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Gerhard Wolf. *Von der Chronik zum Weltbuch: Sinn und Anspruch südwestdeutscher Hauschroniken am Ausgang des Mittelalters.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002. XIII + 519 S. EUR 138,00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-11-016805-1.

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It All Makes Sense Now

This substantial treatment of three major “family chronicles” produced in southwestern Germany in the sixteenth century (with a glance at a fourth) explores how their authors used literary tropes, strategies, and invented elements in the service of their vision of history. These chronicles—the *Truchsessenchronik*, Sebastian Kung’s chronicle of the dukes of Wuerttemberg, and the *Zimmerische Chronik*—combined genealogical accounts and biographies of important family members with local history, making them rich sources on the culture and practices of the lower nobility in this tumultuous period in German history. Notorious for their creative use of the historical record, however, these chronicles have often fallen between the cracks of academic disciplines, as history does not consider them reliable “fact,” nor literature good “fiction.” Relying on Hayden White’s understanding of history as narrative, Gerhard Wolf’s literary approach reveals that the oft-disparaged break with reality is the key to making sense of these texts. *Von der Chronik* is essential reading for scholars interested in historiography or noble culture in the sixteenth century, as well as for any scholar planning to use chronicles as sources. It will be of importance to all scholars interested in the relationship between literature and history, and fact and fiction, whether in the sixteenth century or in the twenty-first.

Following an introduction that covers theoretical, disciplinary, and genre issues, Wolf considers each chronicle in a separate section. Through detailed examinations of each chronicle’s origin, from patronage ar-

rangements to sources to dissemination plans, Wolf situates these chronicles within the cultural landscape of southern Germany in the sixteenth century. Some obvious distinctions appear. The Truchsessen chronicle was commissioned by Georg III von Waldburg (the famous Bauernjoerg who had led the Swabian League to victory in the Peasants’ War) from an unknown author, based on material gathered at Georg’s request by a *Domherr* in Augsburg. Kung’s chronicle was most likely self-initiated and may even have been intended for the printing press, while the Zimmern chronicle was written by a member of the Zimmern family, Froben von Zimmern, adding an autobiographical element to the narrative. Yet in many ways these chronicles grew out of the same admixture of the medieval chronicle tradition, new humanist impulses acquired through formal education, and the need to demonstrate nobility. Once written, these chronicles had to plausibly represent the family’s history to a number of constituencies, from the noble family itself to other members of the nobility to other (and later) historians. The interaction between author, sources, and expected audiences then produced the type of history that has so puzzled previous scholars.

Wolf acknowledges (and often carefully documents) the divergence of the chronicles’ accounts of history from not only current historical standards but even from their own sources. For these authors, history was not about “what really happened,” but about providing the present with intelligible lessons from the past. Yet the material unearthed in previous chronicles and documents was

often insufficient for the achievement of this goal, providing incomplete, implausible, or simply unhelpful historical accounts. Thus, each of the authors creatively filled in the gaps, remolded the material, and cast aside what did not fit in order to produce narratives that said something convincing about the problems that interested them. Wolf exposes the careful calculations behind what tales they told and how they told them, skillfully explaining how the authors used narrative elements, including many drawn directly from literature, to make the past usable.

The Truchsessen chronicle, in his analysis, is a long meditation on the role of loyalty and sound economic management in creating and maintaining the status of a noble house, a particularly acute topic given recent family strains. Kung, on the other hand, used his chronicle of the dukes of Wuerttemberg to analyze the relationship between rulers and the land from the perspective of a Stuttgart city councilor more loyal to the latter than the former. The Zimmern chronicle, the longest and most elaborate of the three, picks up on some of themes of the Truchsessen chronicle on the secrets to noble success (with Froben himself in the starring role). By the end, however, it shows increasing ambivalence and skepticism about human nature and the possibility of clear moral lessons in history. Despite (or because of) this doubt, Froben emphasizes the need for verbal agility and compromise in worldly affairs, a point driven home by his penchant for retelling *Schwaenke* (humorous anecdotes) that focus on deception, the consequences of rash action, and getting oneself out of sticky situations.

Wolf's emphasis on the coherence of the texts he analyzes is one of the many strengths of *Von der Chronik*, because it takes the intellectual aspirations and literary competence of these authors seriously. Through tracing themes such as sexual passion and court politics into the *Schwankkapitel* about sexual escapades and insults to honor, Wolf reveals these seemingly irrelevant and irreverent stories as serious commentaries that support, problematize, or undercut the historical narrative Froben has just constructed about a particular aspect of his family's history. In revealing these chronicles as literary texts, Wolf also gives them new weight as conscious experiments in sixteenth-century historiography.

In addition to their importance to the history of historiography, these chronicles provide much insight into early modern noble culture in Germany. For example, both the Truchsessen and the Zimmern chronicles were written on the occasion of the family's elevation

within the nobility, and reveal the desire for, and anxieties about, such a step. More generally, as the chronicles address noble culture, either from the inside or, as Kung does, from the outside, they make many statements about noble values, from good governance to family responsibilities to the qualifications of true nobility. Even their views of major events, such as the crusades and the *Bauernkrieg*, provide telling information about how the demands of noble self-representation shaped their perceptions of the wider world. Some of their statements on these themes are intentional, some unintentional, and the value of Wolf's work is that he enables historians to distinguish the two.

The comparative aspect of this work is surprisingly limited, given the title's suggested narrative of development, but useful nonetheless. In the course of handling each work separately, Wolf delineates points of contact on individual subjects or attitudes not only with the other chronicles discussed in his book, but with other works of genealogy and history, most importantly, the genealogical and memorial work done on behalf of Emperor Maximilian I. A brief chapter at the end about another noble chronicle, the richly illustrated *Zollernchronik*, reveals no unifying characteristics with the other chronicles, except for the general but important point that even its brief narratives reward literary analysis. The book's conclusion, on the other hand, provides a helpful summary of the origin, themes, and basic literary strategies of the chronicles. Neither the conclusion, nor this review, however, can do justice to the nuanced interpretations that Wolf develops as he proceeds section by section, biography by biography, through each chronicle. While the organization of *Von der Chronik* can be repetitive, as the analysis of each individual section of a chronicle reveals the same issues and narrative patterns as the previously examined ones, the method is ideal for demonstrating Wolf's main point that what seems on the surface to be a mishmash of material does have an inner logic. Furthermore, scholars interested in a particular topic (e.g., view of antiquity, witchcraft, marriage) can easily find their way to Wolf's discussion of the chronicles' treatment of that theme.

Wolf's approach based on literary analysis does lead to two assumptions that historians and other scholars may wish to question. First, his interest in stories leads him to sideline those aspects that are not contained in narrative form, specifically Kung's inclusion of "annalistic" entries in parts of his chronicle, as well as the pictures that are the central focus of the Zollern chronicle. One could argue that such material also tells stories on its own (for example, does the listing of famines, wars, and

pestilence lend a sense of history as cyclical or as progressive?), and certainly in conjunction with the historical narrative that Wolf analyzes. Secondly, Wolf's search for organizing themes and structures steers him towards transhistorical concepts in his descriptions. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the Zimmern chronicle, in which Froben's interest in human motivations is labeled "anthropological" and his social insecurity "labile Selbstwertgefuehl," while his understanding of "sexuality" is compared to Foucault's and his historiographical technique to New Historicism. Wolf is not making an argument about the origins of these concepts, but by using them, he removes his analysis a step or two from the world in which the chronicles were written.

Scholars may also wish to delve more into the irrational and contradictory side of these chronicles. Wolf's concentration on the rationality and consistency with which the authors approached their task produces many convincing explanations and superb conclusions, but does occasionally seem to be based on overreading what could be an inherent and insoluble tension in the text. For example, he argues that Froben's *Schwaenke* mirrored the nobleman's theory of history. When some of his stories played with the distinction between truth and lies, Froben is ironically acknowledging the slipperiness of

his own use of sources. When many of his stories lack clearly readable morals or guidance for readers, Froben is consciously commenting on the necessity of reading between the lines and looking below the surface in life in order to truly understand human motivations. Wolf's argument deserves careful consideration, but it is also important to consider whether Froben's unease with his distortion of the sources crept out despite his attempts to control it or if the stories' opaque lessons were the result of long-standing contradictions in the demands of noble culture (for both wealth and generosity, for example). Wolf makes the case that overriding purposes guided the selection of sources and the presentation of material; the ways in which these goals were not (and could not) be met would also be a worthwhile subject to explore.

Von der Chronik was originally completed as a *Habilitationsschrift* in 1991, but its publication was delayed in anticipation of new editions of both the Zimmern and Zollern chronicles. As the timely appearance of these editions seemed increasingly doubtful, Wolf went ahead with the revision and publication of this monograph. Despite this lengthy wait, the book's arguments are still important, indeed essential, for the assessment of these chronicles, and *Von der Chronik* deserves to be widely and carefully read.

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