

Simone Zweifel, Aus Büchern Bücher machen. Zur Produktion und Multiplikation von Wissen in frühneuzeitlichen Kompilationen, Berlin/Boston (Walter de Gruyter) 2022, 275 p. (Wissenskulturen und ihre Praktiken/Cultures and Practices of Knowledge in History, 10), ISBN 978-3-11-074033-2, EUR 79,95.

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Knowledge production is a very complex social performance embedded in social structures and affected by media. That is why book production can no longer be considered, in the social and historical sciences, to be simply the result of the intellectual efforts of authors, or, of the underlying subjects that make individuals into authors, but must be interpreted as a result of the social conditions that make the reproduction of knowledge possible. This complex interplay between social structures, media and knowledge also affects literary genres.

Simone Zweifel's book focuses on the genre of the compilation (strictly bound to the well-known medieval and Renaissance practice of commonplacing, even if Zweifel never mentions it), especially on that particular form of compilation that between the 16th and 18th centuries led to the creation of the so-called books of secrets, i.e. books containing, as William Eamon already pointed out, any kind of recipe that could in some way arouse the reader's curiosity, from technical rules for obtaining, in a more or less experimental way, particular mixtures to actual cooking recipes. Zweifel investigates the work of Johann Jacob Wecker (1528–1586), whose »De secretis libri XVII« (in its multiple editions and translations) was a true long- and best-seller at the time.

The methodological approach adopted by Simone Zweifel is that of the micro-history and material history of the book. Her crucial hypothesis is that a work such as Wecker's cannot be regarded as the product of the work of a single individual, but must be interpreted as the result of the interplay of multiple actors who in different ways collaborated in its realisation – from the actual compiler to the various correspondents who provided information and sometimes relevant books and further texts, from the editor to the proofreaders, and so on. In this perspective, even a single book becomes the end result of a complex network of actors who contribute in some way to its production (and, in the specific case of Wecker, to the compiling activity itself) – which makes the question of how we can define the authorship of a book anything but trivial.

Zweifel's book deals with some crucial issues in the social production of knowledge. Without any claim to exhaustiveness,



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the activity of compilation is paradoxically confronted, in early modernity, with the claim that books produced and marketed are original. Knowledge circulates, precisely thanks to publications (i.e. by means of the mechanical, rather than manual, reproduction of books), in a manner increasingly independent of face-to-face interactions, thus in a certain sense independent of the author of the book, but at the same time the need arises for the first time to clearly establish the authorship of a publication, and thus the modern notion of author is born. The compiling fury that runs through early modernity has its roots in the ancient and late-medieval practice of note-taking and the production, also for didactic-pedagogical purposes, of commonplace-books, but in the course of early modernity this compiling activity undergoes a parabola that gradually leads to the disdain of the genre and its gradual disappearance (except in cases where this activity is explicitly practised to produce encyclopedias, as is the case of Ephraim Chambers). The order of the knowledge collected through the activity of compilation becomes a problem when the subject-matter seems to exceed certain limits of complexity, but also when it becomes evident that the book can no longer be used as a mnemotechnical support but must be used as a sort of archive with which the user interacts through appropriate indexing systems (today we could say through search engines).

All these issues are, unfortunately, not investigated in Zweifel's book with the depth they deserve. Arguing that a book is the end product of a network of agents who contribute in some way to its production is like arguing, to stick to the topic, that the hen cooked at home is the end product of a network of agents that includes the farmer, the distributor, the butcher, the recipe editor, the circle of friends who spread the recipe over the phone, and so on. The success and gradual disappearance of monumental compilatory works such as Wecker's can only be explained with difficulty on the basis of micro-historical hypotheses or from a history of the book viewpoint that prioritises the investigation of material conditions (which are there, as indeed in any industrial production) rather than the socio-cultural conditions underlying the spreading and reproduction of knowledge. This type of works would then be an excellent starting point to grasp that complex transition that, in early modernity, transforms the book from a patrimonial to a consumer good and at the same time presupposes a use of the book not as a mnemotechnical support but as an archive with which the user interacts as if it were a black box (hence the importance of the scrupulous compilation of indexes to explore the archive in a highly selective manner for information retrieval).

Zweifel's book does, however, have the merit of having clarified how articulate the network that made book production possible was already in early modernity, both on a technical-economic and social level. She also shows how the book itself, in particular that specific genre that was the compiling collection of recipes, was in its own way a condensation of socio-economic conditions without which the production of books out of books would not have been possible. The hope is that historical analyses of this kind



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can be used to initiate an interdisciplinary collaboration which book science and book history could take advantage of.

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Seite | page 3



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