


BOOK REVIEW

Theuerdank: The Illustrated Epic of a Renaissance Knight

Edited by Howard Louthan; translated by Jonathan Green. London: Routledge, 2022. Pp. 324.

Justin P. Meyer 

Washington University in St. Louis
Email: jpmeyer@wustl.edu

Howard Louthan and Jonathan Green's insightful paratexts and fluid prose translation of *Theuerdank* allow students from a variety of disciplines to access a rich and significant contribution to the Renaissance for the first time in English. First published in 1517, *Theuerdank* follows the deeds and trials of its eponymous hero. The figure Theuerdank is a fictionalized representation of Emperor Maximilian I, who sets out on a long journey to (hopefully) marry Princess Ehrenreich, who represents Mary of Burgundy, Maximilian's wife and duchess of the wealthy and powerful Duchy of Burgundy. Theuerdank's journey is filled with treachery, deceit, spectacular victories, and miraculous luck, but the knight reaches Princess Ehrenreich, and they marry with the promise that he would wage a crusade.

Louthan and Green's edition of *Theuerdank* was translated with the goal of being a useful tool to introduce students to the Central European Renaissance through one of its leading figures, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (d. 1519). The edition consists of a number of useful paratextual materials to help students understand the background and culture of the text: a "Habsburg Political Chronology" from the life of Count Radbot (985–1045), the Habsburg progenitor, through the death of Maximilian I; a map the Burgundian lands in Charles the Bold's reign and a map Habsburg lands ca. 1519; a genealogy of the houses of Valois-Burgundy and Habsburg; an introductory essay by Howard Louthan; and a note on the translation by Jonathan Green. After the translation, the volume closes with two more paratexts: discussion questions and suggestions for further reading.

Louthan's introduction discusses many topics related to *Theuerdank*, Maximilian I, the Habsburgs, and the Renaissance. It is both concise and thorough, covering everything from the Habsburg's dynastic history to how to interpret *Theuerdank* as a historical and literary production. This is a clear introduction and serves the needs of building the political, cultural, intellectual, and literary world of *Theuerdank*. Louthan cogently explains the historical background and demonstrates how the poem reflected transformations in Renaissance society, Maximilian's "memory projects," and high politics in the decades before and after 1500. The only issue with this historical introduction I perceive is that it does not explain the development of the Holy Roman Empire or its connection with the Habsburgs well, but rather seems to assume prior audience familiarity. Charlemagne is mentioned, but Otto I, the first Holy Roman emperor, is not, and there is no clear explanation of how Charlemagne being crowned Roman emperor ties with the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburgs. Nevertheless, Louthan's introduction serves its purpose very well.

Green's translation of *Theuerdank* meets each of his expressed goals. He declares that his "overriding goal" with the translation "was to present . . . a readable text" (28). The translation is almost everywhere smooth, and the tone matches well with the subject text's matter in adopting a somewhat old-fashioned but welcoming feel. There are a few instances when some of the translations feel stilted and might be entirely unknown to younger audiences: for example, the use of "peradventure" (153). There are also some phrases that initially appear too colloquial; upon closer review, however, they match closely with the original German and capture "neat parallels between German and English" (29). Beyond a few insignificant instances of potentially unknown vocabulary, the translation is commendable and certainly accessible for the student audience.

There are very few typographical errors and the volume is attractive. A (perhaps unreasonable) request would be colored versions of the woodcut images that adorn each chapter, which would have visually reinforced Louthan's astute emphasis of the work's illustrations being "distinctive" (12) elements of the text. This is a minor quibble and can be easily remedied by accessing the digitized, highly decorated edition of the text on the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek's website (Rar. 325a, <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00013106?page=1>). The only addition that would have greatly aided the expressed goal of making the text accessible to a student audience would have been explanatory notes on the text that point out and clarify allusions and references. For example, the student audience might not understand that "the unbelieving enemies of Jesus Christ" is a reference to the Turks; and Ehrenreich's declaration "to undertake a campaign against them" (282) and have Theuerdank lead it alludes to Maximilian I's own plan for a great crusade. Such notes would help demonstrate how the text was reacting to and reflecting contemporary realities.

Apart from these few, rather insignificant objections, this is a most welcome translation of *Theuerdank*. Few vitally important texts from the Central European Renaissance have ever received modern editions, let alone translations. Louthan and Green are to be commended for opening a new avenue into this incredible era through their introduction and translation of *Theuerdank*. It will prove useful to a wide variety of students—and even professionals—who need a starting point for understanding this rich culture.