

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen (1621-1676)

**Simplicissimus.** By 1668, the year of publication of Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, we have encountered nothing in German literature like 'prose fiction.' (What have we encountered, in the realm of high literature or religious-literary thought? We have been reading epic material—*Niebelungenlied* and *Parzifal*—which ties us to archaic Germanic culture worlds; poetries of love and urban guild, which were pronounced factors of German life from the 12th to the 16th centuries; deeply meditative religious philosophical thinking—Eckhart and Boehme; activist religious thought, scholarship, and creativity in the path breaking moves of Luther and Erasmus.) With *Simplicissimus* (1668) we come on full blooded imaginative prose, a novel, one that arises from personal experience, passed through the sieve of wide reading and careful workmanship. This work remains one of the wonders of its time, and takes its place with the work of Smollett and Defoe in the formation of a European novel tradition.

**Grimmelshausen and the Novel.** The novel is just beginning to make its voice heard in Europe: the reading public for popular literature is growing, especially in Germany, where the western printing press was created and book selling and the book industry were starting to take off. The conclusion of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was only recent, Germany had been left in shambles and disease, and persons like Grimmelshausen (1621-1676) were on all sides, for the most part disoriented and directionless refuse of the War. *Simplicissimus* is a fictionalized autobiography of its author, who grew up among scenes of destruction and havoc, and who captures them in a fascinating fictional canvas; this book before you—and its sequel, *Courage*, which may particularly capture your attention for the vigorous, sympathetic, and sexy picture of the life of a camp-follower during the war.

**Grimmelshausen's own life and the novel.** Whether the present text is an autobiography or not—for certainly it might seem so—we know that Grimmelshausen lived events that intermeshed with the war. At the age of ten he was kidnapped by Hessian soldiery—fighting for the Holy Roman Emperor against the Protestants—and held captive by them throughout his teen years; a time, we can imagine, when he saw some aspects of the brutal war up close. At war's end, still a young man, he was taken into service by the Bishop of Strassbourg, with whom he resided until, in 1665, he was made a Magistrate in Baden, a position, and residence, in which he remained for the rest of his life. In other words, parts of his life suggest the world of the war, others a post-war existence of considerable stability. From hearsay and from his own imagination, at least in part, we have to imagine him bringing forth a tale that includes such events as these: a hero who is left on his own as a child and goes out into the fields to learn religion from a hermit, who went on to become a page to a great man, then a robber, then the discoverer of a significant treasure, who next marries, promptly deserts his wife, heads to Paris where he makes out to be a classy flaneur, returns to the cave of the hermit, whom he discovers to be his father, and then settles down, pipe and slippers, to a comfortable aging process.

**What it all means.** An account like the foregoing, which may seem flip, fails if it leaves out the maturely human tone of the narrator's life. The narration is carried out with some ironic distance, much compassion for the presented world, and a sense of humor which leavens the roughness of the war—one thinks perhaps of the brilliant tone of *Catch-22*. Readers who will love Tom Jones, a century later, can here see one of the seedbeds of that thoughtful and reckless comedy.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Simplicissimus*, trans. Mike Mitchell, 1999.

#### **Secondary source reading**

*A Companion to the Works of Grimmelshausen.* Otto, Karl 2003,

### **Further Reading**

Grimmelshausen, *Life of Courage*, 2001. (Grimmelshausen's fascinating sequel to *Simplicissimus*.)

### **Original language reading**

Meid, Volker, *Grimmelshausen: Epoche—Werk—Wirkung*, 1984.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Suggestion: look into the Spanish novel tradition of the picaresque—check the prototype novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, from the mid 16th century, some plays of Quevedo, or for that matter *Don Quixote* of Cervantes—and then check out some of the collateral work being done, in the 17th century, by writers like Grimmelshausen, who display a picaro character in circumstances which are often full of human meaning. Is this a genre of writing we understand and appreciate today?

Courage is a star player in *Simplicissimus*, then reappears as the main figure in a continuation fiction, written by Grimmelshausen a couple of years later, *Courage*. What is Grimmelshausen's attitude toward this 'woman of the road,' this easy going but long suffering figure of strength? Take a look at Defoe's *Moll Flanders* for a characterization of the same kind of rough and ready, and witty, street woman—from the standpoint of contemporary British society.

### **EXCERPT**

[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7cq85KGmb3sC&dq=grimmelshausen&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=kkCNS538DovcNtTgIW4&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7cq85KGmb3sC&dq=grimmelshausen&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=kkCNS538DovcNtTgIW4&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=&f=false) So far and no further could I get with my song: for in a moment was I surrounded, sheep and all, by a troop of cuirassiers that had lost their way in the thick wood and were brought back to their right path by my music and my calls to my flock. "Aha," quoth I to myself, "these be the right rogues! these be the four-legged knaves and thieves whereof thy dad did tell thee!" For at first I took horse and man (as did the Americans the Spanish cavalry) to be but one beast, and could not but conceive these were the wolves; and so would sound the retreat for these horrible centaurs and send them a-flying: but scarce had I blown up my bellows to that end when one of them catches me by the shoulder and swings me up so roughly upon a spare farm horse they had stolen with other booty that I must needs fall on the other side, and that too upon my dear bagpipe, which began so miserably to scream as it would move all the world to pity: which availed nought, though it spared not its last breath in the bewailing of my sad fate. To horse again I must go, it mattered not what my bagpipe did sing or say: yet what vexed me most was that the troopers said I had hurt my dear bagpipe, and therefore it had made so heathenish an outcry. So away my horse went with me at a good trot, like the "primum mobile," for my dad's farm. Now did strange and fantastic imaginings fill my brain; for I did conceive, because I sat upon such a beast as I had never before seen, that I too should be changed into an iron man. And because such a change came not, there arose in me other foolish fantasies: for I thought these strange creatures were but there to help me drive my sheep home; for none strayed from the path, but all, with one accord, made for my dad's farm. So I looked anxiously when my dad and my mammy should come out to bid us welcome: which yet came not: for they and our Ursula, which was my dad's only daughter, had found the back-door open and would not wait for their guests. \_ HOW SIMPLICISSIMUS'S PALACE WAS STORMED, PLUNDERED, AND RUINATED, AND IN WHAT SORRY FASHION THE SOLDIERS KEPT HOUSE THERE Although it was not my intention to take the peace-loving reader with these troopers to my dad's house and farm, seeing that matters will go ill therein, yet the course of my history demands that I should leave to kind posterity an account of what manner of cruelties were now and again practised in this our German war: yea, and moreover testify by my own example that such evils must often have been sent to us by the goodness of Almighty God for our profit. For, gentle reader, who would ever have taught me that there was a God in Heaven if these soldiers had not destroyed my dad's house, and by such a deed driven me out among folk who gave me all fitting instruction thereupon? Only a little while before, I neither knew nor could fancy to myself that there were any people on earth save only my dad, my mother and me, and the rest of our

household, nor did I know of any human habitation but that where I daily went out and in. But soon thereafter I understood the way of men's coming into this world, and how they must leave it again. I was only in shape a man and in name a Christian: for the rest I was but a beast. Yet the Almighty looked upon my innocence with a pitiful eye, and would bring me to a knowledge both of Himself and of myself.