

Framing the Narrative. Authorial Reflections and the Early Canonization of Medieval German Romances

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"German-language chivalric romances (Romane) and heroic epics (Heldenepen) are significantly better preserved than comparable works in neighbouring literary traditions. Large-scale research has demonstrated that chivalric narratives in German, as well as in Icelandic and Irish, reveal a preservation rate of approximately 80%, whereas those in French, English and Dutch survive at a markedly lower rate of under 50% (Kestemont et al., 'Forgotten Books: The Application of Unseen Species Models to the Survival of Culture', in *Science* 375 (2022) 765–69). In other words, the genre of 'chivalric romances' appears to have behaved differently in the German literary tradition than in adjacent language areas.

This paper relates this observation to a peculiarity found in the prologues of many German romances: the so-called *Literaturekurs* or 'literary excursus'. These prologues frequently contain what amounts to a bibliographical survey, in which authors enumerate fellow writers and their works, often coupled with critical reflections on both these predecessors and their own narratives. Examples are Gottfried von Straßburg's commentary on the romances by Hartmann von Aue and Heinrich von Veldeke, or Rudolf von Ems's discussions of various romance authors. The effort to compile as exhaustive an overview as possible of contemporary and earlier German literary production reveals a literary culture that strives for comprehensiveness.

This paper explores the possibility that such literary awareness may have contributed to an early canonization of the romance genre in the German-speaking world – an aspect that could, in turn, help explain the relatively strong preservation of German chivalric literature. To that end, it begins by examining how authors employ non-narrative literary excurses to frame, contextualize, and 'inscribe' their narrative within an established literary tradition. It then investigates how this practice may have shaped the perception of romances as a distinct genre among medieval German authors. Finally, it considers whether the German chivalric romance should be understood in fundamentally different terms from its counterparts in neighbouring vernacular traditions."