint die
mere

And yet I say with confidence: there is one thing that I consider
very alarming. It concerns men of the cloth who translate the
valuable teachings of the holy scriptures into German for little
money in order to lead the world astray. This is very wrong
indeed. I fear these are the events

Dar von lang zeit man hot geseit pristerschafft werd
geschlagen wie kan ich daz glosiren paß dan allz ich
ewch will sagen manch ley durch die ding wirt gemest mit
punckttlin der er vor nit west und auff daz lest het numer
taren fragen

Which, it was foretold long ago, would harm the priesthood. How
can I put it better than what I will now say to you: many a layman
is, through these translations, being overburdened with details
of which he previously knew nothing, and about which he would
not have dared to ask.



Hin dan gesezt daz er mit letzt sich selbz und ander
leien wan wie ez get allz ers verstet also pfeifft er
den reien do danczen dan die andern nach dar auß
entspringen mag die schmach und sulche rach daz sich
dan hept ein zweien

Not to mention how he harms himself and other laymen with
them, because this is how it goes: however he understands
these details, he plays a merry tune and the others dance along.
Outrage will come from this and such a call for vindication that
a quarrel will begin.

Und welch gelert daz dan erfert dem zimpt ez nit zu
leiden die weil sint ein gewirczet fein sulch grund und
warden schneiden in peiden orten sam ein swert und
unerfert und welln der ding nit meiden

And it would not behoove any scholar who finds out about this
to suffer it lightly because such justifications have been dressed
up nicely and the same sword will cut both ways those who are
[passage missing] and inexperienced and do not want to avoid it.

Und mellden frey ir soch dar pey, der glert nit sollten
pflegen do durch wirt dan ydem sein man auff gleicher
pan begeben dez rot ich furkumpt ez pey zeit daz
geistlikeyt dar um nit leit legt ab den streit filleicht
pleibtz unterwegen

And whoever freely announces their opinion, if scholars don't
care about it, will fight their opponents on an even playing field
because of print. Therefore, I advise you: pre-empt this, and
quickly, so that the priesthood doesn't suffer because of it. Stop
the fight! Perhaps it can still be avoided.

Wan sulcher sam gepirt ein stam der poz ist auz zu
rewten noch pringen mer sulch leiisch ler irung in
schlechten lewten die juden wellens auch bekern und
iren glauben falsch bewern unsern erclern und gruntlich
war bedewten

Because such a seed yields a tree-trunk that is hard to tear out
of the ground. What is more, such lay teachings spread heresy
among ordinary people. The Jews also want to convert people
and falsely prove their beliefs, interpret ours and argue that
theirs are true.

Dar in sint zwar die juden gar poz narren ist mir rechte wie
diser ley mit seim geschrey mit eim hat ein gefechte do
ist der jud vor auff bewart und schneuczt im zaulich auff
der fart durch sulche art wirt cristenheit geschmechte

In this way, the Jews are hateful fools, I agree with this. How this
layman¹ started yelling and picked a fight with a Jew. This meant
that the Jew was on his guard and sent him hurriedly on his way.
Christianity is humiliated by such behavior.

Und auß gepreit von der judscheit dez haben schuld
sulch doren der fantasy mer keczerey durch sulch
unkunst mag foren ye doch schillt ich dez drukez nicht
behender sin wart nie erdicht noch auch bericht dar
durch in kurzzen Jaren

And news of this humiliation is spread by the Jews. Those
fools who are responsible for this have, in their ignorance, let
their imaginations lead to heresy. Yet I don't blame print. There
has never been a quicker way to write texts and also to spread
information. Because of this, within a few years

Die cristlich ler so weiten wer in alle welt entsprungen
lob hab der erst got her der herst all er werd im gesungen
dar nach dem ersten in dem werk juncker hansen von
gutenberck die gotlich sterk gab daz der teutschen
zungen

The message of Christ has spread far around the world. Above
all, praise be to God most noble, praise be to Him! Praise be also
to the inventor, Lord Hans von Gutenberg. The strength of God
gave print to the German people.



Der diß gedicht hat auß gericht der nent sich nit
mit namen waz er sunst mach puchz flid scharsach
sein narung pracht zu samem nun gib her daz er dich
dort sech und daz uns allen daz geschech und unß
nit schmech der hellisch feint spricht amen

He who wrote this poem will not be named. He earns a crust
from his other pursuits, with his box of ointments², his scalpel
and his razor. Lord, let him see you in heaven, and grant this
to all of us, and do not let the fiend from hell harm us. Say
"Amen".

Critical Notes

Transcription

- 1 The manuscript reads "xpnheit", a common *nominum sacrum* for Christ.

Translation

- 1 It is unclear to whom Folz is referring here.
- 2 The German here is simply 'puchz'—box, tin, canister. Given Folz's main occupation as a barber-surgeon, this probably refers to a box of ointments or simple medicines.