

Introduction

‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ is a late medieval verse dialogue between Christ and the soul. Originally conceived as a single-leaf illustrated broadsheet, the work portrays the journey of the soul as the bride of Christ toward *unio mystica* in a series of 20–24 individual scenes, the number and order of which vary from one version to the next. Each scene consists of an illustration depicting the interaction between Christ and the female soul, accompanied by four lines of dialogue text in the form of two rhymed couplets. This text has been expanded in later versions of the work.

‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ survives in eight manuscripts, four single-leaf prints, and one early printed book dating from the late fourteenth century to the mid sixteenth century. These manuscripts and prints represent four different versions of the work. The broadsheet (preserved in the single-leaf prints Bn, M, W, and Z) consists of 20 illustrations arranged in five rows, each scene accompanied by four lines of text. The shorter of the two manuscript versions, the so-called *Bilderbogen-Lesefassung* or ‘broadsheet text version’ (preserved in the manuscripts A, B, Kr, and Mz), consists primarily of the rhymed couplets from the broadsheet with short textual additions. The text in these manuscripts remains unillustrated, although the illustrations have been replaced by short text descriptions in two cases (Kr and Mz). The most extensive version, entitled ‘Die minnende Seele’ or MS (preserved in the manuscripts E, D, K, and Ü), has been expanded to 2112 lines of text and is accompanied by miniatures, in some cases extravagantly and professionally painted. The early print I, the only printed book of this work, contains three unique scenes that do not occur in any other versions. In addition, the text has been expanded not by verse dialogue but rather by prose commentary on the actions of Christ and the soul.

The work first received scholarly attention through a series of editions in the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1839 SCHLOSSER published a text fragment from loose parchment leaves that turned out to be two of three missing bifolia from D.¹ In 1858, as part of a collection of religious poetry appended to his edition of ‘Die Erlösung,’ KARL BARTSCH published an edition of the broadsheet text version as it appears in Kr.² ROMUALD BANZ, a Benedictine monk in Einsiedeln, produced an edition of the entire text of MS in 1908. The text of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ in Mz did not become known until WILLIAMS-KRAPP published an edition of it in 1989.³

Aside from these editions, scholarly discussion of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ has been limited. The text has achieved brief mention in various literary histories,⁴

1 BANZ p. 5. See the description of D below, p. 45.

2 BARTSCH pp. 216–224. This text became known as ‘Bartschs Minnende Seele’ or BMS (BANZ p. 43 and HELLMUT ROSENFELD, “Christus und die minnende Seele” ²VL 1 col. 1236).

3 WILLIAMS-KRAPP (1989) pp. 355–358.

4 For example WEHRLI pp. 690–691, RUPPRICH pp. 330–331 and MCGINN pp. 309–311.

reference works,⁵ exhibit catalogues,⁶ and art historical works,⁷ where it is, however, often (though not always) portrayed in a negative light as a simplification of mystical concepts for the broader masses. BANZ, who judges the MS version primarily based on the aesthetic quality of both text and images, concludes that, “Besonders die Stellen, die an die Spekulation der späteren Mystik anklingen, machen meist den Eindruck aufgehaschter und angelernter Formeln und Phrasen, die auf gut Glück unverarbeitet und unorganisch, nicht selten geradezu unverständlich zusammen geklebt werden.”⁸ ROSENFELD continues in this vein, deducing from the deceptively simple form of the broadsheet that it was intended as *Volkskunst* or *Volkspoesie*⁹ for mass distribution among those with less sophisticated understanding of the subject matter: “Um auch weniger Begnadeten das mystische Erlebnis nachvollziehbar zu machen, wurden gewisse mystische Übungen in Gedichtform gebracht oder in Bilderbogen zu einer Art Trainingsplan gemacht.”¹⁰ WEHRLI sees in ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ “Das repräsentativste Beispiel für eine späte, populär, ja vulgär gewordene Liebesmystik,” going on to describe the text as “Mystik in Knittelversen, nicht ohne weiteres das Zeugnis schamloser Roheit, vielmehr auch ein Stück spätmittelalterlicher Kontrafaktur und Parodie.”¹¹

More recent studies have taken a different approach, moving away from using primarily aesthetic criteria to judge the work and looking not only at form and content but also at circumstances of actual reception and use by a late medieval audience. SCHMIDT takes issue with using the form of an illustrated broadsheet to define its function as a “volkstümlich[er] Einblattdruck,” arguing that this does not contribute to understanding the variety of ways such late medieval broadsheets were actually employed.¹²

HAMBURGER incorporates both broadsheet and manuscript versions of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ in his discussions of how late medieval devotional texts and images were received and understood. He groups ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ with other works of literature and art that are made up of or include literal illustrations of the Song of Songs, such as monumental wall paintings in Göss and Chelmo, as well as manuscript illustrations like those found in the ‘Rothschild Canticles’ or the verbal images in the tract ‘Von Ihesus pettlein.’ He thus demonstrates that such literal visual and verbal images would have been familiar devotional material to an audience of nuns in the late Middle Ages.¹³ Furthermore, he shows how the employment of such literal imagery in these works, especially ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ and the ‘Rothschild

5 HELLMUT ROSENFELD, “Christus und die minnende Seele” ²VL 1 col. 1235–1237 and “Christus und die minnende Seele” KDIH 3 pp. 106–129.

6 STAMM and TEBBE.

7 ROSENFELD (1954), SCHMIDT (2005), REITINGER pp. 109–115, HAMBURGER (1990) pp. 84 and 87, HAMBURGER (1997) pp. 166–168 and p. 183, and HAMBURGER (1998) pp. 268–270 and p. 408.

8 BANZ p. 180. See also pp. 178–183 for a broader negative assessment.

9 ROSENFELD (1954) p. 74.

10 ROSENFELD (1978) p. 186. Qtd. in KELLER (1997) p. 122 n. 13. See also HELLMUT ROSENFELD, “Christus und die minnende Seele” ²VL 1 col. 1235. See below pp. 246–247 for further discussion of ROSENFELD.

11 WEHRLI pp. 690 and 691.

12 SCHMIDT (2005) p. 277. See also below pp. 246–248 on function of the broadcast.

13 HAMBURGER (1990) p. 87 and HAMBURGER (1998) pp. 407–408.

Canticles,' converts the Song of Songs into a narrative or romance in which the soul can participate by imitating the Sponsa's dialogue and interaction with Christ.¹⁴

Apart from BANZ's early edition and commentary, HILDEGARD KELLER has provided the most extensive treatment of 'Christus und die minnende Seele' to date. In a series of articles she analyzes the structuring principle of sacred and secular marriage in the MS version of 'Christus und die minnende Seele' and has examined the use of 'Des Teufels Netz' as a source for the text of this longer version. She argues that although Christ's initial violent depiction of earthly marriage is intended as a deterrent, motivating the soul to enter into a spiritual marriage with Christ as a fundamentally different type of husband,¹⁵ this latter marriage ends up being characterized by the same kind of violence present in the former.¹⁶ As valuable and insightful as her treatment is, her analysis nevertheless focuses exclusively on MS. As will be seen below, a careful analysis of the illustrated broadsheet, which serves as the basis for all other versions of the work, reveals structural principles that can inform further discussions of structure in the other manuscripts and prints. KELLER herself calls for a more thorough investigation of sources, origins and reception of the work.¹⁷

To date there has been no comprehensive study of the entire transmission of 'Christus und die minnende Seele.' BANZ's edition also discusses the manuscripts, content, literary sources, illustrations, dialect, and language, but although extensive his comments are limited to MS and need to be updated. Several of his conclusions were already called into question by STRAUCH's review of the edition in 1910.¹⁸ An incomplete survey of the circulation of 'Christus und die minnende Seele' is also provided by ROSENFELD's article in the 'Verfasserlexikon' and by the 'Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters' (which includes only the illustrated manuscripts and prints).¹⁹ WILLIAMS-KRAPP takes a more detailed look at the circulation of 'Christus und die minnende Seele,' examining Mz in the context of the other manuscripts and prints and comparing the text in Mz with the rhymed couplets of other versions. He attempts a reconstruction of both an original broadsheet and the source broadsheet for MS.²⁰

The goal of this study is to provide a thorough overview of the circulation and reception of all versions of 'Christus und die minnende Seele' in the manner of the *überlieferungsgeschichtliche Methode*. According to this method:

Der Untersuchungsgegenstand sollte der Tradierungsprozeß der Werke im Wechselverhältnis von Verfassern, Schreibern (Druckern), Redaktoren und Publikum sein. Die Ausgangsbasis einer derartigen Untersuchung müsse eine möglichst genaue Kenntnis der diachronischen, diatopischen und diastatischen Überlieferungsdaten bilden, die es ermöglichen, Mutationen der Werke als Vorgang eines sich 'in der Rezeption' vollziehenden Verstehens zu interpretieren und den Prozeß mittelalterlicher Texttradierung in ein historisches Bezugsfeld zu stellen.²¹

14 HAMBURGER (1990) p. 84 and HAMBURGER (1997) pp. 165–166.

15 See BANZ pp. 260:22–263:90.

16 KELLER (1996/1997), KELLER (1997), KELLER (1998), and KELLER (2000) chapter four.

17 KELLER (1996/1997) p. 358 n. 58, KELLER (1997) p. 110, and KELLER (1998) p. 463 n. 6.

18 STRAUCH (1910) pp. 256–261.

19 HELLMUT ROSENFELD, "Christus und die minnende Seele" ²VL 1 col. 1235–1237 and "Christus und die minnende Seele" KDiH 3 pp. 106–129.

20 WILLIAMS-KRAPP (1989) passim.

21 WILLIAMS-KRAPP (2000) p. 3.

The following chapters address these issues by beginning with the evidence provided by the manuscripts and prints themselves. In the first chapter I provide detailed descriptions of these manuscripts and prints, going beyond the scope of traditional and existing manuscript descriptions to look more closely at the individuals and institutions involved in the production and reception of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele.’

The second chapter entails an iconographic catalogue. As NORBERT OTT determined in his study of the German ‘Belial’:

Unbestritten aber eröffnet die Erforschung von Beziehungen zwischen Kunst und Literatur im Mittelalter – über die bloße, neopositivistische Bereitstellung ikonographischen Materials hinaus – als Instrument der Rezeptionsforschung Möglichkeiten, detailliertere Kenntnisse von der Gebrauchssituation von Gattungen und der Wirkungsgeschichte von Stoffen und Texten zu gewinnen, als die bloße Erforschung der Textüberlieferung dies vermag. Der Bildzwang mancher Texte, der Anspruch, der in der Ausstattung von Handschriften bestimmter Gattungen manifestiert, die Herausbildung und Tradierung von Bilderzyklen und Einzelbildern – auch außerhalb von Handschriften –, das und vieles andere ist, integriert in die Überlieferungsforschung, von spezifizierendem Aussagewert für die Gebrauchssituation der Stoffe und Texte.²²

Visual images are an integral part of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele.’ Not only are they necessary for full understanding of the text, they also add levels of meaning not present in the short dialogue verses and play an essential role in aiding the reader’s spiritual progress. Therefore, in addition to issues of textual circulation and reception, this study documents and analyzes both the woodcuts and miniatures illustrating ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ as well as the larger context of the programs of illustration of the manuscripts. Descriptions of each manuscript’s or print’s illustrations of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ are accompanied by transcriptions of their respective headings and the first four lines of dialogue along with documentation of other illustrations and ornamentation in the manuscript. In addition this chapter treats wider issues related to the program of illustration: the artist (if known), the quality and expense of the illustrations, the purpose behind the illustration, evidence of use (thumb tabs on illustrated pages, for example), and unique iconography. This helps to complete the picture of both the intended and actual reception of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ and its illustrations. The third chapter brings together the findings of the first two in order to place the different versions of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ in their chronological, text historical, geographic and social context.

The fourth chapter remains with the manuscripts, now looking at the texts transmitted along with ‘Christus und die minnende Seele.’ Examining the contents of the individual manuscripts in light of the information about their circulation gathered in the first three chapters shows how different audiences read ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ in different ways and with different agendas. The context in which it is embedded not only reveals much about how this individual text was read and received, but also provides an example of the late medieval approach to broader (and often controversial) themes such as mysticism (in this case primarily bridal mysticism with images and lan-

22 Ott (1983) p. 193.

guage borrowed from the Song of Songs) and the role of visual images in religious life and practice.

The final chapter provides a detailed analysis and interpretation of the texts and images themselves, focusing on those elements shared by all versions of the work: the illustrations and the four lines of dialogue from the broadsheet. The intent is to develop an understanding of the illustrated broadsheet, the version of ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ that serves as the basis for all later adaptations of the work, a project that has not as yet been undertaken and which is a necessary foundation for further discussion of the work. Variations on the broadsheet texts and images as well as scenes present only in other versions are included for comparison when relevant.

An examination of the literary traditions ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ is based upon provide insight into how the broadsheet was intended both to imbue the observer’s own experience with spiritual meaning and at the same time to shape future experience according to a spiritual model. Furthermore, using the broadsheet as the basis for analysis reveals its strongly ‘vertical’ structure. To be read from bottom to top, it is divided into three sections that correspond to the three phases of mystical life: the *via purgativa*, *via illuminativa*, and *via unitiva*. But while the episodes within each horizontal section are only loosely connected, the scenes in the vertical columns are thematically related. Actions and themes from the *via purgativa* are taken up again in the *via illuminativa* and given new, spiritual meanings. In addition, the images increase in difficulty the higher the soul progresses. While the scenes of the lower echelons can be interpreted at least in part literally, the images of the upper tiers can only have a spiritual meaning, requiring a higher degree of sophistication not only from the soul but also from the viewer progressing along with her. This closer examination of the structure and content of the broadsheet quickly make clear that it is by no means a ‘simplification’ of mystical spirituality, as ROSENFELD and others have assumed. On the contrary, its illustrations and to some extent its texts consist of abbreviated references intended to call to mind highly complex theological concepts of which the viewer must have some foreknowledge in order to understand them and participate in the spiritual journey. Finally, Katharina Tucher’s ‘Offenbarungen’ provide an example of one woman’s incorporation of images from the broadsheet into her own personal spiritual experience.

The manuscripts and prints containing ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ document a circulation lasting almost two centuries. A comparison of the earlier broadsheets and broadsheet text versions with the later MS version shows clearly how attitudes toward bridal mysticism transformed during the course of the late Middle Ages. Not only in this respect is ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ a work that reflects the debates and tensions of the late Middle Ages. Read by lay and religious audiences, by men and women, comprised of word and image, present in manuscript and printed form, in the vernacular and Latin, ‘Christus und die minnende Seele’ offers a unique view into the diversity of the late medieval literary landscape.

The transcribed texts have been reproduced as they stand in the manuscripts. Diacritical marks have been retained. Abbreviations have been expanded: *Xpi* = *Cristi/Christi*, *vñ* = *vnd*, etc. Capitalization and punctuation follow the manuscript. Scribal errors have been corrected and appear as non-italicized text.

All Biblical citations are taken from the Stuttgart Vulgate edition (WEBER).

The illustrations can be viewed on the attached CD. A complete list of plates with full reference information can be found on pp. 259–262.

