Alena Andrlová Fidlerová, Charles University, Prague, “Popular manuscript prayer books in Early Modern Bohemia”

Nominated and introduced by the author

Alena Andrlová Fidlerová studied Molecular Biology and Genetics at the Faculty of Science and Czech Language and Literature and English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. At present, she is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Czech Language and Theory of Communication of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. She specializes in the history of Czech language and literature in the Central European context and the history of orthography, rhetoric and stylistics, language thought, and manuscript communication, focusing on the Early Modern Period and the first half of the nineteenth century.

As a postgraduate student, she started to collaborate on projects mapping Early Modern manuscript texts preserved in Czech museum collections. These inventory works, inspired initially by the intention to broaden the source base for the still rather poorly known history of Czech language and literature in the Baroque period, resulted not only in the publication of Repertorium rukopisů 17. a 18. století z muzejních sbírek v Čechách [Inventory of 17th and 18th Century Manuscripts from the Museum Collections in Bohemia] I/1, 2 (A–J, Prague 2003), II/1, 2 (K–O, Prague 2007), III/1, 2 (P–Š, forthcoming), but also in a gradual re-definition of their goal and of the field of study itself. They showed quite clearly that Early Modern manuscripts cannot be conceived of as purely private papers or simply witnesses of an unfulfilled ambition of their authors to publish in print, but rather that in this period, manuscript communication represented an autonomous way of disseminating specific types of texts, which was largely independent from the print medium and favoured by certain groups of authors and readers. These findings proved to be in accordance with some recent American and European research in the field, which, however, focuses mostly on elite manuscripts from the 16th century and do not pay much attention to their later and more popular counterparts. Another closely related discipline, the history of the book, founded originally as a discipline studying the history of the creation, dissemination and social function of printed books perceived as material objects, began to be aware of manuscript books as long-term counterparts and competitors to printed books only recently.
From the methodological point of view, the article also represents an innovative approach in the context of Czech book history. Focusing almost exclusively on printed books, it grew out of the tradition of enumerative and descriptive bibliography and book science (Buchwissenschaft) close to the German tradition and even today to a certain extent prioritises the descriptive approach, concentrating on the detailed characteristics of individual incunabula and early printed books, studying the history of printing, describing the output of individual printing houses, analysing the relations between Czech and foreign printers etc. Although some members of the younger generation are methodologically closer to French book history tradition and specialize in the history of censorship or libraries or the cultural history of the book trade and circulation, even they focus almost exclusively on print production and pay hardly any attention to manuscripts. Manuscript studies are in the Czech Republic often understood as a constituent part of medieval studies: consequently the focus there is on medieval or illuminated 16th century manuscripts. Where Early Modern manuscripts (specifically prayer books and other manuscripts of popular origin) have been studied so far at all, they have usually been perceived as a constituent part of folklore and described from the point of view of ethnology and folklore study or religious history, stressing their aesthetic qualities such as their illustrations and their functions in popular piety and magic or in religious dissent. The present article, approaching Early Modern manuscript prayer books from the point of view of the history of the book, differs from previous and contemporary studies on the theme by approaching them as specific examples of entrepreneurial manuscript publication, by applying quantitative methods and by emphasising the social and gender status of their scribes and owners. Additionally, it addresses the issue of the mutual relationship between Czech and German language culture in Early Modern Bohemia, pinpointing not only similarities, but also differences.