

# Ways of Knowing in Early Modern Germany

Johannes Praetorius as a  
Witness to his Time



Gerhild Scholz Williams

WAYS OF KNOWING  
IN EARLY MODERN GERMANY

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# Ways of Knowing in Early Modern Germany

Johannes Praetorius as a Witness to his Time

GERHILD SCHOLZ WILLIAMS  
*Washington University in St. Louis*

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1 Wondrous People: Early Modern Diversity ( <i>Anthropodemus plutonic</i> )	25
2 Demonology and Topography: Locating Giants and Witches	67
3 The Global and the Local: Wonders in the News	111
4 Gender and Class: The Woman's Lot	169
Conclusion	219
<i>Bibliography</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	243

# List of Figures

I.1	<i>Zodiacus Mercurialis</i> (1669): fireworks at the wedding of the elector of Saxony, April 26, 1668, at the castle of Schlackenwerder	10
I.2	<i>Zodiacus Mercurialis</i> (1669): Frontispiece	15
1.1	<i>Anthropodemus plutonic</i> (1666): title page	28
1.2	<i>Anthropodemus plutonic</i> (1666): frontispiece	37
2.1	<i>Daemonologia Rubinzalii</i> (1662): title page	71
2.2	Giant's tooth unearthed at Krems, Austria, in 1645 ( <i>Theatrum Europaeum</i> V)	74
2.3	<i>Blockes-Berges Verrichtung</i> (1668): title page	86
2.4	Witches' Sabbath ( <i>Blockes-Berges Verrichtung</i> )	94
3.1	<i>Adunatus Cometologus</i> (1665): title page	116
3.2	<i>Zodiacus Mercurialis</i> (1667): title page	122
3.3	<i>Zodiacus Mercurialis</i> (1667): frontispiece	123
3.4	<i>Theatrum Europaeum</i> , vol. 2 (1646)	125
3.5	<i>Theatrum Europaeum</i> , vol. 3 (1644)	127
3.6	Wedding festivities in Vienna (December 1666)	128
3.7	<i>Catastrophe Muhammetica</i> (1664): title page	129
3.8	Fashion fools	130
3.9	Shipwreck and life on the Isle of Pines ( <i>Zodiacus Mercurialis</i> , 1669)	132
3.10	The anointment of Sabbatai Sevi	138
3.11	The Great Fire of London (1666)	141
3.12	Wonders ( <i>Zodiacus Mercurialis</i> , 1669)	145
3.13	Wondrous rain of grain (1670)	146
3.14	<i>Theatrum Europaeum, Zehender Theil</i> (1677): title page	147
3.15	<i>Theatrum Europaeum, Zehender Theil</i> (1677): frontispiece	149
4.1	<i>Dulc-Amarus Ancillariolus</i> (1662): title page	172
4.2	<i>Der Jungfrau-Hund</i>	173
4.3	The siege of Magdeburg	177
4.4	More fashion fools	181
4.5	Smokers [ <i>Tabaktrinker</i> ]	196

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The completion of this book took longer than I had anticipated. The topic proved challenging for many reasons: accessibility of sources; sparseness of secondary materials directly related to Praetorius; and having to follow up on his multifaceted interests. Still, my goal of bringing this interesting writer to the attention of a wider, specifically English-speaking audience has been accomplished. I am very pleased that Ashgate Publishing has accepted this book into their new series on *Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity*.

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To

Richard Arthur Roloff

# Introduction

“Always news, rarely good news,” writes Johannes Praetorius, “but if things always remained the same, God would not have to send us so many unheard-of warning prophets in all the elements.” This statement very effectively illustrates Praetorius’s conception of himself as a writer and interpreter of his times. His vast output in print indeed begins and ends with his self-assigned task of informing, teaching, cajoling, and amusing his readership.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on contemporary culture, on the issues of gender and class and the political and intellectual concerns of his day, he constructs a panorama in print in which wonders, the occult, the emerging scientific way of thinking, and family and social mores are recurrent themes. For Praetorius, as for many writers of the seventeenth century, knowledge, the question of who knew what and how well, was as much a social issue as an intellectual challenge. These “ways of knowing,”<sup>2</sup> that is, how different types of realities were constructed and events reported, led to forms of inquiry and confirmation, “ways of telling,” that provided writers like Praetorius many ways of making events, however implausible, decipherable.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the present study focuses on the ways in which Praetorius reflects on the convergence of old and new, gender and social order, science and the occult, local and global, communication and the interpretation of wonders.

Throughout his work and certainly in those texts chosen for this study, Praetorius confronts us as an assiduous reporter of contemporary European and pan-European events and scientific discoveries, a critic of common superstitions, as much a believer in occult causes as in wondrous portents and in God’s communication with His people. His writings must be seen as his attempt to understand, and to clarify for his audience, the political, social, and intellectual uncertainties of his century. In the face of diverse interpretive authorities and of the varieties of structures of knowledge that interacted and conflicted with each other in the public arena of knowing, he makes great efforts to order and arrange his oeuvre so that his diverse readership will find it profitable and enjoyable to purchase and to read.<sup>4</sup>

Praetorius witnessed an age that, more than most before or since, was marked by an intensely productive, sometimes hostile, intertwining of old and new. It was not the victory of progress over tradition or superstition, until recently considered quintessentially seventeenth century, that inspired Praetorius to write for a growing literate public, and me to write about him. Rather, I was prompted by what

Schmale calls the “noch immer” and “auch schon” [the still and the also already], the “Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen”<sup>5</sup> [the simultaneity of things usually not simultaneous], which more insistently marks the seventeenth century than any other time before or since.<sup>6</sup> It seems appropriate to turn to this author because the seventeenth century has come to stand for a way of reflecting about history and change that resonates with us and affects our own thinking.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly expending their military, economic, and religious resources in a vast and ongoing effort at religiously and economically dominating the known world, yet ever mindful of the social and political volatility in the European theater, the powers of the seventeenth century reflect their own deep ambivalence at their imperial grandeur in their awareness, as Hardt and Negri put it, that this was a “fragile, baroque century” (77). Praetorius’s writings afford a glimpse of the much-discussed “crisis of the seventeenth century.” While the debate among historians about the “crisis” or “crises” of the seventeenth century has considerably cooled since the early 1980s, “crisis,” referring to various aspects of the century’s politics and culture, regularly appears in the literature.<sup>8</sup> It is here, in the century’s turmoil, that Hardt and Negri locate the cradle of modernity, the birth of modern Europe.<sup>9</sup> Shaken by seemingly interminable wars, changing political alliances, and undulating military fronts, the seventeenth century continues, to this day, to frustrate all but the most detail-oriented historians. People were stricken with illness and hunger and frightened by rapidly declining fertility rates that, along with countless war-related deaths, emptied the continent of its population by the hundreds of thousands. However, while Praetorius frequently refers to a population decimated by illness and death, and while the loss of life from many causes was significant, newer research has shown that the actual decline in population numbers was not uniformly spread across the continent. Some areas of central Germany suffered significantly more than others. But all of Europe recovered its pre-Thirty Years War population level by the early eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Non-scientist and nonexpert though he was, Praetorius observed with great acuity and sensitivity the political and military conflicts, the economic and social forces that pitted the great European powers against each other in ever-changing alliances. Moreover, he reacted with much acerbic criticism to what he saw and read about the relations between the social classes and between the sexes. The miseries of the times contrasted sharply with a much-ridiculed interest in and passion for elaborate and costly *alamode* (French fashion).

According to the traditional paradigm which governed Praetorius’s thinking, mankind constituted the microcosm, which mirrored and was included within the macrocosm, that is, God and all of His creation. Contemporaries believed that this century, more than any previous one, was marked by the appearance of uncounted prodigies and wonders, of comets and celestial portents. Either predicative or explicative, these comets and wonders accompanied the course of world events like an endless, if confusing, conversation between mankind and the divine, assiduously elucidated in print for all who wanted to understand.<sup>11</sup> In the minds of

Praetorius and his time, war did not begin with a single event, such as, in the case of the Thirty Years War, the infamous “Prager Fenstersturz.” Rather, this especially brutal and extended series of conflicts was presaged by many prodigies, most notably the appearance of not one, but three terrifying comets. In the early modern period, comets were a pan-European preoccupation. Praetorius mentions the comets of 1618 several times in his *Adunatus Cometologus* (1665); in his chronicle of 1666 he notes that the English court of King James I was also much disquieted by this celestial phenomenon, believing that the death of Queen Anne had been foretold by one of the comets.<sup>12</sup>

Still, in spite of terror, moral outrage, religious fervor, social prejudice, lax morals, and the century’s seemingly perpetual wars and skirmishes, Praetorius occasionally lightens the burden for his readers by letting them laugh. This is, for the most part, a socially prejudiced, xenophobic, and misogynist laughter, but it is laughter nonetheless.<sup>13</sup> In Chapter 4, we will encounter two especially instructive examples of this sense of seventeenth-century humor—in this case humor related to sexuality and gender—that was also Praetorius’s.

On the basis of his two most famous works, the witch tract *Des Blockes-Berges Verrichtung* [Tales about the Blocksberg] and the three-volume *Daemonologia Rubinzalii* [Rübezahl demonology] on the famous Silesian giant Rübezahl, Praetorius has been thought of as primarily a collector and recorder of superstitions and popular tales.<sup>14</sup> Also mentioned occasionally in scholarly studies<sup>15</sup> is his bulky *Anthropodemus plutonic* [Tales about strange and wondrous people], while studies about popular literature and the development of early modern newspapers mention his tracts on comets. Furthermore, a true child of his time, he is noted as making frequent mention of the Turk, whom he and his contemporaries called the arch-enemy of early modern Europe. His casually prejudiced interest in Jews and Gypsies also surfaces in many of his tracts.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Michael Schilling, in his entry on Praetorius in Walter Killy’s *Literaturlexikon* (1988–93), wistfully comments on the dearth of attention paid to this writer who, as a reporter on his century, applied himself with considerable talent, energy, and breadth of knowledge to his task.<sup>17</sup> This book has been written to remedy this dearth.

For most of his life, Praetorius lived and worked as a writer in the city of Leipzig. Born in 1630 in the small Brandenburg town of Zethlingen, he came of age during the Thirty Years War (1618–48), the defining geopolitical event of the seventeenth century.<sup>18</sup> As the fortunes of the “Great War” (or the “German War,” as Praetorius also calls it) waxed and waned, Praetorius’s family was repeatedly forced to flee into the surrounding woods from the plundering and marauding foreign and domestic troops.<sup>19</sup> Throughout his oeuvre, he returns to this war and its effect on the people who lived through it, their anxieties about what was and what was yet to come. He bears witness to his times, surveying events, manners, sufferings, and wonders for his literate audience. The numerous editions of his works printed during his lifetime signal his popularity; they are a treasure trove for studies of seventeenth-century literature and culture. Especially popular, most

often as facsimile reprints, are his collections of ominous portents and stellar movements as well as his *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung*, which influenced Goethe's *Faust*, the timeless drama of sin and redemption. His *Daemonologia Rubinzalii* was important in the evolution of the Romantic fairytale. Moreover, the attention paid to it as been much influenced by the nineteenth-century passion for sources (*Quellenforschung*) and for research into folklore and fairytales.<sup>20</sup> As the present study seeks to demonstrate, Praetorius's work has much more to offer to the contemporary reader who seeks insights into the issues and events that dominated the seventeenth century and, according to Negri and Hardt, make it congenial to our own.

Like many of his contemporaries, Praetorius recognized that he lived in exciting times. The Neapolitan writer and philanthropist Giovan Battista Manso (1569–1645) hailed the seventeenth century for its discoveries of new and hitherto unknown worlds, in which, in its own way, it rivaled the momentous sixteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Praetorius anticipated comparably rapid advances in all areas of knowledge for his century, spurred on by the invention of wondrous machines like the telescope and the microscope that opened outward and inward horizons. The study of human physiology was leading to a better understanding of the workings of the human body, and research in chemical processes was creating more efficacious medicines. Praetorius and his contemporaries felt that their century would be the envy of ensuing generations. At its close, the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) concurred that it indeed had been a century of great and important changes brought about by the emergence of many new inventions and ideas (to which he himself had significantly contributed).<sup>22</sup>

Interest in this distant century has been driven by increased scholarly attention to the history of science, to seventeenth-century theories of the creation and manipulation of life, and to the areas of knowledge generation and management, including the evolution of encyclopedism. The century's wars, plagues, discoveries, and expansionist drive, its extravagant fashions, its physicality, religious intolerance, and grinding poverty prompt our curiosity. The way new science coexisted in the same (re)searching mind together with traditional and occult beliefs, the endless factional strife, the fear of and fascination with the strange and the wondrous and the many new beginnings—all these speak to the twenty-first-century student and scholar with great intellectual urgency.<sup>23</sup>

Succeeding generations have alternately admired, pitied, and scorned the seventeenth century's purported love of exaggerated forms in literature and the visual and architectural arts, its fascination with the occult, its passion for collecting. Frequently, students of literature, unfamiliar with the period's aesthetic and linguistic ambitions, have tended to turn away from Baroque narrative, bored by protagonists who wandered, fought, loved, and suffered through interminable sequels. Some observers smiled in admiration, while others dismissed their predecessors' efforts at joining natural philosophy, history, mathematics, rhetoric,

and theology in a universal science of knowing. Some disparaged the century's eagerness to collect, order, and categorize the diverse specimens in its overflowing chambers of wonders [*Wunderkammern*], early forms of our museums. Even while later generations of writers and philosophers made use of the information gathered in the century's vast encyclopedias and memory books, literary scholars and historians tended to view these versions of early modern databases—the endless lists of disparate items arranged alphabetically or numerically, commentaries, and lists of quotes taken from authorities—with only mild interest, bordering on condescension. Only of late have the efforts of these workers in the production lines of knowledge assembly, these constructors of huge compendia variously called *Collectanea*, *Theatrum* literature, or commonplace books, received the attention they deserve. These treasure troves of knowledge represent an ideal of depth and breadth of knowing that moves beyond narrowly focused areas of specialization.<sup>24</sup>

Praetorius's substantial and varied print productions are an excellent guide to this century's diversity of knowledge. His European outlook and reflections on the increasing political, social, and cultural heterogeneity of his world offer fascinating insights. Among the seventeenth-century authors who also wrote extensively and in a similar manner—Martin Zeiler (1589–1661), Erasmus Francisci (1627–94), Georg Harsdörffer (1607–58), von Eberhard Happel (1647–90) most prominent among them—Praetorius has produced the most compellingly eclectic oeuvre. It shows him to be a fascinating witness to his time, one who shares with his public what he sees, hears, and reads. The generic multiversity (chaos even), his ways of telling, are as varied and challenging to the modern reader as his expansive ways of knowing must have been to his contemporary audience. The audience for whom he writes is, for the most part, literate and, judging by some of his Latin tracts, even learned. He writes for men and women whose ability to read he champions, even praises. Women, especially young girls, who are able to write meet with considerably less enthusiasm. He finds that too much time is wasted with the writing of specious love letters.

Most of Praetorius's tracts are written in German, some in Latin; occasionally he mixes both languages. An example of this early modern form of code switching, as amusing as it is enlightening, is his discussion in the *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung* of the purported ability of witches to make weather, which he juxtaposes with a scientific tract (in Latin and quoted in full) by his contemporary Athanasius Kircher about lightning and thunder, magnetism and meteors.<sup>25</sup> Passing review in his writings are the century's disparate and conflicting images, which expose both change and continuity of long-held beliefs. Praetorius is ultimately revealed as an author who, like so many of his contemporaries, addresses an educated but nonspecialist audience; like his readers, he is able to accommodate assumptions and expectations that we find fascinating, in part because they seem to us mutually exclusive.

### Praetorius's Life

Praetorius's birthplace of Zethlingen was located on a much-traveled road across the northern part of Germany. His family is believed to have inherited rights to the local inn (*Krug*) and, possibly, to the office of mayor. His father and stepfather enjoyed a level of education and prosperity that placed them among the leading citizens of Zethlingen. Before Praetorius enrolled at the University of Leipzig at the age of 22, he attended the Lutheran Gymnasium in Halle, where Christian Friedrich Franckenstein (1621–79) was headmaster. Praetorius's mention of Franckenstein in the *Anthropodemus plutonic* (1666) suggests that his poly-historical interests may have first been awakened by this teacher, who, in 1652, was appointed professor of Latin and history at Leipzig University.<sup>26</sup> Also important in this context is Praetorius's association with Christian Daum (1612–87), principal at Zwickau Gymnasium, with whom he corresponded until 1671. As one of the famous universal intellects of the day, Daum assembled a large library (7,680 volumes), which became a source of distinction for the city of Zwickau even during his lifetime. Daum provided printed resources for many of his humanist colleagues, among them Jacob Thomasius (d. 1684), rector of the Leipzig Nicolaischule and father of the more famous critic of the witch persecutions, Christian Thomasius (1655–1728). He may have done the same for Praetorius.

In 1659 Praetorius was named Imperial poet laureate, a distinction that allowed him to identify himself as such in all his publications. This honorific could be bestowed by any duke or count palatine (*Hof- und Pfalzgrafen*) so designated by the German emperor. However, Helmut Waibler was unable to identify who conferred this honor on Praetorius.<sup>27</sup> In the same year Praetorius married Barbara Vater, from Saalfeld, and the couple made their home in the Leipzig Paulinum, a residence hall for students and faculty at the university. They had two daughters, one of whom died at the age of 12 of the plague. Praetorius's efforts at securing a teaching position at Leipzig University seem to have been unsuccessful. Nevertheless, he never gave up his residence at the Paulinum and remained in close association with the university, its faculty, its students, and presumably its library resources. Judging by his frequent mentions of the pressing scarcity of money, enduring difficulties in financing his print productions, and the vexing need for protection from those who would appropriate his intellectual property without his permission, it must have been a challenge to support himself and his family through his writing. On the basis of several dedicatory, occasionally pleading, prefaces directed at members of the House of Alvensleben, a prominent noble family that owned land around Praetorius's birthplace, Waibler conjectures that this family may have provided financial support for Praetorius's studies and his publications.<sup>28</sup> In 1680 Praetorius died at the Paulinum of the plague.

## What Did Praetorius Know?

Praetorius's vast oeuvre signals his agreement with the amazement expressed by Manso and Leibniz about the variety of wonders, discoveries, and inventions that marked his century's progress. He eked out a living as an independent author writing about these and many more items that he judged newsworthy. He discussed comets and monstrous births, preternatural beings, and the political machinations of the powerful. Often employing an ironic, even sardonic tone, he indicted the suffering brought about by the century's scourge, its incessant wars, which brought disease, hunger, death, and social upheaval. He eloquently deplored the attendant disorder, the decline in moral, social, and civic values. Reflecting the nascent nationalist sentiment, he praised his homeland, the Holy Roman Empire, with patriotic fervor even while chastising the deterioration of religious practices and beliefs and lack of Christian charity.

While Praetorius was not active in bringing about any of the vast changes in the thinking of his and subsequent generations, he did record and comment on many of his century's great thinkers and history-making events. He diligently noted the phenomena associated with what came to be called the Scientific Revolution, which continues to account for much of the century's allure (even if Steve Shapin says that it never took place).<sup>29</sup> Rather than creating new knowledge or altering the ways in which his contemporaries understood the movements of heavenly bodies that they observed through the telescope, or the worlds made perceptible through the microscope, Praetorius gathered, reported, commented on, and (when worried about intellectual property, his and others) occasionally ranted about what went on in his vicinity and far away. He mediated between people's lives and the phenomena and events that they lived through and that often terrified them. He was aware of the new explanatory models, but this awareness did not significantly alter his beliefs or, presumably, the beliefs of his readers. For example, Praetorius, in his tract on comets, the *Adunatus Cometologus* (1665), disparages Johann Hevelius (1611–87), one of the most famous astronomers of his day. Hevelius had discovered the regular and consequently predictable appearance of comets. Praetorius does not deny the validity of this hypothesis, but he is not prepared to give it pride of place over other ways of interpreting such signs; there was still, he points out, another kind of knowledge to be gleaned from such observations, namely knowledge of what God intended for his people.<sup>30</sup>

Praetorius's world and his work were constructed of wonderment at the magical universe and the speculations of the new science. Praetorius weaves the informational threads spun by the many news writers from great changes and persistent traditional views into a vast conceptual tapestry.<sup>31</sup> He lived in a world where experiences, information, and news from within and without whirled about in ways that were unsettling to him and his contemporaries. Together, old and new inspired variant explanatory patterns that provided different keys to open new doors to different modes of understanding and of representation. Secrets of nature

and the established ways of knowing continued to exist alongside the excitement generated by all manner of new scientific, geographical, and astronomical discoveries; all of these vied against the linguistic, rhetorical, and categorical controls for readers' and scholars' attention and for dominance in the public consciousness.<sup>32</sup> These ways of knowing did not exclude each other or impede each other's movement toward alternative models of explanation.<sup>33</sup> As is apparent in Praetorius's oeuvre, new discoveries in all areas of knowledge did not consign past ways of knowing to oblivion just yet. Whether worked out by scholars or surmised by the laity, the concept of the world as a system of signs that carried many, often conflicting, meanings was captured in an explosion of writing energy that encouraged, even demanded, the simultaneous beholding and understanding of dissimilar explanatory models. Order and disorder in nature kept on signaling grave future events, great misfortunes, and horrific disasters. Moreover, as natural signs of transcendent origin, they provided messages about what God had in store for his people. Even when, as so often happened, predictions made according to these signs were not borne out by events, it had to be assumed that the signs had meaning.<sup>34</sup> Natural history, a relatively recent addition to the forms of knowledge production of the seventeenth century, introduced a plethora of new information as a result of explorations abroad and experimentation at home.<sup>35</sup>

Praetorius also devotes considerable energy to issues of gender and class. He criticizes fashion and the conduct of men and women, specifically young men and women of the well-to-do burgher class. He alternately ridicules and chastises married and unmarried women, damsels (upper-class young women) and maids (lower-class servant girls and women). His tracts show the misogyny of his age alongside remarkably sensitive portraits of the life of the early modern urban woman.

Like many of his contemporaries, Praetorius believed that the physical state of the world could be compared to the moral history of mankind; thus, cosmology, history, theology, and all the science of the day conjoined in imparting information about the human condition to the observant mind. Praetorius's life was spent sharing this information with his readers.<sup>36</sup> Beyond what can reasonably be treated here, his oeuvre explodes with the exuberance of linguistic and generic hybridization that makes his "way of telling" a hallmark of the literary energies of his age.

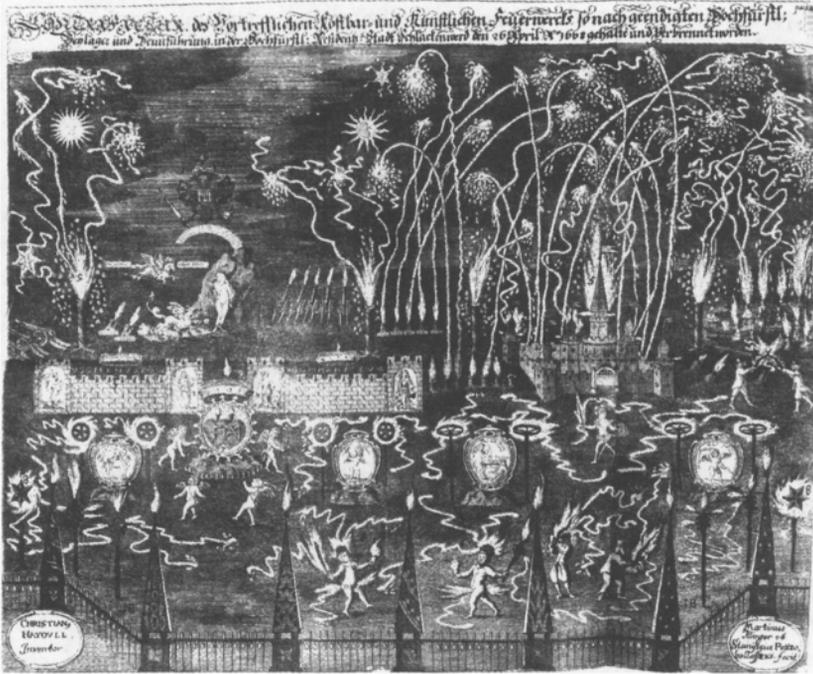
### **Where and How Did Praetorius Get His Information?**

Waibler comments on the great significance of Praetorius having spent his adult life in physical proximity to the University of Leipzig's library and the Bibliotheca Paulina (958). For reasons unknown to us, he never became a member of the faculty. In 1543, several decades after its founding, the monastic library of the Pauline order had been added to the university's holdings, initiating a series of acquisitions of both private and institutional libraries that significantly improved

the quality of the library's holdings. The library's expansion was slowed by the Thirty Years War, but picked up again with the acquisition of the personal collection of the theology professor Johann Hülsemann (1602–62) through the agency of the university's chancellor, Johann Adam Schertzer (1628–83). Subsequently, Schertzer bequeathed his own collection of three thousand titles, large by the standards of the day, to the university.<sup>37</sup> By the time Praetorius made use of it, the library contained many important titles dealing with early modern astronomy. Aside from holdings in the traditional fields of theology, philosophy, law, and medicine, we find mention of an edition of Paracelsus's *Wunden- und Artzney Buch* (Cologne, 1571) and a tract by Joachim Camerarius the Elder on *Astrognosis*. In all, 165 titles have been recorded that relate to this area of knowledge so very popular during the seventeenth century.<sup>38</sup>

Early modern universities, whether Catholic or Protestant, were accredited by the Holy Roman Emperor. They were devoted more to disseminating than to producing knowledge. On the whole, research, as we understand it today, took place elsewhere, in private laboratories at the courts of princes and the homes of wealthy burghers. However, this situation was changing. Scholars have pointed to the increasing importance of mathematics, of experiential physiology, which was making inroads in the medical schools, and of educational reforms like those introduced by Philipp Melanchthon in Germany.<sup>39</sup>

During Praetorius's lifetime, Leipzig became an important link in the transfer of European print communications. Aside from having a university that attracted young men and their teachers, whose intellectual and instructional needs encouraged book production and consumption, the city offered the additional advantage of being located on a communications axis connecting the city with important printing centers all over Europe, especially Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Prague, Vienna, and Paris. Moreover, contemporaries ascribed great importance to Leipzig's biannual book fairs, which ensured the regular supply of new publications, as well as to the biennially published reports on current events, the *Meßrelationen*.<sup>40</sup> Early in the seventeenth century, Leipzig hosted two large fairs, the *Ostermarkt* (Easter) and *Michaelsmarkt* (Fall); a few years later a New Year's Fair was added. This meant that *Relationen* reported on events covering a period of about four months.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the books available at the university, those that he could borrow from other people's libraries, and the *Meßrelationen*, we will see that Praetorius also made extensive use of daily, weekly, monthly, or annual news publications, such as *Zeytungen*, local and international *Relationen*, *Diarien*, and *Avisen* that had become widely available by the middle of the century.<sup>42</sup> Over 30 German cities produced regular newspapers in German; some produced several.<sup>43</sup> The publications of various national and international learned societies also began to appear in Leipzig and other important cities during the second half of the century.<sup>44</sup> These journals opened windows to the world by providing reports on politics, wars, social concerns, and demographic changes, as well as on strange natural phenomena, monster births, and murders.



**Fig. I.1** *Zodiacus Mercurialis* (1669): fireworks at the wedding of the elector of Saxony, April 26, 1668, at the castle of Schackenwerder

In addition to news publications, Praetorius employed traditional sources of information gleaned from books. It would be impossible to list all the authors, past and present, on whom he drew for his tracts. He carefully cites his sources, frequently noting the title, chapter, and page. Praetorius was a critical reader, occasionally engaging in a discussion with his source, as, for example, when he formulates his arguments for and against Paracelsian theories of the alchemical production of a person, the homunculus.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, though he traveled little during his adult life, Praetorius surveyed a vast terrain with the help of information delivered to him in print products—knowledge that came to him in memory traded in the language of the quickly expanding periodical print trade.<sup>46</sup> The desire of an increasingly literate readership to be informed about social, economic, political, religious, and cultural phenomena brought forth a network of communications media in which Praetorius actively participated. From his vantage point in Leipzig, Praetorius surveyed Saxony and the vast expanse of the German Empire. His writings also reveal an intense friendly interest in the independent Netherlands; he is much less sympathetic toward France and Spain, and his reporting on England can be termed downright

hostile. His acute awareness of the importance of all of these powers to European and German affairs makes them loom large in his writings. He comments in somewhat less detail on Northern and Eastern Europe. However, the Near East figures prominently as he discusses the Turkish threat to the Italian city states, especially Venice, and to the German empire. Finally, he never moves beyond the most general remarks about the New World, the Far East, and Africa. Africa figures mainly as a source of slaves for the plantations of the emergent colonial powers of England, the Netherlands, and France, and for the war efforts of the European and non-European powers. It is difficult to conjecture why, in contrast to his intense engagement with the wondrous, with astronomy and the occult, he remains so diffident about, even uninterested in, distant lands, despite the rich travel literature that was available.

In Praetorius's writings we can observe the emergence of a nascent European consciousness prompted by pan-European wars, evolving communication networks, and the ensuing interest in the complex power politics, in which national and international alliances changed almost daily. Geographic distance, national borders, and the speed with which news traveled increasingly affected professionals and entrepreneurs who made decisions about who delivered what kind of news, at what price, and to which location, in order to ensure the uninterrupted flow of information.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Vielschreiber and Polyhistor?***

Later critics often described Praetorius as *barocker Vielschreiber* [baroque mass writer], *Buntschriftsteller* [writer of entertainment literature], or *Polyhistor*, reflecting the fact that Praetorius wrote copiously on many and disparate subjects. The first two terms are somewhat ironic and condescending, and *Vielschreiber* especially seems unfair, since, by today's standards, most seventeenth-century writers known to us produced huge bodies of work.<sup>48</sup> The term reflects more the way that succeeding generations of writers and readers assessed the activities of their predecessors than any meaningful judgment on Praetorius. Early modern authors delighted in turning out endless series of novels. They collected, reordered, and organized knowledge in vast compilations variously called *Theatra*, *Universalbibliotheken*, *Pandecten*, or commonplace books, and they arranged countless specimens of natural wonders on the shelves of their museums (*Wunderkammern*).<sup>49</sup> This impulse to collect and exhibit must be understood as analogous to the impulse to provide, in writing, a mental space for such collecting activity.<sup>50</sup> Along with this impulse grew the need to find structures and organizing principles for arranging materials rationally in linguistic order as well as in real spaces. The order and structure of books should convey the order of information they contained.<sup>51</sup> We will see that Praetorius delighted in using various methods of structuring a huge body of material that was always in danger of escaping his authorial control. He

frequently employed acrostics and alphabetical and numerical lists, or a combination of all three. The magic of the alphabet proved especially enticing to him and his contemporaries. As early modern linguists, they were thrilled that from only 23 letters could be constructed endless words and works.<sup>52</sup> The logic of these indices brought together disparate elements of knowledge that could be arranged and rearranged at will. Indices and cross-references were favorites; “vide” [go see] is one of Praetorius’s most frequent directions to his readers. Self-citations provided user-friendliness and added to the reader’s enjoyment even as he was confronted with huge volumes of, often unconnected, information. The writer became a repository of knowledge (*Datenspeicher*) that, as a part of an endless chain of information, reached back into the past, and, with the writer’s help, forward into the future.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, as a *Vielschreiber*, Praetorius simply fit well into his century.

The term *Polyhistor* describes a scholar with “fachübergreifender Kompetenz” [competency across disciplinary boundaries],<sup>54</sup> whose work is characterized by universality and inclusiveness.<sup>55</sup> The model for such a scholar is Praetorius’s contemporary Daniel Georg Morhof (1639–91), whose magnum opus is the *Polyhistor sive De notitia et rerum commentarii* (1688) and its continuation (1708).<sup>56</sup> Intellectuals of the time dealt with knowledge that reached across disciplinary boundaries. Conversely, because of their very expansiveness and inclusiveness, polyhistorical writings are often considered superficial, the work of scholars dealing with too much information to meet high standards of scientific discipline and informational depth.<sup>57</sup> A more positive early modern evaluation saw the *Polyhistor* as well versed in languages and literary history, employing his knowledge for the amelioration of his readers’ moral character.

Characterizing Praetorius as a *Polyhistor* is somewhat problematic. This term has been ascribed to him by more recent scholarship; as well as can be determined, his contemporaries never referred to him by that name or portrayed him as such. He does, however, frequently cite Zeiler, Harsdörffer, Fincel, Gesner, and other encyclopedists who are variously called *Polyhistor* or *Polymathus*, which caused readers to group him under the same category. Waibler correctly describes Praetorius as being influenced by the polyhistorical temperament of his time. He wrote within the tradition of polyhistory, and he corresponded with men who were called *Polyhistor*, such as Daum or Thomasius.<sup>58</sup>

If order and method are the fundamental requirements for being a *Polyhistor*, Praetorius does not qualify. He does fit, however, if we place greater importance on compiling and rearranging exemplary information for the improvement of knowledge, morals, and manners. In fact, only in this way can his disparate oeuvre be arranged into some kind of literary and historical logic and understood as a unity that subsumes historical awareness (*memoria*); the reasonable assessment of information provided; the thirst for new knowledge, for the wondrous and strange, for fashion and manners (*curiositas*); and education of the young and great caring interest in familial relationships. He thus represents a type of *Polyhistor*, not the

organizer personified by Morhof, but the gatherer, whose ultimate goal is an ideal completeness that will allow access to all learning and knowledge.<sup>59</sup> Praetorius is conversant with wide areas of knowledge on diverse subjects; he endlessly quotes the works of famous and less famous writers. This does not mean that he “sees with alien eyes, speaks with alien lips, and writes with alien pens.”<sup>60</sup> Rather, he makes all these “aliens” his own. He fits them into his time and his world, producing an oeuvre that is less learned and scholarly than it is entertaining and informative and, to some extent, personal; in other words, worthy of our attention.

### The Selection

Responding to the challenge that a writer like Praetorius represents to the contemporary reader, I have chosen several among his works that speak most effectively to his time, his culture, and his ways of knowing. They are also the most entertaining examples of his “ways of telling.” I decided against a thematic approach, which would have made this book vastly repetitive. Even as it is, I sometimes have to return to information given in previous chapters for want of clarification. Each chapter employs a distinct focus, according to the varieties of knowledge that Praetorius wants to convey to his reader. Interpretive approaches thus include reflections on early modern anthropology, demonology, topography, gender, morality, social and cultural prejudices, science, natural philosophy, astronomy, and history. This study will afford us a glimpse at Praetorius’s own take on world events, that is, his struggle to make sense of the political shifts and economic changes that he sees prefigured in the widely reported appearances of wonders, freak births, comets, and phantom battles in noonday skies. Responding to his need to sell his books, Praetorius frequently refers to already published works of his, as well as to works still to appear, including some that, as far as we know, never did appear. Some of his works were printed under pseudonyms, some of which he later acknowledged as his; the authorship of others has still not been positively identified. This lacuna is especially vexing in the case of the *Traumbuch* mentioned in several of his works.<sup>61</sup>

Some of Praetorius’s writings are available in modern editions, most often reprints of the originals. Furthermore, the Herzog-August-Library in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, the Yale Microfilm Collection, the Jantz Collection of Duke University, and many other research libraries, public and private, have extensive holdings of his works. A detailed list of libraries is included in Helmut Waibler’s biography and extensive bibliography, which provides convenient access to a wealth of information about Praetorius and his oeuvre.

The first chapter examines the voluminous *Anthropodemus Plutonic / Das ist / Eine Neue Welt-Beschreibung / von allerley / Wunderbahren Menschen* (1666), a description of the world’s peoples that is neither new nor covers the whole world. It does, however, provide a fascinating look at the coexistence of magic, natural

philosophy, theology, alchemy, astrology, geography, and history in the mind of a man who is neither a scientist (or alchemist) nor a theologian, but a writer fascinated with the strange and the wondrous and the science of both.

Praetorius's interest in topography, demonology, and the witch is the subject of the second chapter. Here we turn from Praetorius's more general review of wonders and the preternatural to the specific natures of giants and witches. He explores these in his tract about the mountain spirit Rubezahl, the *Daemonologia Rubinzalii* (1662), and his well-known and influential demonology *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung*, (1668). Both tracts reflect the increasing interest in geographical writings that accompanied the second wave of journeys of exploration and conquest. These new journeys, marked more by global and imperialist ambitions than by a quest for knowledge, were significantly supported by the great seafaring nations in an effort to secure access to potential resources and markets overseas. Travelogues and geographies of the world, past and present, were published and sold in great quantities.<sup>62</sup> The tracts, however, keep geographically very close to Praetorius's home, northern and eastern Germany.

The third chapter presents Praetorius as a reporter and interpreter of celestial signs and current events. It also highlights the enormous impact of regular and periodic news on European literary and historical writing. I review one of his cometological tracts, the *Adunatus cometologus* of 1665, as well as his three detailed calendars, the *Zodiacus Mercurialis / Das ist: / Jährige Europaeische Welt-Chronick* [The zodiac of Mercury, that is: the annual European world chronicle] (1666, 1667, 1668). These four tracts, thematically and generically the least unified, are interesting for the information they convey as well as for Praetorius's frequent use of the emerging popular medium of the contemporary newspaper (*Relationen* and *Avisen*). He also relied heavily on compendious collections of news, such as the *Theatrum Europaeum*, gleaning from them a wealth of information on local, national, international, and global events. Praetorius also gathered and published several wonder tracts in a collection entitled *Deutschlandes / Neue / Wunder-Chronik* [Germany's new chronicle of wonders] (1678).

The fourth and last chapter of this book is devoted to Praetorius's take on gender and class, his observations concerning the social realities of young girls and grown women, of husband and lovers. Here he is less concerned with strange, wondrous, and amazing phenomena, though these do figure in the context of birthing and lying-in. We will smile at young women's struggles as they navigate early modern social conventions described in the lengthy, funny, and sometimes acerbic observations on the virtues and merits of maids compared to those of young unmarried ladies in the *Dulc-Amarus / Ancillariolus: / Das ist / der süß-wurtzligte und saur-ampferigte / Mägde-Tröster / Erzwingend / Daß die Mägde bessere Thiere seyn . . .* [The bittersweet consoler of maids where it is proven that maids are superior animals (loosely translated)] (1663).<sup>63</sup> As predictably as young women become wives and mothers, we will turn to married women, specifically to

a new mother's life, which Praetorius observes and satirizes in the *Apocalypsis / Mysteriorum Cybeles. / Das ist / Eine Schnakische / Wochen-Comedie* [A birthing chamber comedy] (1662). Through the eyes and ears of a male listener hidden behind a door, this tract observes the interactions of several groups of women who visit a new mother after the birth of her third child during her six-week lying-in-period. The reader will not miss the underlying message of both tracts: the gendered ways of knowing are tied to the purported need for social discipline, not only for woman of all ages and classes, but for urban society in general.

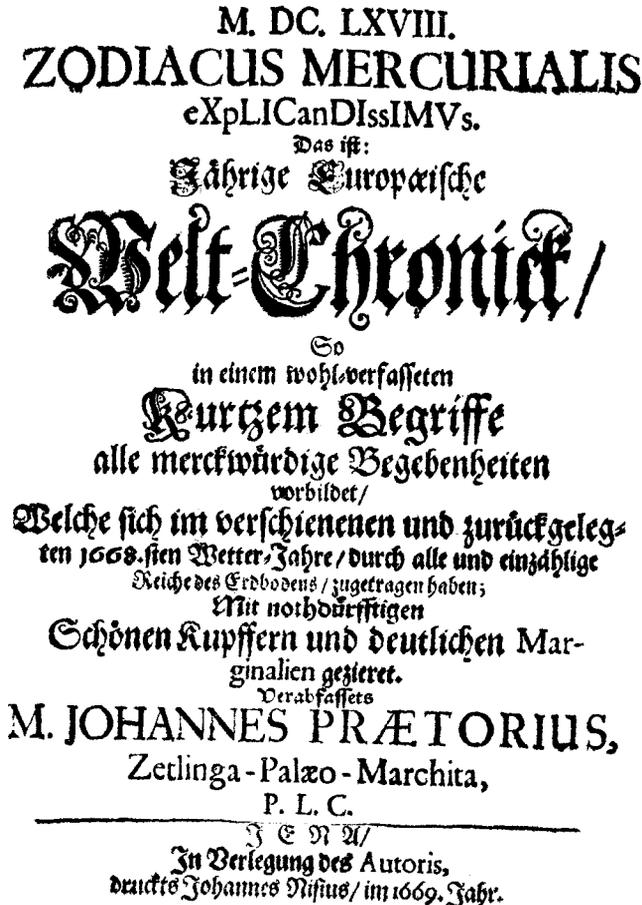


Fig. I.2 *Zodiacus Mercurialis* (1669): Frontispiece

While Praetorius struggled to keep his faith and his sanity in the face of the vigorous, often violent convergence of old and new, occult and scientific, he strove to satisfy the expectations of his audience by providing rational and comforting

explanations that might help to understand and thus to reconcile to the trajectories where God, nature, and humankind meet.

Finally, this book's goal is an exposition of seventeenth-century culture through the eyes and pen of a prodigious if sometimes confusing writer. It is not a study of sources and origins. These have been explored in significant detail by scholars like Schenda and Dünnhaupt. Moreover, even though Praetorius mentions gathering tales for his *Rübezahl* trilogy, for this study it is not particularly enlightening to discern whether he really collected such tales from travelers coming through Leipzig or whether he used written materials that were based on oral stories and had been distributed in the new print media or by the carriers of these media, the *Boten* [postal messengers]. Furthermore, even though he used oral sources, Praetorius tended to disparage them as belonging to the world of women's gossip and of the lower classes. This study focuses on the scientific and cultural discourses, of ways of knowing in Praetorius's work. While not entirely neglecting Praetorius's ways of telling, I have chosen to remain focused mostly on the documentation of influences of and connections with contemporary cultural discourses. I made this choice with the realization that identifying the complete congruence of the oeuvre thematically, linguistically, and structurally would be historically and culturally unsupportable and do injustice to the exuberant incoherence that is also an important part of the creative potential of this age.

## Notes

HAB = Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel.

- 1 "Immer was neues—Selten was gutes . . . [D]enn bliebe man bey dem Alten / so würde der eyverende Gott ietzt wohl nicht so viel unerhörte Straff-Propheten zu uns senden / aus allen Elementen." He goes on: "Nehmlich / hat man nicht von dem grausamen Erdbeben im Welschlande etc. gehört? Seynd nicht Feuer-Kugeln und andere brennende Prodigia gewesen? Ist nicht das Wasser an etlichen Orthen in Bluth verwandelt worden?" [[H]ave we not heard about the horrible earthquake in Italy, etc.? Have there not been balls of fire and other fiery wonders? Has not water been changed into blood in several places?] (A ij). Johannes Praetorius, *Sacra Filamenta Divæ Virginis, oder Naumburgsche Plumerant-farbene Faden, daß ist / Unerhörtes Prodigium, Von der Hoch-blauen Seide / So bey Laucha um Naumburg / unlängst . . . gefallen gewesen* (Halle in Sachsen: Melchoir Oelschlegeln, 1665), 1 [HAB 180.21 (6) Quod].
- 2 Taken from the title of John V. Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology, and Medicine* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001).
- 3 Andrew Barnaby and Lisa J. Schnell, *Literate Experience: The Work of Knowing in Seventeenth-Century English Writing* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), Introduction.
- 4 Barnaby and Schnell, *Literate Experience*, 12.

- 5 Hans Blumenberg, *Aspekte der Epochenschwelle: Cusaner und Nolaner* (Frankfurt: SuhrkampTB Wissenschaft, 1976).
- 6 Wolfgang Schmale, "Das 17. Jahrhundert und die neuere europäische Geschichte," *Historische Zeitschrift* 264(3) (1997): 607. Schmale discusses the tension between a "noch immer" and an "auch schon" that marks the so-called crisis of the seventeenth century.
- 7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), note in their discussion of the rise of Eurocentrism, "European [and now, by extension, American, GSW] mastery is always in crisis—and this is the very same crisis that defines European modernity" (77).
- 8 For example, see Hartmut Lehmann on the century's spectrum of religious allegiances, which vacillated between orthodoxy and nonconformism, in "Zur Erforschung der Religiosität im 17. Jahrhundert," in *Krisenbewußtsein und Krisenbewältigung in der Frühen Neuzeit—Crisis in Early Modern Europe: Festschrift für Hans-Christoph Rublack*, ed. Monika Holtz and Sabine Hagemajer (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 3–11, here 5–6; see also the essays in Hartmut Lehmann and Anne-Charlott Trepp, eds., *Im Zeichen der Krise: Religiosität im Europa des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 152 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Wolfgang Behringer, "Veränderung der Raum-Zeit-Relation: Zur Bedeutung des Zeitungs- und Nachrichtenwesens während der Zeit des Dreißigjährigen Krieges," in *Zwischen Alltag und Katastrophe: Der Dreißigjährige Krieg aus der Nähe*, ed. Benigna von Krusenstjern and Hans Medick, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 148 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 39–83, for bibliography.  
 Aside from the texts noted above, see Heinz Schilling, *Die neue Zeit: Vom Christenheitseuropa zum Europa der Staaten. 1250–1750*, Siedlers Geschichte Europas (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 1999), 273, 274 ["Krisenphänomene"], 275 ["modernisierende Veränderungskrise"], 278; Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis, 1598–1648*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Geoffrey Parker, *Empire, War and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (London: Penguin, 2002), 5; Ronald G. Ash, *The Thirty Years War: The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618–1648* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 26–34, 47–57.
- 9 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*: "Modernity itself is defined by crisis" (76); "In the seventeenth century the concept of modernity as crisis was definitely consolidated" (77).
- 10 See Schilling, *Die neue Zeit*, 265; see also the bibliographic information in von Krusenstjern and Medick, eds., *Zwischen Alltag und Katastrophe*, "Einleitung," note 4; Benigna von Krusenstjern, "Seliges Sterben und böser Tod: Tod und Sterben in der Zeit des Dreißigjährigen Krieges," in *Zwischen Alltag und Katastrophe*, ed. von Krusenstjern and Medick, 469–97; Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1750*, New Approaches to European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 60–61, 207.
- 11 Sara J. Schechner, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Christina Hofmann-Randall, *Monster, Wunder und Kometen: Sensationsberichte aus Flugblättern des 16. bis 17. Jahrhunderts*