SYLVA FISCHEROVÁ
JIŘÍ STARÝ (EDS.)

ANCIENT WEEDS



CONTOURS OF POPULAR AND TRASH LITERATURE IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL TIMES

KAROLINUM

Ancient Weeds
Contours of Popular and Trash Literature
in Ancient and Medieval Times

Sylva Fischerová
Jiří Starý (eds.)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial Note 7

Ancient and Modern Weeds: An Attempt at a Definition (*Sylva Fischerová*) 9

Popular Literature and Pulp Fiction in Ancient Egypt (*Jiří Janák – Renata Landgráfová*) 74

The Ancient Love Novel: Formula and Its Innovation (*Sylva Fischerová*) 89

Early Christian Martyrologic Texts: Between Topoi and Entertaining Reading (*Iva Adámková*) 137

The Paradox of High Popular Art and Formulaic Creativity in The Sagas of Icelanders (*Slavica Ranković*) 161

Coal-Biters and Their Journey Out: Popular Features of Old Norse Short Narratives (*Kristýna Králová*) 174

The Author, Schema and Originality: The Case of Old Norse Lying Sagas (*Jiří Starý*) 203

Formula Theatralis: Formulaic Elements and Structures in Central European Medieval Religious Drama (*Martin Bažil*) 248

The Highest Lady and the Cycle of Praise: Alfonso X's Attempt to Create Literature "for the People" (*Matouš Jaluška*) 270

A "Not Very Specific Term": Late Medieval Popular Literature (*Lucie Doležalová*) 294

Romances of the Blind as Pulp Fiction (*Juan A. Sánchez*) 314

About the Authors 335

Name Index 337

EDITORIAL NOTE

This volume is based on the monograph *Starodávné bejlí. Obrysy populární a brakové literatury ve starověku a středověku*, published in Czech in 2016. The monograph is the result of the research project *Formula Fiction: "Trivial" and "Pulp" Genres in the Context of Historical Development and Concepts of Popular Culture*, undertaken at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University (for details, see the introductory study, p. 46).

The studies published in the Czech monograph have not been translated mechanically from Czech into English; for the purposes of this volume, they have been adapted for an international audience and updated by their authors. A great deal of attention has been paid to ensure consistency of terminology. Due to the nature of the project, the book does not consist of the *disiecta membra* of individual studies; on the contrary, the authors have tried to link the book by means of mutual references. They also worked closely with the translators during the translation process.

The following is a list of the names of the translators and the chapters translated.

Kateřina Šebková translated the following chapters:
Early Christian Martyrologic Texts: Between Topoi and Entertaining Reading (*Iva Adámková*)
Coal-Biters and Their Journey Out: Popular Features of Old Norse Short Narratives (*Kristýna Králová*)
Formula Theatralis: Formulaic Elements and Structures in Central European Medieval Religious Drama (*Martin Bažil*)
The Highest Lady and the Cycle of Praise: Alfonso X's Attempt to Create Literature "for the People" (*Matouš Jaluška*)
A "Not Very Specific Term": Late Medieval Popular Literature (*Lucie Doležalová*)
Romances of the Blind as Pulp Fiction (*Juan Sánchez; the verses of the romances of the blind were translated from Spanish to English by Matthew Sweney and Daniel Esparza*)

Andrew J. Hauner and Sylva Fischerová translated following chapters:
Ancient and Modern Weeds: An Attempt at a Definition (*Sylva Fischerová*)

The Ancient Love Novel: Formula and Its Innovation (*Sylva Fischerová*)

Naďa Abdallaová (together with Robert Michael Baugh and Karolína Klibániová) translated the chapter The Author, Schema and Originality: The Case of Old Norse Lying Sagas (*Jiří Starý*)

The studies Popular Literature and Pulp Fiction in Ancient Egypt (*by Jiří Janák and Renata Landgráfová*) and The Paradox of High Popular Art and Formulaic Creativity in the Sagas of Icelanders (*by Slavica Ranković*) were originally written in English and translated into Czech for the Czech volume.

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Sylva Fischerová and Jiří Starý

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ANCIENT AND MODERN WEEDS: AN ATTEMPT AT A DEFINITION

SYLVA FISCHEROVÁ

1. A (TRIVIAL) DEFINITION

Popular literature as well as so-called low literature often tend to be viewed and evaluated in the manner which the following definition, from a publication about literature for children and young adults, proposes:

> Trivial literature can be generally described as a type of mass product functioning exclusively as entertainment and relaxation, void of creative inventiveness, originality and artistic quality, distinguishing itself by conventional approaches, attractive subject matters, understandability in terms of content, an uncomplicated, illusory and idealised portrayal of reality, syuzhet schemes and stereotypes, simplified character developments, happy endings, a one-sided orientation towards adventure plotlines, an unusual setting and linguistic clichés.[1]

This kind of literature is thus characterised, first, by the amount of production, i.e., by a mass occurrence[2] that presupposes being favoured or popular; second, by its function (which is here exclusively that of entertainment and relaxation; elsewhere we read of an escapist function);[3] third, by its form and content, which are focused on by the somewhat verbose remainder of the definition where we find, on the one hand, conventionality, syuzhet schemes and stereotypes, simplified character developments, linguistic clichés and happy endings, and, on the other hand, an orientation towards adventure plotlines, attractive subject matters and unusual settings. This kind of literature *en bloc* is denied creative inventiveness, originality and artistic quality and, on the contrary, is attributed an idealised and illusory portraying of reality.

It would of course be possible to proceed from a different definition, but – as illustrative of a textbook perspective on the phenomena under scrutiny – the present characterisation will undoubtedly suffice, albeit with a few

1 Toman, *Trivialita a kýč v literatuře pro děti a mládež*, p. 3–4. Unless stated otherwise, all quoted texts are translated by Andrew J. Hauner and the author.

2 The terms mass production, mass culture etc. are discussed further in the text.

3 Cf. Cawelti, *Adventure*, p. 13–15.

addenda. First, this literature is to be distinguished by purposiveness and tendentiousness (ideological, political or generally "in the ethos of servitude towards one-sided attitudes and patterns of behaviour";[4] hence the German label "Konformliteratur"[5]).

Second, it is necessary to integrate this type of literature into the wider context of popular culture as a whole. Popular culture texts (the expression being applicable to all of popular culture's products, not only to literary products) are usually seen "as easily understood, simplistic, and formulaic. On a continuum stretching from formula to innovation, popular culture texts are most often closer to the formula than to the innovation pole. So the study of popular culture is especially concerned with genres, stereotypes, conventions, codes and rules."[6] Under the wide umbrella of pop culture, then, what can be included is a mix, spanning from commercials for Coca-Cola and potato chips all the way – via music, films and TV series – to Garfield, James Bond and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* – or, in other words, that whole "way of life we inherit, practice, and pass down on to our descendants";[7] all this is spiced, moreover, with a debate on the topic of how culture as a whole ought to be defined.[8] From a different perspective the phenomenon of "the popular" extends from "original" folk cultures right up to modern mass-culture; what is also at issue is the distinction between mass and popular (since, according to a host of authors, mass culture is only turned into popular culture by its recipients, as we shall see later).[9] From the point of view of production and commerce – which is a viewpoint that surely is not negligible – popular culture can be seen as a hybrid product that is formed, on the one hand, by a popular demand for entertainment and enjoyment and, on the other hand, by producers' efforts to engage the widest possible audience and take over the market. At the same time, if we have thus integrated popular literature into the wider context of popular culture, we can take yet another step and also connect it to the discipline known as "cultural studies," which has both its own history[10] and its own specific thematic and methodological problems. What is unmistakable

4 Zbytovský, *K německému triviálnímu románu v Čechách*, p. 133.
5 Nutz, *Der Trivialroman, seine Formen und Hersteller*.
6 Hinds, *A Holistic Approach to the Study of Popular Culture*, p. 169.
7 Browne, *Popular Culture as the New Humanities*, p. 75.
8 See e.g., Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*; Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 1 ff. What captures this well is S. Hall's bon mot: "I have almost as many problems with 'popular' as I have with 'culture'" (Hall, *Notes on Deconstructing the Popular*, p. 508).
9 This idea is developed by Fiske, Willis, de Certeau etc. in their respective works; cf. further in the section that deals with the reader.
10 Along with Culler (*Literary Theory*, p. 44 f.) we can summarise that modern cultural studies are of a double origin: on the one hand, they flow from 1960s French structuralism – on the other, from British Marxism-oriented literary theory (the works of R. Williams and R. Hoggart, the founders of Birmingham's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which was infamously

is its sociological (or econo-political) dimension, as well as certain emphasis – that is more a product of the history of the discipline than something stemming from the matter itself – on modern times and the contemporary.

Third, another frequent claim one may encounter, in view of popular literature/culture,[11] bespeaks the time-period of its inception. These phenomena supposedly only start appearing in the 19th and 20th centuries (or arrive with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century) and later receive the label of mass culture. In connection to the spread of literacy during the abovementioned era and also thanks to the spread of free-time institutions into other layers of society, a new reader emerges, that is, a "simpler" reader. In other words, what we have here is certain "reading for maids," as it was designated, about a hundred years ago, by the Czech writer Karel Čapek.[12]

The whole matter, then, comes across as being ostensibly uncomplicated and nearly trivial. But at the very least there is one thing that ought to keep us alert and watchful, and that is the looseness of the terms for the given type of literature in different languages: *popular literature, genre fiction, pulp literature, junk literature, trash literature* and *formula fiction* in English;[13] *Trivialliteratur, Unterhaltungsliteratur, Schemaliteratur, Schmutzliteratur, Afterliteratur* and *Schundliteratur* in German;[14] the French, then, preferring the expression *paralittérature*,[15] which is joined by the Italians (*paraletteratura*), in whose case, however, we also find the expression *letterattura di consumo*.[16] What is more, the English term *popular literature/popular culture* has a double meaning, as the adjective *popular* signifies "popular" in the sense of "favourite" as well as "of the folk." This can be read as reference to the sphere of folklore and folk culture mentioned above. From this vantage point – and in view of the context of pop-culture studies and cultural studies – the phenomenon of the popular and the pulp does not come across as an unambiguously defined

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and in a somewhat embarrassing way closed in 2002 after nearly 40 years of existence; another scholar who worked in the Center was S. Hall).

11 Even though popular literature is at the centre of our focus, for methodological reasons it is also necessary to relate to popular literature as a component of popular culture; hence in what follows there is occasional switching over to the more general concept of popular/mass/folk culture.

12 Čapek, *Poslední epos*.

13 Terms used in English are discussed e.g., by Meskin, *Popular Fiction*, p. 117 f.

14 For German terminology see Zbytovský, *K německému triviálnímu románu v Čechách*, p. 132.

15 Couégnas, *Introduction à la paralittérature*; Arnaud, Lacassin, Tortel (eds.), *Entretiens sur la paralittérature*. A nice anecdote that illustrates how loosely the terms have been used in different languages is told by Burke: In the early 1970s "the phrase *culture populaire* sometimes meant bringing high culture to the people. Even in 1973, when a conference on *popular culture* – in the English sense – was held at the University of East Anglia, the French participants only discovered the difference in usage on arrival," Burke, *Revolution in Popular Culture*, p. 45.

16 See Pecere, Stramaglia (eds.), *La letteratura di consumo nel mondo greco-latino*; Fusillo, *Il romanzo antico comme paraletteratura?*

whole; rather, it is somewhat reminiscent of *weeds*. It cannot be succinctly defined; it strives to grow everywhere; its aesthetic value is problematic (as is its practical one); and it ignores borders between gardens. In any case, it was as an "imprecise hybrid" – which can also easily be read in terms of botany – that mass culture was designated in the 1960s by Umberto Eco.[17]

2. A DEFINITION: HOW TO REACH A MORE APPROPRIATE ONE

2.1 TO WHAT END, OR, FUNCTION AND IDEOLOGY

The definition presented above will now be discussed in more detail, beginning with the function and the purpose of works of this kind. The primary function of this type of literature is – as quoted above – to offer an escape as well as entertainment. For now let us set aside entertainment and pause at the concept of escape (which is already at first glance suspicious) and the related strategy of escapism. According to C. S. Lewis, one of the founders of the fantasy genre, "there is a clear sense in which all reading whatever is an escape. It involves a temporary transference of the mind from our actual surroundings to things merely imagined or conceived. This happens when we read history or science no less than when we read fictions. All such escape is *from* the same thing: immediate, concrete actuality. The important question is what we escape *to*."[18] In this way we arrive at the character of the text that is being read and not at a strategy of escape as such. "Escapism" is, in short, a highly projective category, and this is something we ought to be aware of. In the same vein, Roberts adds in response to those who like to label the readers of certain types of works with the dishonouring reproach of escapism: "We readers should have learned by now that the word escape is safe to use only when we are using it about ourselves. It is dangerous when we use it to explain the reading preferences of other people."[19] But in this context what is spoken of is not only escape; one may also encounter by far more cutting formulations: "The individual motifs that lead them [scil. the mass consumers] to reading trivial literature need not be the same …, but they end up at a question that is perhaps the most fundamental to the problematics of free time for the members of contemporary mass society. It is the necessity of somehow filling up the emptiness of the I."[20]

17 Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 12.
18 Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, p. 68.
19 Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, p. 96.
20 Grebeníčková, *O literatuře nízké, zábavné a masové*, p. 102. Further on in the same study, the author writes about "'hygienic reading' for moments of relaxation, tiredness, emptiness" (p. 107).

It is especially the utility of these works that is attacked. Collingwood, a typical exponent of elitism, counterpointed against works of art proper so-called amusement art, which he reproved for instrumentality and for purposedly limiting its aims: "The work of art, so called, which provides the amusement, is … strictly utilitarian. Unlike a work of art proper, it has no value in itself; it is simply means to an end. It is as skilfully constructed as a work of engineering, as skilfully compounded as a bottle of medicine, to produce a determinate and preconceived effect, the evocation of a certain kind of emotion in a certain kind of audience."[21] However, the principle of amusement implies, according to Collingwood, a division of experience into a "real" part and a part that is "pretend" or artificial; the emotions we acquire in this latter part remain settled but there and do not spill over into matters of "real" life. The bifurcation is perfect, and the consumer of works of amusement is characterised by "an inability to take any interest in the affairs of ordinary life, the necessary work of livelihood and social routine."[22]

What works of popular literature/culture do is often, however, repeatedly associated not only with the creation of these partial emotions and amusement but also with myths and dreams. The designation of Hollywood as a dream factory has long since become an overused cliché, but even popular culture as a whole can be understood as a "collective dream world"[23] or, better yet: popular culture "has taken our dreams and packaged them and sold them back to us."[24] Except that during this process something has happened to our dreams: they have been given a shape, a certain desire strategy has been formulated – all on the basis of a supposed sensibility of the masses and a new mythopoetics (which of course departs from the old one, from those constants of human nature that represent woman-man-hero-superhero and the like and that reliably elicit enjoyment, arousal or pleasurable fright). Despite the above-mentioned constancy of human nature, changes still occur. As Eco points out, the characters who earlier functioned as archetypes, i.e., as the sums of "certain collective aspirations" and desires, must necessarily become either immobilised in an emblematic and fixed nature or subjected to a development which is typical originally of novelistic characters.[25] This absolutising claim, however, may be called into question – at least after having examined the archetypes that we know from Greek mythopoetics and that are much more heterogeneous and much more dramatically structured than is claimed by a "monolithic" stylisation of the sort they are tirelessly endowed

21 Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, p. 81. Clearly, the reproach is based on a series of arbitrary aesthetic assumptions.
22 Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, p. 94 f.
23 Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 9.
24 Maltby, *Dreams for Sale*, p. 14.
25 Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 233.

with by all kinds of literary theory books.[26] Nevertheless, we are witnesses to a bricolage-based effort and combinational work in this area, too, and every introduction to popular culture has its obligatory special chapter or chapters dedicated to the myths the audience is lusting after and to their analyses from all sorts of methodological positions, psychoanalytical ones included, spanning from Freud to Lacan and Žižek.[27]

Another concept we come into contact with in connection to the function and purpose of popular literature can be labeled with the term "literature for the people."[28] "In addition to commercially distributed amusement literature directly dependent upon the public's imagination, taste and needs rather than upon the institutions and norms of elite culture (let us call it 'folk literature'), what has taken off is a 'literature for the people,' educational or agitational, coming into existence under the patronage of erudite circles, churches, states, various political movements, often expressing their particular ideological interests," writes Janáček.[29] Although Janáček is referring to no earlier than the Enlightenment and later periods, it is possible to say that this type of literature was produced by probably every society, whether as an instrument for self-affirmation, as a way to secure and affirm its functioning and the validity of its ideology, or conversely as an instrument for new ideological changes, as we also ultimately gather from the contributions in this volume. An important role has always been played by the texts' expressiveness and effectiveness: e.g., within the genre of medieval exempla we often find very amusing stories which can in and of themselves be described as amusing, but they are always followed by a moral maxim which they elucidate and illustrate. "The combination of a funny story with a serious moral can be striking and it can be difficult to believe that such exempla were ever taken seriously";[30] but the mixture of entertainment and usefulness (*delectatio et utilitas*) is omnipresent in medieval textual culture, comments L. Doležalová.[31] Let us also emphasise that although the strategies varied, "literature for the people" and "folk literature" competed for the same

26 According to Scholes and Kellogg, Homer's characters are monolithic and stark; the authors compare them to "the Druid stones of Wessex," Scholes, Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 163.

27 See, e.g., Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, chapter: *Psychoanalysis*, p. 91–109.

28 I have drawn the term from a discussion devoted to the beginnings of Czech prose fiction in the 19th century, see Vodička, *Počátky krásné prózy novočeské*, p. 330. Vodička writes about a stratum of literature that "artificially mediates between artistically more elevated structures and popular literary customs in the hopes of finding the means by which it might get closer to the popular reader." According to Vodička, its counterpoint are "books for popular reading," which amount to a standardised and continually reissued product, the kind that has already attained resonance in popular milieu, like *cantastorias*.

29 Janáček, *Literární brak*, p. 46.

30 Doležalová, *Pulp Fiction in Medieval Latin Literature?*, p. 91.

31 Ibid., p. 91.

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readership. No wonder that the authors of "literature for the people" were programmatically and critically in opposition to books for popular reading. To this extent, M. J. Sychra, the Czech writer active during the Czech National Revival in the first half of the 19th century, called such books for popular reading "muck" and "barren chatter."[32] Later, the attack is aimed directly "against blood-curdlers" with the following argumentation:

> The blood-curdler, the opium of Europe's pariah. A material that is unsightly, sticky, of a disgusting odour, inedible to the unaccustomed mouth, but briskly inebriating, ridding the eater of any sense of reality and carrying him over to the world of monsters. An opiophagist (opium consumer) worker has returned home from the workshop; a shoemaker-cobbler has gotten up from his bench; a seamstress has topped the sewing machine with its cover. While at work all three of them had been craving this moment. They have dinner quickly, light their lamps and are no sooner sitting by a heap of bound papers and giving themselves over to their intoxicant enjoyment. … Before you could count to ten, the opiophagist has left this world and is walking the world of brigands and monsters – the world of his heroes, the realm of his beauty. … Boys who go on to steal their fathers' savings books, setting out along with a couple of friends on a research trip to Africa which usually ends in Prague at the police station, tend to almost always be reared by blood-curdlers. And crude criminals, brigands and murderers tend to be reared by them quite often.[33]

The process of functioning presented above can thus be viewed as an instrument for conceptual indoctrination (and, consequently, for the maintaining of the status quo on the basis of manufacturing consent – according to the designation popularised by N. Chomsky in his propaganda model),[34] whether we are dealing with a modern society, a medieval European Christian society (where the opposite conceptual pole is formed at first by the cult of pagan gods, then by Christian heresy and afterwards by the mutual rivalry between Catholicism and Protestantism) or, for example, an ancient Egyptian society. We are thereby also smoothly transitioning to the realm of ideology or poli-

32 Sychra especially disliked Till Eulenspiegel; I am quoting from Vodička, *Počátky krásné prózy novočeské*, p. 330.

33 K. Scheinpflug's philippic presented above is an advertising text printed repeatedly on the last page of each booklet of Karel Sabina's work *Oživené hroby* published by the *Románová knihovna of Zář Magazine* in 1908; the publisher was naturally concerned with propagating their own products, that is, especially novels from the revolutionary year of 1848. Bohemia and Moravia are at this point still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the revolutionary year of 1848 functions as a marked political symbol. *Zář Magazine* has been published by the Press Committee of the Czechoslavonic Social Democratic Workers' party.

34 Chomsky, Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*; the authors were primarily concerned with mass media and their ideological effect on readers, but the mechanism is also relevant to a different context. For a concise summary see Danesi, *Popular Culture*, p. 42 f.

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