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The Masquerade of History: Herman Bote’s Schichtboik

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In medieval city chronicles of northern Germany we find an interesting instance of polysemy in the word “schicht,” which is used to mean both “history” and “uprising.”¹ This semantic overlap suggests a strong association in the contemporary imagination between the processes of historical change and the manifestation of disorder. This association is reflected in the practice of city chronicle writing in the medieval and late medieval period, which frequently was undertaken in the aftermath of an uprising.² The chronicle documented the legitimacy of the restored order, and served the specific purpose of perpetuating the city’s present legal status, in the same way a legal document could. An extension of the council’s interests, the chronicle made sense of the uprising by relating it to a present, lasting and eternally valid Rechtszustand.³ Histories of the schichten thus contributed to the stabilization process following an uprising, by documenting the passage out of the medium of change and into the changeless state of Recht. The schicht—both the history and the uprising—concluded with the reestablishing of order.

In the discussion below I would like to explore what the implications of this polysemy might be for a German city chronicler of the late medieval


period, by looking at a specific example, Herman Bote’s *Schichtboik*. This work relates the history of six uprisings that occurred in the medieval Hanseatic city of Brunswick between 1292 and 1514. As the city tax collector and the son of a councilman, Bote was well-informed regarding city politics. This combined with his considerable literary skills—Bote is the author of numerous historical and didactic works, and most recently has been put forward as the author of the anonymously published chapbook, *Ein kurzweilig Lesen von Dil Ulenspiegel*—made him a uniquely well-qualified chronicler of Brunswick’s *schichten*. The *Schichtboik*, like Bote’s other works, reflects the political and social views of a loyal supporter of the city order, who attempts to justify this order in the face of forces threatening it from within and outside its walls. Although the work apparently was not commissioned by Brunswick’s city council, it is likely that they are Bote’s desired readers. Bote’s purpose in writing the *Schichtboik* was to admonish the council to work for the “common good” and thereby uphold the Hanseatic city order, its political privileges, trading rights and financial stability, lest the city fall prey to the territorial princes. Already in the foreword we read the cautionary warning, “weset vorsichtich,” that Bote reiterates throughout the *Schichtboik*. Bote appeals to the authority of tradition, both civic and religious, in arguing conservatively for the preservation of the old, “holy” order.

In the course of this paper I shall examine: first, how Bote’s diction reflects the polarity between the eternal, “holy” order and the historical realm of the *schichten*; second, how he conceptualizes the *schicht* as masquerade or what I would like to call here *Eulenspiegelei*, and finally, how Bote, in his concern to perpetuate order, begins to undermine the concept of civic order based on a corporative structure and the voluntary oath, replacing it with the concept of *Obrigkeit*, where the council maintains order through force. We will see that in so doing, Bote unwittingly lets masquerade infiltrate the holy order, which in turn renders the boundary between eternal order and temporal disorder porous, and opens up the possibility of writing history as a continuous narrative.

I

Bote’s chronicle typifies late medieval city chronicles in the strongly polarized diction he employs in depicting persons and qualities that tend to preserve order in Hanseatic Brunswick vs. those which do not. The city’s *Recht*, the laws and privileges that guarantee its free status vis-à-vis the princes, and which protect the trading rights that preserve the “common good,” is in the mind of the late medieval city chronicler a divine institution. Preservation of the city constitutes piety; those upholding this *Recht*—meaning both rights and laws—are typically designated as pious. *Recht* is defined and anchored in the voluntary oath, which obligates the burgher before God to an order with claims to divine legitimacy. The most blessed state for the city is one of concord—where council and burgher are united single-mindedly in their shared purpose of guarding and preserving “dat ghemeny ghut.” Bote conceives of concord as a sort of protective wall of common will circumscribing the city and its institutions, where individual interests are subjected to the whole. Thus the moral categories of humility and neighborly love are particularly important components of the civic piety that generates concord.

Perhaps nowhere else are the full dimensions of concord better visualized in the *SB* than in the processions performed in honor of Brunswick’s patron saint, Auctor. Clergy, councilmen and guildsmen processed

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6 “Sunderlichen to bedenckende unde vorttosetten dat ghemeny ghut” (*SB*, p. 299).

7 Schmidt: *Die deutschen Städtechroniken*, pp. 37, 86–89.

8 The following examples are representative: “Dut sulfte vorvoren ander *vrome lude* ock de huer huse bewarden der schichtmekers, dat se seghen dat se uth oren husen gingen unde drogen hernesch under den hoyken […]”. So wart dat van den *vromen laden* vormeldet, de de burgermester upwecked” (*SB*, p. 343 f); “*Frome lude*, de dusse vorrederie markeden, warnden de burgermester davore” (*SB*, p. 354; emphasis mine).
around the city walls annually, bearing the saint’s relics in a ritual meant to ward off danger from the city. The procession inscribed a holy circle, as it were, around the city, creating an image of impervious integrity, of concord. Not surprisingly, we find that the restoration of concord was often celebrated with a procession. In 1446 the council narrowly averted a violent uprising by a faction of the guilds, who were attempting to acquire the privileges of the patricians and wealthier guilds for themselves. The council decided to commemorate the patron saint’s gift of restored concord by having a new coffin for St. Auctor’s remains built of silver and gold, and to institute a second, new festival procession with the coffin. The procession was preceded by the renewal of oaths of fidelity to the council. Here the sign—the words of the oath and the ceremony—achieves sacramental significance as the manifestation of divine presence within the civic order. Sign and signified coalesce, lifting the city back into the stasis of eternal order.

Discord, on the other hand, arises when self-interest takes precedence over the common good. When pride, hatred, envy, or partisan behavior take root, this opens the door to uprisings. The protective wall of common will fragments, becoming permeable and susceptible to invasion, most frequently by the princes. Writes Bote in the introduction to the SB, addressing the leaders of the city:

Mysterious it is, and a [case of] great forgetfulness, that the honorable people in the great, powerful cities, which have been freed from the princes and granted privileges, should regard these things so little and so lightly and not consider that much evil arises in the cities by [such] contempt and neglect. In particular the common good must be considered and promoted: when the common good is guarded assiduously and the authorities of the cities feel kindly towards one another, I believe that God will not allow any discord or doubting to arise among them. But self-interest and envy are strong among the patriciate; they are partisan, so that secret hate takes a strong foothold, and after years—maybe ten, twenty, or thirty years—discord arises among them. By casting pearls before the swine, someone can vent his anger on his enemy. But then it comes about that both parties lose life and goods, frequently at the same time bringing the city under the control of the princes.

As the etymology of the word “twydracht” suggests, discord arises when “two-ness,” or a principle of division, asserts itself over the holy number “one,” in medieval theology associated with the unity of being in God. While Bote never engages in theological speculation concerning the numerical symbolism of Eintracht and Zwietracht, it is apparent that theological assumptions associated with two-ness and one-ness inform his depiction of Brunswick. City history is a series of discordant deviations from the blessed and honorable state of civic unity, of concord. Through discord the “sin of change,” the schicht, is initiated. Those who in promoting their own interests bring about discord and disorder are conceived of as betrayers; drawing on the Biblical parable, Bote also likens them to those who cast

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10 “Schicht der unhorsem borger” (SB, pp. 332–348).
pearls—the city order—before the swine. In other parts of the SB Bote compares them to the Jews who betrayed Christ. Nor is there any doubt in Bote’s mind as to what force inspires this sin. In the first schicht he writes that the devil entered the party of twelve and their guildmasters as they conspired against the council to turn control of the city over to the Welfian Duke Henry.

While Bote typically refers to the members of the council as “erbar,” his preferred designation for those in opposition to the council is “schalck.” Interestingly, this is also the byname most frequently given to that principle of discord and division, Till Eulenspiegel; in both cases the term marks its bearer as a transgressor against the holy order. “Schalck” had a considerably more negative meaning at the close of the Middle Ages than it does today, as can be seen, for example, in Luther’s translation of the “polluti” (Vulgate, Jer. 23:11) as “scheike,” and the “serve nequam” (Vulgate, Mat. 18:32) as “Schalkknecht.”

In the uprising of 1374 the citizens gather around councilman Til Boring’s house, prior to leading him to his execution; they are “alse de jodden umme unsen heren Jhesum in Caphas huse” (SB, p. 313). In the Ludeke Holland schicht beginning in 1488 the “party-brothers” gather to read together the recess just approved, which instituted the Twenty-four as an advisory body to the council. Bote describes them “als de jodden in Cahas huse in der stillenfridagesnacht” (SB, p. 360). See also reference to betrayal (yorredereye; SB, p. 394). In the Ludeke Hollant schicht we find an interesting twist: when the inner council (kokenrad) is too casual about the threats coming from Hollands party, Bote exclaims, “O Judas, wu vorredes tu dinen heren!” (SB, p. 354). Here the city itself becomes the analog to Christ; it is being betrayed by the kokenrad. Cf. Schmidt: Die deutschen Städtechroniken, p. 78, who observes this same diction applied to territorial princes who threaten the city order.

“Tō sunte Michaelis dage vor de duvel in dusse twolfe unde ore gyldemestere, unde worden des to rade, dat se wolden hebben eyen huldigen heren. Unde gyngen sammeliken hen to dem hertogen in de borch, so dat se sicke myt hertogen Hinnke vorbunden unde vorstrickeneden” (SB, p. 304 f). On the demonization of protest movements, see Ehbrecht: Bürgertum und Obrigkeit, p. 280.

“Dusse blotgirigen schelcke” (SB, p. 377); “so hedden de schelcke almyt dem stricke betoghern worden” (SB, p. 396). Bote also coins the word “schalckkankl” (SB, p. 461), meaning feignedly ill. This association of schalck with dissimulation and masquerade will figure importantly in the discussion below.


Already Ludwig Hänselmann noted that Bote’s statement was incorrect (SB, p. 317, n. 7).

discussion of the barkeeper Ludeke Erekes, a man known for his loyalty to the council, but who then became involved with two others in a conspiracy against the council. Mistaken identity, or the disjunction between sign and signified, consistently triggers the invasion of history into the holy order. The presence of an imposter destabilizes the relationship between sign and signified by challenging the established order’s monopolistic claim to proper signification. For the narrator there is never any question that the imposter’s signs are false, indeed recognizably so. But the temporary displacement of signs in the historical interludes of the *schicht* is able to occur because of the semiotic confusion generated by the imposter. In the Ludeke Hollant *schicht*, for example, Bote compares the city to a foolish ass that de-poses its true leader, the lion, from the throne, and replaces him with an imposter, the cat. While the cat may resemble the lion in its shape, says Bote, it is very unlike him “in its nature, its strength, and in its nobility.” But because the imposter bears a passing resemblance to the legitimate ruler, his invasion of the city order is at least temporarily successful. The reference to the cat alludes to the main actor in the *Schicht*, Ludeke Hollant, the spokesman for the group of twenty-four guildsmen who gradually take over the powers of the council. Hollant was a member of the furrier guild, which was traditionally represented by a cat. Bote relates that at the height of his power Hollant received a coat of arms from the Welfian Duke William, after which he considered himself to be descended from the royal house of David. Notes Bote bitterly: “de kattenkoppe mochte he do nicht mer seyn” (*SB*, p. 376). For Bote, Hollant’s signs of nobility are false, merely covering over his true cat/furrier being. Bote’s social conservatism is evident here: one’s social status is equivalent with one’s true being. Changes in status wrought through history (*schichten*) are conceived as false signs, mere temporary cloaks obscuring one’s true being, which will present itself as a true, concordant sign only when the old, eternal order is restored.

Reading the *SB* leads one to suspect that the deliberate creation of semiotic ambiguity constituted the incipient phase of political resistance and change. In a world where the repetition of ritual served to anchor again and again the temporal order in an eternal foundation, the Imitation of these rituals and Symbols by the “ unholy,” those not vested with privilege, constituted a challenge to authority. Generally, the first action taken by a resisting group was to swear an oath among themselves.21 This immediately created a crisis of legitimacy: for by imitating/repeating the oath-taking process, one put forward an alternative *Recht*, and *Recht* itself became ambiguous. Resistance groups frequently underscored this state of ambiguity by engaging in symbolic imitations of privileged ritual. In the first *Schicht* (1292) Bote discusses an uprising by the guildmasters, who, after swearing allegiance to their cause for a ten-year period,22 formed a twelve-man body which gradually usurped the functions and powers of the council. As a first step towards proclaiming their legitimacy, the Twelve established a regular meeting place, the “Pallas,” which served as an imitation *Rathaus*. Writes Bote: “dar gingen se uppe to rade unde to richte” (*SB*, p. 302; “they went up there to counsel and to judge”). After the Twelve had been in power for some time, the day of St. Auctor’s festival arrived. The ritual procession, in which council and clergy processed together with Auctor’s remains, traditionally was followed by the councilmen’s feast. The Twelve decided to hold an imitation feast, “dem Rade tovedderen,” writes Bote, and to make the offense entirely clear, they also fished in the waters reserved for the council.23 When the council then came to them in their “Pallas,” requesting “in a humble

19 “Ach du grave slyme essele, du dumme kumpan, drifst du deck sulven uth dynem weseende in de vorbistemisse und heipst der karten uppe dynes koniges stol, des lauwen, boren. Wuwol dat du so mendest, dat de katte dem lauwen gelick were an itijken ledematen, dat is wol so, over se sint gelick in ytijken dingen, sunder gar ungelick in der natur unde an der starcke unde in de edelloenix” (*SB*, p. 349).

20 When decrying Brunswick’s folly in exchanging the lion for a cat, note that Bote says “du [drifst] deck sulven uth dynem weseende in de vorbistemisse” (*SB*, p. 349, emphasis mine)—here Bote clearly associates “being” with the old order.


22 “So makeden de gyldemestere under sick eynen bunt unde vorstrickinge myt looten unde eden, teyn jar langk eyn by deme anderen to bylvende” (*SB*, p. 302).

23 “Do kernen de gildernester rnyt oren twolff en unde beiden ore sunderlike laghe dem Rade tovedderen, unde Stegen in des Rades watere unde leten darinne fysschen, unde slogen rum up, unde wur se dem Rade konden wat tovedderen don, dat deden se myt erneste unde frevele” (*SB*, p. 302).
and friendly manner,” writes the ever-partisan Bote, that the two groups
should advise in concord—“wenete twigerleye rad, eyn tigen den anderen,
dat brochte nicht ghudes in” (SB, p. 303; “for two councils, one against
the other, would come to no good”), the Twelve protested, “neyn neyn! sie
wolden so oren pallas nicht laten” (55, p. 303; “no, no, they didn’t want to
leave their Pallas”). They weren’t about to give up this symbolic challenge.
On the contrary, they promptly upped the ante by electing their own bur-
ghermaster and scribe, and creating their own seal.24

Resistance manifests itself here in the non-sanctioned reiteration of holy
signs, creating ambiguity, a state of semiotic flux, that makes the oath-in-
scribed city porous and susceptible to invasion and replacement of one
symbol-bearer by another. The forms of resistance in this schickt range from
the carnivalesque imitation feast—all the way to imitation Rathaus, Bürger-
meister, and seal. But the underlying structure of symbolic doubling is com-
mon across the scale.

It is interesting to note here the parallel structure in the TE episodes.
Typically Till invades the normal order by means of masquerade: he pre-
tends to be something he is not, and very often his prank rests on a sort of
verbal masquerade. Promising, for example, to sift flour in the moonlight,
as his master, the baker, has instructed, he proceeds to hold the flour sifter
out the window, letting the flour fall—in the moonlight, to be sure—onto
the muddy courtyard. Only after the damage is done, is it clear that Till
was an imposter, at which point the baker banishes the imitator, which points the imitator the shalck from his
premises, and order is restored.25 Bote based one of the Till episodes
on an occurrence also reported in the SB, and we see here again how im-
itiation is used to provoke and challenge authority. In the SB incident,26 a
conspiracy has been formed against the council. The conspirators have
created their own symbols of authority, including a banner bearing the image
of a rabbit. Ernst Bock, a supporter of the council, decides to humiliate
the conspirators. He catches a cat and sews over it the skin of a rabbit. He
then lets the imitation rabbit free near to where the conspirators are con-
venering. They are fooled, and chase eagerly after the “rabbit”. They recognize
their error only as the terrified cat, meowing pitifully, seeks refuge from its
pursuers by climbing a tree. The conspirators are angry. They realize the
prank was designed to shame them, they are convinced that the burgher-
masters were responsible, and agree to pursue their seditious plans with
renewed vigor. In the TE prank,27 Bote intensifies the problems of mas-
quarde, false identity, and symbolic ritual. He sets the prank in Leipzig in
the carnival season, the night before Lent was to begin. The furrier guild
was planning a traditional pre-Lenten feast, a ritual anchored both in the
religious calendar and in the social life of the guild itself. Till decides to
play a prank on them, in order to pay them back for what he considered to
be unfair treatment by a furrier in Berlin. He knew that the furriers were
particularly keen on eating wild game at their feast. In the spirit of carni-
val, Till dresses up as a peasant, and in this masquerade sells the cat—also
in costume—to the unsuspecting furriers. When the identity of the cat
becomes apparent, the furriers determine to kill the culprit who had so
insulted their honor. But Till’s masquerade saves him. Writes Bote, “Aber
Ulenspiegel het sein Kleider ußgezogen und sich verandert, das sie ihn nit
kanten.”28

In both the SB and the Till episode, masquerade serves as a means of
threatening honor. The facsimile invades and pollutes the symbolic ritual
of the group. If the group itself can be fooled by the facsimile, this calls into
question the reliability of their symbols. The possibility of a double, an im-
itator, makes the group’s honor, its legitimacy within the city order defined
by Recht, ambiguous. For this reason both the conspirators in the SB and
the furriers in TE are resolute in identifying and punishing the prankster.
His punishment would remove the ambiguity by establishing the illegiti-
macy of the prankster, thereby restoring the group’s honor and the validity
of its symbols.

24 “Unde satten do unde koren egen burmestre, egen schrivers, egene seggele” (SB, p. 303).
25 TE, pp. 60–62.
26 SB, p. 340.
27 TE, p. 160 f.
28 Ibid., p. 161.
It is no accident that Bote would set the Till prank, which depends on multiple masquerades, in the carnival season. In carnival we find the problem of signification being dramatized within the closely confined parameters of a festival, of playful or non-serious behavior. Carnival creates a moment of ambiguous signification when citizens don devils’ masks and create a world upside-down. Because carnival was closely controlled, it did not generally represent a threat to order. But in the SB it is clear that the moment of semiotic flux created by carnival could be exploited by those wanting to challenge seriously the city’s order.

In the Schicht of 1446, a group of the guilds, chiefly the drapers, pot-makers and furriers, joined together with some of the patricians in opposing the council. The conspirators engage throughout the schicht in carnivalesque actions designed to provoke the council, but at the same time sufficiently playful that the perpetrators can maintain their innocence. Bote notes that the first thing the conspirators did as a way of firing up enthusiasm for their cause, was to hold a feast and to run through the street wearing devils’ masks (schoduvel lopen), a practice common in Northern Germany at carnival and before Christmas. Later they created a general uproar in the city by dancing between clothframes and clattering with their spinning wheels (wulbogen), beating on pots, and “making such a racket throughout the city, that no one could hear (anything else)”.

In the midst of the turmoil the conspirators voiced their criticism of the city order:

And many of the party brothers, especially the pot-makers, took up rakes and hoes, ran with them into the streets and cried that they would tear up the hops; the gardeners should plant cabbage so they could buy a lot of it for a farthing. The other group called out that the Einbeck beer was too expensive; its price should be lowered to make it affordable for the poor people, and the poor people should get as good beer as the rich, otherwise they would hack the kegs in the beer cellars to pieces.

But they restricted their rabble-rousing to the nighttime, where the darkness masked their identity, and when reprimanded by the authorities, their excuse was, “We did nothing wrong and wished to harm no one.” Outside the context of carnival, carnivalesque behavior represented a potential threat to the city’s order. Masquerading as masquerade, the conspirators could provoke the council and at the same time point to the masks, the carnivalesque paraphernalia, and claim they meant nothing serious by it.

By the time carnival arrived, the council had a real cause for anxiety, as word had spread that the conspirators had formed a plan to overthrow the council. As mentioned earlier, they had made a banner depicting a rabbit. The plan was to cry out, “Hu hase hu” (SB, p. 337), as they proceeded to throw out the council. With the city on edge, the conspirators took advantage of the carnival season to express yet another ambiguous challenge to the council. The servants (knappen) of the conspiring guilds fixed paper tags onto the hats of the girls with whom they went dancing through the streets of Brunswick. On the tags were painted little axes, beneath which was written, “Ick hauwe, ick hauwe” (SB, p. 338). The blacksmith servants, whose guild was loyal to the council, felt particularly insulted by the slogan and decided they would pay back the offense. They, along with the cobbler servants, hid axes and knives under their cloaks, planning to ambush the dancers as they came by and “chop and stab, so that the rhymes with the axes should fall off them.”

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29 SB, pp. 332–348.
31 “Se [...] lepen schoduvel unde danseden in den lakengespannen, unde snarden myt den wulbogen, unde de beckenslegere snurden unde schurden myt den becken, dat belderde de stad dorch dat neymet horen konde” (SB, p. 336).
32 “Ock vele der pertiebrodere, sunderlichen de beckensleger, de nemen hercken unde krauwele, unde lepen darmede uppe der strate unde repen: se wolden de röden utheren unde de hoppenrancken, de gardeners scholden dar kol planten, dat se vele koles konden vor eynen ferling kopen: de ander pert de repen: dat Einbeches beer dat were to dure, me scholde dat mynner setzen, dat arme lude ok Einbeches beer drincken konden, unde me scholde dem armen so ghtur beer tappen alsen dem riken, edder se wolden de vate in dem beerkele entwey hauwen” (SB, p. 337).
33 “Se en hedden nicht quades vorhanden unde wolden neymede neyn leyd don” (SB, p. 337).
34 “So wolden se uppe den dans hauwen und steken, dat one de rym myt der barden scholde entvallen” (SB, p. 338). The German is ambiguous: ”myt der barden” could modify “rym”; it could also be understood adverbially: ”so that with axes the rhymes...”
blows that night between the two groups, because the guildmasters of the blacksmiths and cloggers, having gotten wind of the planned ambush, informed the burgher masters, who came and requested the servants to let the others dance.\(^{35}\) The servants then were “obedient”,\(^{36}\) notes Bote, and went their separate ways.

The incident illustrates well how carnival offered opposition groups an opportunity to express their challenge to authority. The challenge of the little painted axes hangs in the balance between serious and non-serious discourse, depending on whether one “reads” it as masquerade, a playful sign with no serious signification, or as a serious sign anticipating a violent deed. But in its very ambiguity the masquerade opens a channel for invasion and violent upset. The response of the smiths and cloggers illustrates how this invasion could take place. The council averts violence by defining the action of the conspirators strictly as play: “Let the others dance,” is their order to the smiths and cloggers.

The smiths and cloggers did not let things rest here, however, and came up with a plan to insult the conspirators as they felt they had been insulted. Again the preferred method is imitation: they, too, pinned slogans on their caps, such as: “Now you’re wearing rhymes, soon you’ll be tending swine,” or, “I huff, I puff.”\(^{37}\) And when the time came to celebrate the next feast, the clogger and smith servants decided they would wear the slogan “blode hase” (SB, p. 339; “stupid rabbit”) pinned to their sleeve as they danced the sword dance in town. The sword dance traditionally was associated with both masquerade and rowdiness: the carnivalesque situation of ambiguous signs provides the opportunity for oppositional political expression. Again the council intervened, fearing that an uprising would occur, which the conspirators would use to seize power. They forbade the sword dance, and again the clogger and smith servants were “obedient,” writes Bote.\(^{38}\)

The authorities in medieval Brunswick carefully regulated carnivalesque activities because of their potential to spawn disorder.\(^{39}\) This is because disorder begins, as we have seen, when order, the relationship between sign and signified, is destabilized or threatened. Imitation of symbolic ritual or the masquerade of carnival creates this moment. A shift in power can occur if the masquerade can displace the original sign and claim legitimacy for itself: it then becomes “serious,” and the original sign is banished or destroyed. In Bote’s preferred narrative of restoration, such shifts in legitimacy do not occur: the old order always is eventually restored, the impostors always unmasked and banished. The dissidents are by nature incarnations of Till Eulenspiegel, whose only intent is to disrupt and perpetrate *Eulenspiegel*, acts of violence against a holy order.

III

Ultimately the defense of the council Bote puts forward in the SB begins to undermine the corporative structure of the city based on the voluntary oath. Let us consider again the uprising of 1446, the “schicht of the disobedient burghers”. Bote introduces this *schicht* with the following animal analogy:

O what a bad shepherd is he who allows the insidious wolf to run among his animals, where he brings them to ruin and kills them. O you thoughtless shepherd! Don’t you know that a wolf is never a good sheepdog? He’s a thief and a robber, and has no regard for the sheep,
that they are useful and good for people and the world. Sheep and other animals are tended badly by wolves, although it often occurs in the cities that wolves are put in with the sheep and allowed to run about like a sheepdog. Thus the city comes to eternal ruin, because the wolves become so vicious that they destroy and kill sheep and shepherd. For this reason, you leaders of the city, be careful and hold your subjects under force, and do not allow them free will, because free will and unpunished misdeeds turn subjects into clever, biting wolves. Do not believe the oaths and vows of the common person. They are like the tame wolf, who’s not so tame after all: his father’s nature still motivates him. And if the burgher is not held under force and within the regimen, this leads to a disobedient burgher.  

Bote draws his analogy of the wolves and the sheep in all probability from the New Testament reference to wolves as false prophets: “Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Mat. 7:15). Those who threaten the rule of the council are by definition dangerous impostors; again we see Bote’s conservative view of the social order in identifying the city rulers as “shepherds”—legitimate rulers—and all pretenders to their power as wolves in disguise. Bote proposes that the legitimate order can be maintained only through force; granted any “free will,” their subjects immediately will try to overthrow the regimen. Any appearance of orderliness on the part of the subjects is just that—mere appearance, a false sign obscuring but superficially the true signification, the true being of the subject. By nature “untameable,” their rapacious character must express itself once the strictures of force are lifted. For this reason Bote argues that the oaths and vows of the common people—and by them he must mean here all those excluded from rulership—are unreliable. They are false signs, masquerade, Eulenspiegelei. To trust them is as foolish as trusting Till’s ambiguous language: it inevitably leads to destruction.

In his determination to provide the council with unshakable legitimacy, Bote is forced to drive a wedge into the original foundation of city order, the oath. Traditionally the oath played a critical role not only in the maintenance of city order but also in changing it. Ehbrecht has argued that the uprisings in late medieval Hanseatic cities probably constituted a legitimate form of civic dialogue and change. They seem to follow predictable patterns, including oath-taking and public demonstration in the form of the “banner-loup”. Schilling has suggested that the uprisings were understood to be a return to a “gemeindlich-genossenschaftliche[er] ’Urzustand’” necessitated by what the citizenry considered a constitutional breach on the part of the council:

Die politische Gewalt lag während dieses Urzustandes wieder bei der Gemeinde. Ja, indem die Bürger—häufig auf Glockengeläute hin—”wehrende Hand,” d.h. bewaffnet, auf dem Marktplatz zusammenliefen und sich gegenseitig einen Eid schworen, konstituierte sich die bürgerliche Gemeinde neu im Wehr- und Schwur verband.  

But this shift of authority away from the council is precisely what Bote believes must be avoided. His solution, to disqualify the oath of those socially excluded from council membership, insures that resistance to the oversten never gains legitimacy.

With this conclusion, however, the notion of a divine civic order seems to be yielding to a more secular notion of order perpetuated through  

40 “Och, wat is dat eyn bose quat herde dede den slusperen wulff let lopen morwil-ligen mangk sin fee, dat he dat vorder ve unde to dode make. O du lose herde, westyu nicht, dat de wulff ney nghut schaperhunt en is? he is eyn deyff unde eyn rover, unde achter nicht de schape, dat de deme mynschen unde der weride nutte unde ghut don. Myt wulffen wart offfel gehot noch Schape efte ander fee, wu wolv dat yd vaken schud in den steden, dat me de wulff sey set dey de schape unde let se darby lopen alse schaper-hunde. So kumpt denne de stad darvan in ewich vordarff, wente de wulffer werder so odervadich, dat se de schape unde den herde tosamede vernichten unde to dode brin-gen. Hirumme, gy oversten der stede, weset vosichtig unde holdet juwe untersaten in dwange, unde latet one nicht oren frigen willen, wente de frige wille unde ungestraffet offeldat de maket uth den undersaten slubetsche wulffé. Lover neynen meynen lunden noch ede unde loftfe, se sint also de tarne wulff: de is so sere nicht geternet, synes vaders art dat roret one. unde wan de borger nicht in dwange sin unde in regemente, dat maket ungenorsem borger” (SB, p. 332).

41 Bürgertum und Obrigkeit, pp. 282–284.

force. For the state of concord has been redefined: no longer the harmonious integration of sign and signified, it now is necessarily tainted by the presence of unreliable oaths, of Eulenspiegel— which we know to be the mark of schichten, and of history itself. Concord has become mere appearance, the forceful imposition of law and obedience onto an essentially discordant citizenry. While appealing to the traditional, divine source of legitimacy, at the same time Bote supports a more modern view of authority within the city, a view that appeals to princely power for its model. In so doing he offers a means for preserving the city’s order within history.

Bote was apparently unaware of this inner contradiction in the SB. But it comes close to the surface of his consciousness, I believe, in the narrative form Bote finally gave his work. After having related the schichten in accordance with his absolute moral/theological categories, Bote then wrote an appendix, “Von der pagemunte,” in which he explains the financial causes of discord in Brunswick. “Von der pagemunte,” considered to be a peculiarly “modern” part of the SB, discusses roughly the same time period as covered in the SB (it begins a little later with events in 1412), but in the form of a continuous narrative of economic history.

In this book [the SB] I have described the discord in this city of Brunswick. As to the cause of this discord, anyone can check this [by looking at] those places where “discord” occurs. But in particular it has also come about and is related to the penny and groschen, and how bad currency came to be circulated in Brunswick, and how the Brunswick penny thereby lost value.

Bad currency and the Brunswick penny’s loss of value again are Problems directly relating to the destabilization of sign and signified. With currency one sees most clearly how value can be exchanged: currency itself is based on the principle of exchange. The Brunswick penny was not able to compete successfully, was devalued, and the Brunswickians themselves came to prefer foreign currencies to their own. Value thus is not anchored in eternal norms, but is fluid, changing, and therefore conceivable only in historical terms. As a narrative of continuous change and exchange, “Von der pagemunte” submerges Brunswick entirely into the temporal realm; it is an historical account unpunctuated by the silences of eternal stasis between the schichten. The narrative of exchange forms one explanation for developments within Brunswick, the narrative of restoration another. Bote does not attempt to form a synthesis between the two narratives: they exist side by side, and are indicative of the inner contradiction within the work itself.


Joachim Ehlers has observed this appeal to the old to justify the new: “Bote steht in diesem Prozeß ganz auf selten des so verstandenen ‘modernen’ Rates; was er als altes Herkommen preis, ist nichts anderes als die Rückprojektion bestimmter politischer Ziele aus seiner Zeit in die Vergangenheit.” (Hermen Bote und die städtische Verfassungskrise seiner Zeit, p. 128.) Bote’s emphasis on “obedience” throughout the SB, as well as his impersonation of city authority in the form of a lion (“Wente [=denn] eyn lauwe is eyn konigk aller dere” [SB, p. 349]; my emphasis) both point towards this princely view of authority.

SB, pp. 409–450. “Von der pagemunte” (“On Currency”) actually follows the fifth schickt (Ludeke Hollant’s); Hänsemann (Chroniken der niedersächsischen Städte. Braunschweig. Vol. 2, p. 278 f.) has suggested that Bote originally ended the book here at about 1510, and then added later the sixth schickt, “Uployp von twen schoten” (SB, pp. 451–468), which discusses events occurring in 1513–14.
which in turn is symptomatic of the transition period in which Bote lived. The SB reflects the uneasiness of a late medieval mind, whose categories of the divine and demonic, of truth and duplicity, are absolutely divided, but which increasingly is confronted with the fragility, even the arbitrariness of order as it takes shape in history.