

# GERMAN LITERATURE – Postclassical Period

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

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## Medieval German Literature

### Overview

The origins of German literature, unlike the origins of the Romance literatures, retreat into the margins of the Roman Empire. In his *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus provides us with our first extensive account of the German tribe, the Germani, and gives us the sense of a warlike but socially organized people, whose strength and virtues were in some ways to be emulated by the increasingly decadent Romans. From that first semi primitive exposure to the great world, to the first individual voices of German literature, would require a millenium of tribal jostling, linguistic development and branching out from the native Germanic tongues—which were totally foreign to the Latin language families—and arguably a synthesis of pagan with the gradually adopted Christian culture, from which would come the rich and original textures of the literature we now consider German.

The first genres to meet us, in this new literary world, are epic and lyric poetry. The epic tradition in Middle High German, the Classical period (1180-1250), is of two distinct kinds: court and popular. The court epic is written for the nobility—with noble patronage—and is accordingly polite and cultivated, frequently sprinkling French words; the tales that are told typically—as in the epic *Parzifal*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220)—concern chivalry, and the high honor and courtliness culture implied by chivalry. The popular epic tradition, exemplified by *The Nibelungenlied* (1200 A.D.), blends ancient Germanic tales of warfare, revenge, and court life, with an overlay of Christian values, which blend forcefully, providing a ‘folk epic’ closer to Homer’s work than was anything produced out of the court tradition. The traditions of lyric poetry, in mediaeval Germany, are preserved from two major groups: Minnesingers, ‘singers about love,’ who emulated French troubador poetry, and whose greatest exemplar was Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230 A.D.); and Mastersingers, who flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries, were best represented by Hans Sachs, and who were an organized guild of professional traveling poets. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) will stand in here for the brilliance of the German mystical tradition, which expressed itself in a poetry that qualifies it as the highest literature.

## Nibelungenlied

**Archaic German Literature.** The origins of German literature lie in Norse and Icelandic saga, and embody rich traits: powerful mythological forces in conflict, ruling the world; subtle as well as bellicose personal relations embodied inside that mythic dynamic. Some of this material is neither Christian nor drawn from Classical Antiquity and therefore opens us to perspectives on humanity and nature which have not been incorporated in the mainstream of Western culture. These valuable insights take us back to pre-Christian Europe, with its rich cache of ‘pagan’ (largely Norse) myths, and yet that stratum of early Germanic poetry is itself blended with the growing chivalric tradition of Christian poetry, which is by the time of the *Nibelungenlied* proving to be a growing component of the ‘Germanic life view.’ Thus we find, in this epic collated and written down around 1200 A.D., a culturally blended creation, with work of extreme antiquity—dragon-slayer motifs as in the tales of Perseus in Ancient Greece—joined to Romantic chivalric love, jealousy, and vengeance.

**The narrative of the *Nibelungenlied*.** The work in question embodies historical memories that go back to the court of the Burgundians, who in the 4th century A.D. were foes of the declining Roman Empire; and continues on to incorporate elements of different stages of very late German mediaeval culture, as well as a great deal of fairy tale (*Maerchen*) and folk legend. (It might be added that the manuscript itself has been through numerous historical periods: lost entirely by the end of the 16th century; rediscovered in the 18th century in a manuscript dating from the 13th century.) If at times the epic seems to be bursting at its seams, and running over its edges in repetition and randomness, that is because the narrative pays homage to so many different traditions. It is also, incidentally, because the consistent verse structure—four rhyming lines, each divided by a caesura, the fourth line consistently longer by one stress; over an extent of 10,000 lines—serves wonderfully to keep the ear focused on the stanzaic structure.

**The main characters.** The narrative centers on a few main characters—whose force, and sharp profiles, hold the fabric together. Siegfried the dragon slayer is an archaic form, the hero ready for action but prudent and ultimately a tragic victim; the hero who has rendered himself invincible—except for one tiny Achilles’ heel—by bathing in the blood of the dragon he has slain; Siegfried’s eventual bride, Kriemhild, whose beauty and primal sense for revenge—she avenges the murder of her husband, Siegfried—are from archaic legend; the villain hero Hagen, who is both a image of faithful vassalage, and of unreserved brutality; the dwarf Alberich, to whom the treasure of the *Nibelungs* is confided, and who is himself right out of the jester entourage of any mediaeval prince; the crafty Etzel (Attila the Hun, in fact) at his Hungarian court, the center of the intrigue which undergirds the second Part of the poem. In this lengthy and passionate pastiche of plots and sub plots, in which love, treachery, magic and courage compete for our fascination, we are immersed in the world of mediaeval Germanic feeling, nostalgic and contemporary pride mixed, and find ourselves engaging with those fierce archaic virtues of pride, independence, vengeance and stubbornness which were uncompromising to a degree fascinating to our more ‘complex’ age.

**The German *Iliad*?** The material of the *Nibelungenlied* has played to many tunes: Wagnerian opera, National Socialist self-glorification, and today, of course, cartoons and pop Siegfried songs. In the end all of these efforts miss the intra-secular richness of this historical pastiche, which has been called the German *Iliad*, in the sense that like Homer the anonymous author of this German lay brings together historical materials and personages from many different versions of his own culture.

## Reading

### *Primary source reading*

There are numerous excellent translations into English: three are included here:

Hatto, A.T., *The Nibelungenlied*, 1964.

Raffel, Burton, *Das Nibelungenlied*, 2006.

Edwards, Cyril, *The Lay of the Nibelungs*, 2010.

### *Secondary source reading*

McConnell, Winder, ed. *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, 1998.

### *Further Reading*

Mueller, Jan-Dirk, *Rules for the Endgame: the World of the Nibelungenlied*, 2007.

### **Original language reading**

Ehrismann, Otfried, *Nibelungenlied: Epoche—Werk—Wirkung*, 1987.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Betrayal, jealousy, and revenge all play central roles in the *Nibelungenlied*. It is as though, even in the fairly 'archaic' literary milieu of this work, the drivers are all drawn from the passions. Can you isolate the elements that seem to you most clearly part of the 'archaic' world? Can you do a little research on the Burgundians, whose role as enemies of the Romans in the 5th century, takes us into classical antiquity?

We noted that the *Nibelungenlied* has been called the *Iliad* of Germany. Do you feel that this German epic, like Homer's, concentrates on a single topic—like The Battle of Troy—and makes salient points about that topic, like the moral decision facing Achilles at the end of the epic? Or is the *Nibelungenlied* more diffuse than the *Iliad*? Less in control of its diverse assembled materials?

**EXCERPT** Beginning of *Nibelungenlied* [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1151](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1151)

In the Netherlands there grew the child of a noble king (his father had for name Siegemund, (1) his mother Siegelind), (2) in a mighty castle, known far and wide, in the lowlands of the Rhine: Xanten, (3) men called it. Of this hero I sing, how fair he grew. Free he was of every blemish. Strong and famous he later became, this valiant man. Ho! What great worship he won in this world! Siegfried hight this good and doughty knight. Full many kingdoms did he put to the test through his warlike mood. Through his strength of body he rode into many lands. Ho! What bold warriors he after found in the Burgundian land! Mickle wonders might one tell of Siegfried in his prime, in youthful days; what honors he received and how fair of body he. The most stately women held him in their love; with the zeal which was his due

men trained him. But of himself what virtues he attained! Truly his father's lands were honored, that he was found in all things of such right lordly mind. Now was he become of the age that he might ride to court. Gladly the people saw him, many a maid wished that his desire might ever bear him hither. Enow gazed on him with favor; of this the prince was well aware. Full seldom was the youth allowed to ride without a guard of knights. Siegmund and Siegelind bade deck him out in brave attire. The older knights who were acquaint with courtly custom, had him in their care. Well therefore might he win both folk and land.

Now he was of the strength that he bare weapons well. Whatever he needed thereto, of this he had enow. With purpose he began to woo fair ladies; these bold Siegfried courted well in proper wise. Then bade Siegmund have cried to all his men, that he would hold a feasting with his loving kindred. The tidings thereof men brought into the lands of other kings. To the strangers and the home-folk he gave steeds and armor. Wheresoever any was found who, because of his birth, should become a knight, these noble youths were summoned to the land for the feasting. Here with the youthful prince they gained the knightly sword. Wonders might one tell of this great feast; Siegmund and Siegelind wist well how to gain great worship with their gifts, of which their hands dealt out great store. Wherefore one beheld many strangers riding to their realm. Four hundred sword-thanes (4) were to put on knightly garb with Siegfried. Many a fair maid was aught but idle with the work, for he was beloved of them all. Many precious stones the ladies inlaid on the gold, which together with the edging they would work upon the dress of the proud young warriors, for this must needs be done.

The host bade make benches for the many valiant men, for the midsummer festival, (5) at which Siegfried should gain the name of knight. Then full many a noble knight and many a high-born squire did hie them to the minster. Right were the elders in that they served the young, as had been done to them afore. Pastimes they had and hope of much good cheer. To the honor of God a mass was sung; then there rose from the people full great a press, as the youths were made knights in courtly wise, with such great honors as might not ever lightly be again. Then they ran to where they found saddled many a steed. In Siegmund's court the hurtling (6) waxed so fierce that both palace (7) and hall were heard to ring; the high-mettled warriors clashed with mighty sound. From young and old one heard many a shock, so that the splintering of the shafts reechoed to the clouds. Truncheons (8) were seen flying out before the palace from the hand of many a knight. This was done with zeal. At length the host bade cease the tourney and the steeds were led away.

## Parzifal (Wolfram von Eschenbach)

**Wolfram von Eschenbach.** Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220), the author of *Parzifal*, was a serving knight—that is a man at arms in the service of a provincial lord, a position on which he prided himself far more than on his role as poet. (As one of the greatest of the minnesingers he was thus by poetic as well as military profession, a creator constantly on the move.) From the little we know of his background, we believe he was born in Bavaria, near the city of Ansbach, that he found his way eventually into vassalage under a certain Hermann von Thuringia--with whom Walther von der Vogelweide was also connected—and that he composed his work—*Parzifal* itself, and two lesser verse pieces, *Willehelm* and *Titurel*-- in the first quarter of the twelfth century. (This work thus belongs to the era of the Minnesingers.)

**Parzifal.** *Parzifal* is the first major work of German imaginative literature to tap directly into the Christian tradition, which, as we see in the *Nibelungenlied* and the work of a Meistersinger like Hans Sachs, was not yet fully at home in German culture. (Christian sacramental symbols are widely scattered throughout that literature, but the background against which we read those symbols seems rural and pagan.) Von Eschenbach's work is vast and ambitious, an extensive tale through the personscape of Arthurian legend, search for the grail (which for the protagonist *Parzifal* is a sacred rock), pregnant encounters with the Fisher King, Amfortas, who suffers from the lance that pierced Christi's side, and that pierces his own, and, throughout it all, a gradual growth in *Parzifal*'s own maturity and insight—though he mocks himself throughout, claiming, for instance, that he is 'illiterate; and permitting himself startling comic digressions. This vast epic stretches to 24, 810 lines, staged in the conventional four stress lines in rhyming couplets. (Though clearly, in fact, von Eschenbach was literate, it is likely that this minnesinger creation was backed up by oral presentation.)

**The Grail background of the epic.** *Parzifal* itself deals with the Grail legend, which refers to the legend of the chalice (or stone, or salver, or jewell) which had been preserved from the time of Christ's Last Supper: a relic worship given its strongest Mediaeval form by Chretien de Troyes, in his *Perceval*. The elaborate story concerns a Knight on a spiritual adventure quest, and in both epics—those of Chretien and Wolfram--ultimately involves a transformative encounter with the Holy Grail, the chalice (or other relic) alleged to have been used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. (Though the meaning of the grail itself is cloudy in *Parzifal*, and to a large part this sacred symbol serves as a useful literary quest device.) While in Chretien's *Perceval* we are concerned with the education of a crude young knight, Wolfram introduces us to a quest character who is untutored but not stupid; working his way to self-understanding through a fundamentally 'religious' milieu.

**Wolfram and the meaning of his work.** Read *Parzifal*, please, with an eye for the thriller story in which ultimate Christian mystery is embedded. Do you find this text of contemporary (to us) interest? What is most living in it? To note: Richard Wagner also made *Parzifal* into an opera, loosely but powerfully modeled on the blending of hero quest and sacred symbol

### Reading

#### *Primary Source Reading*

Hatto, A.T, *Parzifal. Wolfram von Eschenbach*, 1980.

#### *Secondary Source Reading*

Hasty, Will, *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzifal*, 1999.

#### *Further Reading*

Groos, Arthur, *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram von Echenbach's Parzifal*, 1995.

#### *Original language reading*

Bumke, Joachim, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, 1990.

### Suggested paper topics

Does Wolfram's work, in *Parzifal*, reflect the minnesinger tradition to which we customarily assign Wolfram? What connections do you see between the lyrical work of Walther von der Vogelweide and Wolfram? Is the work of either writer deeply infused with Christian motifs?

What do you make of the kind of untutored but intelligent quester to whom Wolfram confides his narrative of a quest for the Holy Grail? Do you take this to be the author's self-portrait? What kind of self-transformation, then, do you take to be implied in the effort to find the grail?

**EXCERPT** <http://products.ilrn-support.com/wawc1c01c/content/wciv1/readings/parzifal.html>

Thus, Parzival parted from them, and courteous he now might bear  
His knightly garb, and he knew them, the customs of knighthood fair.  
But alas! He full sore was troubled with many a bitter pain,  
And the world was too close, and too narrow with width of the spreading plain,  
And the greenswald he thought was faded, and his harness had paled to white;  
So the heart of the eye constraineth and dimmeth awhile the sight.  
For since he had waxed less simple somewhat of his father's lore,  
The desire of the man for the maiden, in his wakening heart he bore;  
And he thought but of fair Liassé, that maiden so true and sweet,  
How never her love she proffered, yet with honour the guest would greet.  
And wherever his horse, might turn it he took in his grief no heed,  
And if slowly it paced or swiftly he thought not to guide its speed.  
Nor many a field well-fenced nor wayside cross he found;  
Nor chariot-wheel nor horse-hoof had furrowed with tracks the ground;  
Untrodden the woodland pathway, nor wide was I ween the way,  
And he knew not the hills and the valleys — Full oft shall yea hear men say,  
'Who rideth astray, in his wandering the lost axe may often find.'  
They lay here unnumbered round him, if for axe ye have trees in mind.  
Yet tho' far was the road he journeyed yet he went in no wise astray,  
And thus from the land of Graharz he rode through the livelong day,  
Till he came to the kingdom of Brobarz thro' mountains wild and high —  
When the shadows of evening lengthened, and red flushed the western sky,  
Then he came to a mountain torrent, and the voice of the raging flood  
Rang clear as its waves rushed foaming round the crags that amid them stood.  
So he rode adown by the waters till he came to the city fair  
Which a king had bequeathed to his daughter; 'twas the city of Pelrapär,  
And I wot that tho' fair the maiden who bare of that land the crown,  
Great grief and small gladness had they who dwelt in that noble town!  
Like an arrow that swiftly speedeth from the bow by a strong arm bent,  
The waters onward rushing on their downward pathway went;  
And a bridge hung high above them with woven work so fair,  
And the stream it flowed swift to the ocean — Well-guarded was Pelrapär,  
As children in swings delight them, and swing themselves to and fro,  
So swung the bridge, yet ropeless, youthful gladness it scarce might know!  
And on either side were standing, with helmets for battle bound,  
Of knights e'en more than thirty, and they bade him to turn him round,  
And with lifted swords, tho' feeble, the strife would they gladly wait,  
They thought 'twas the King Klamidé whom they oft had seen of late,  
So royally rode the hero to the bridge o'er the field so wide —  
And thus to the youth they shouted, and with one voice his arms defied,  
Tho' he spurred his steed full sharply it shrank from the bridge in fright,  
But ne'er knew he a thought of terror — To the ground sprang the gallant knight.  
And he led his horse by the bridle where the bridge hung high in air,  
Too faint were a coward's courage so bitter a strife to dare!  
And well must he watch his footsteps for he feared lest his steed should fall —

## Minnesingers

**Minnesang.** The 12th and 13th centuries witnessed the development of a refined poetry, Minnesong or Love Song poetry, promoted within the scattered feudal courts of the many Germanic lords who were vassals of the Holy Roman Emperor; poetry deeply influenced by the contemporary French troubador tradition. (Of nationhood we cannot yet speak, nor will we, in the case of Germany, for another more than 600 years, when Bismarck gives a kind of administrative unity to the scattered elements of the German nation, centered around local princes and their courts; rather the Europe in formation, in the time of the Minnesingers, was porous and truly international, since in fact it was pre national.)

**French troubadours.** While the French singers and musicians were the innovators in their kind of wandering minstrel poetry, by the end of the twelfth century the German minstrel tradition had evolved its own patterns, and the courts and culturescape of the land were crowded with performers—who were of course a substantial element of the ‘entertainment’ any culture requires for itself. You will at once see the distance of this refined lyric tradition—much of it romantic and inspired by the Troubadour tradition of Southern France-- from the potent epic mind of the *Nibelungenlied*. (Although you may notice a strong resemblance of the two kinds of Germanic texts to one another, oh the question of love and passion. The devoted cult of woman is conspicuous in the German Mediaeval culture mind, as it was throughout Europe—often as a byproduct of the cult of the Virgin Mary—at this time.)

**Von der Vogelweide.** Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230 A.D) is a good model of the sophisticated work, which emerged from this movement. The minnesang movement, which lasted over two centuries, eventually playing out into the very different Meistersinger tradition—was while not entirely aristocratic commonly located among the vassals of the princely German courts of the time. Walther, like many of his contemporary wandering court poets, was what we could call a ‘knight,’ not a fighting man but an armed defendant of his court, and, in addition, a noteworthy patriot in the local sense—which included strong antipathy to the Papacy, as well, apparently, as participation in the Crusades.

**Von der Vogelweide, the poet.** Vogelweide was a master of romantic poetry, as well as of nature poetry, epigrams and songs, and like others of his craft he wandered throughout the Europe of the day reciting and presenting his work. (One might think of a kind of mediaeval Rock Star.) If you read the translation of his poetry carefully, and compare it with the original, you will begin to see how close his Middle High German is to English, and how craftily he handles it. Do you see the magic of the particular verse below? The image is of the most common. The beloved, asserts the poet, is locked in his heart, and cannot escape. The key to the heart is lost. Nothing could be more simple. Yet listen to the rhymes interact, as the rhythms plays out:

Middle High German original	Modern German	English
Dû bist mîn, ich bin dîn:des solt dû gewis sîn. dû bist beslozen in mînem herzen. verlorn ist das slüzzelîn: dû muost immer drinne sîn!	Du bist mein, ich bin dein:dessen sollst du gewiss sein. Du bist verschlossen in meinem Herzen. Verloren ist das Schlüsselein: du musst immer darin sein.	You are mine, I am yours, Of that you may be sure. Deep within my heart You're safely locked away. But I have lost the key And there you'll ever stay

### Reading

#### Primary Source Reading

Jackson, B.G., *The songs of the Minnesingers*, 1965.

#### Secondary Source Reading

Sayce, Olive, *The mediaeval German lyric, 1150-1300*, 1982.

#### Further Reading

Taylor, Ronald, *The Art of the Minnesinger*, 1968.

### *Original language reading*

Hahn, Gerhard, *Walther von der Vogelweide. Eine Einfuehrung*, 1986.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Do the Minnesingers, as a group, seem to you closely bound to the nature of the society in which they flourished? Was their mobile, performative life the byproduct of a culture in which small court entertainments, scattered across the German landscape, provided venues and support for 'wandering minstrels'? Do the internationally performing music groups of our day provide some kind of contemporary parallel to the world of the Minnesingers?

In what ways does the work and world of the Minnesingers resemble that of the French troubadours, who were their predecessors and 'models'? Were the social backgrounds of the two styles of minstrelsy significantly different? Were the pervasive themes of the two poetries different? Try to explain what differences you see.

**EXCERPT** <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/under-the-lime-tree/>

Under the lime tree  
On the heather,  
Where we had shared a place of rest,  
Still you may find there,  
Lovely together,  
Flowers crushed and grass down-pressed.  
Beside the forest in the vale,  
Tándaradéi,  
Sweetly sang the nightingale.

I came to meet him  
At the green:  
There was my true love come before.  
Such was I greeted —  
Heaven's Queen! —  
That I am glad for evermore.  
Had he kisses? A thousand some:  
Tándaradéi,  
See how red my mouth's become.

There he had fashioned  
For luxury  
A bed from every kind of flower.  
It sets to laughing  
Delightedly  
Whoever comes upon that bower;  
By the roses well one may,  
Tándaradéi,  
Mark the spot my head once lay.

If any knew  
He lay with me  
(May God forbid!), for shame I'd die.  
What did he do?  
May none but he  
Ever be sure of that — and I,  
And one extremely tiny bird,  
Tándaradéi,  
Who will, I think, not say a word.

## Meistersingers

**Meistersingers as a guild.** The Mastersingers were a guild of craftsman poets, who took their inspiration from the mediaeval minnesingers, desiring to sustain the tradition of public poetry and its entertainment. But the Meistersingers—that is the singers who worked for ‘masters’ in the craft system culture-- attempted to recreate the minnesinger tradition within a later society—that of the Northern Renaissance—which was already home to a middle class economy, and in which the mediaeval traditions of wandering singers, like the French Troubadors or German minnesingers, was far in the past, in effect at least two centuries in the past. The Meistersinger tradition developed into a craft guild organically from local and church choirs as they expressed themselves from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. It cannot be overstressed that this new tradition was an artificial graft onto the minnesinger tradition.

**The rules of the guild.** For the Meistersingers twelve outstanding Middle High German poets served as exemplars and models—among them the best known to us was Wolfram von Eschenbach (d. 1216). Working from such models, Heinrich Frauenlieb established the first Meistersinger school at Mainz, in the early fourteenth century. By the fifteenth century the movement had spread throughout Germany, and Nuernberg had become the leading nucleus of the movement. By that point the Meistersinger organization was highly developed—as was the case with all guilds in the German craft culture of the time. Each Meistersinger cell consisted of a Meister—the chief in charge of the productions of his ‘unit’—and two degrees of subordinates, who had privileges corresponding to their position on the performance ladder. (For example, the Master alone was permitted to invent new tunes and new verses to fit them, while the two lower ranks of performers were responsible only for ‘copying.’) However the Master himself was not free for much invention. A law book (Tablatur) laid down the kinds of poems that were permissible for the guild, the rhymes that were acceptable, and listed a great number of mistakes to watch for. (When performances were given by the guild, four judges customarily evaluated, from behind a curtain, the correctness, euphony, and freedom from error of the performance.)

**Hans Sachs.** The most renowned of the Meistersingers, for us, is Hans Sachs (1494 A.D.-1576 A.D.), who was born of a humble family in Nuernberg, and at the age of fourteen began his apprenticeship as a shoemaker—thus placing himself inside one of the craft guilds of the city. At the age of seventeen, Hans Sachs began his career as a traveling journeyman, and on one of his journeys he stopped in the city of Wels, in Austria. There he was discovered—for the excellence of his singing—by the Emperor Maximilian, who was passing through town. Thanks to this chance encounter, Hans Sachs was eventually removed to Muenchen, where a linen weaver took him over as a guild craftsworker, and where Hans was able to launch a lengthy and prolific career as shoemaker-poet. (In all he created over 6000 ‘pieces of literature,’ of every sort—for he burst out of the bounds prescribed by the guild—from religious tracts to poems, from epigrams to sacred plays. One of his finest poems was written out of his vast admiration for Martin Luther, *die wuerttembuergische Nachtgall*, the Wuerttemberg nightingale.) Sachs grew from the Meistersinger craft position into an ambitious poet for whom the strict rules of the craft were never far distant, and proves that, even in such a derivative and mechanical tradition as the Mastersingers created, local energy was possible. We also owe the renown of Sachs to the (fairly humorous) treatment of him we find in Wagner’s only comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*, 1868.

## Reading

### **Primary Source Reading**

Aylett, Robert, *Translations of the Carnival Comedies of Hans Sachs*, 1995.

### **Secondary Source Reading**

Hauser, Arnold, *Social History of Art, Vol. I.*, 1999 (reprint.)

### **Further Reading**

Classen, Albrecht, *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age*, 2009.

### **Original language reading**

Klein, Dorothea, *Bildung und Belehrung. Untrsuchungen zum Dramenwerk des Hans Sachs*, 1988.

## **Suggested paper topics**

Do you see a continuity between the Minnesingers and the Meistersingers? On the face of it the differences seem

dramatic. Do they result from the differences of social milieu between the two literary movements? Was the mobile courtly song/poetry tradition more fitted to poetic creation than the crafts guild people's tradition of two centuries later?

Are you familiar, in your own time, with efforts to include the creation of the finer arts under a 'guild system,' or something like it? Do Writers' Unions, such as they exist today world wide, and such as were prevalent and influential during the Cold War in Eastern Europe and Russia, provide some kind of parallel to the world of the Mastersingers.

*EXCERPT* <http://www.poemhunter.com/hans-sachs/>

Why Art Thou Thus Cast Down, My Heart?

Why art thou thus cast down, my heart?

Why troubled, why dost mourn apart,

O'er nought but earthly wealth?

Trust in thy God, be not afraid,

He is thy Friend who all things made.

Dost think thy prayers He doth not heed?

He knows full well what thou dost need,

And heaven and earth are His;

My Father and my God, who still

Is with my soul in every ill.

Since Thou my God and Father art,

I know Thy faithful loving heart

Will ne'er forget Thy child;

See I am poor, I am but dust,

On earth is none whom I can trust.

The rich man in his wealth confides,

But in my God my trust abides;

Then laugh ye as ye will,

I hold this fast that He hath taught,--

Who trusts in God shall want for nought.

Yes, Lord, Thou art as rich to-day

As Thou hast been and shalt be aye,

I rest on Thee alone;

Thy riches to my soul be given,

And 't is enough for earth and heaven.

What here may shine I all resign,

If the eternal crown be mine,

That through Thy bitter death

Thou gainedst, O Lord Christ, for me--

For this, for this, I cry to Thee!

All wealth, all glories, here below,

The best that this world can bestow,

Silver or gold or lands,

But for a little time is given,

And helps us not to enter heaven.

I thank Thee, Christ, Eternal Lord,

That Thou hast taught me by Thy word

To know this truth and Thee;

O grant me also steadfastness...

Thy heavenly kingdom not to miss....

## Meister Eckhart

**The challenge of Eckhart.** The Christian theme foregrounded in *Parzifal*, and more or less shallowly foregrounded in the poetry of a minnesinger like Walther von der Vogelweide, is evidence of the subtle pervasion of the new faith into a German culture which is still, in the thirteenth century, in transition from a version of the Middle Ages in which are embedded many elements of the ancient pagan world. The monastic tradition still provides the energy for the evolution of the Christian perspective in Germany.

**Meister Eckhart.** Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) was born of a simple tradesperson family in Thuringia, during a period when a vocation in the church was one of the most promising career paths, but one made especially difficult at Eckhart's time, by the split in the Catholic Church, whereby the power of the Papacy had shifted to Avignon, in France. At the age of eighteen Eckhart entered the Dominican order and became a monk. By this move he made a career decision which would lead to an active institutional role, in his order, conflict of life importance for the monk, and adventures in theological/philosophical thought which would render Eckhart a figure of influence not only in German religious history but in the wider history of contemporary world thought. He would, through his sermons, philosophical position papers, and public debates, become a widely known representative of his order, twice invited to a seminary lectureship in Paris, an honor previously bestowed only on Thomas Aquinas.

**Meister Eckhart's career.** As a member of the Dominican order Eckhart is soon recognized as of remarkable intellectual power. He is sent to lecture in Paris—a center of high intellectual debate among theologians, the intellectual elite of the time—then moves from one seminary or pulpit to another, engaging all the time more deeply with the thought of his time. And he is concerned not only with theology, in which his thought grows increasingly bold, but with administrative matters, like convent management, which kept him fully involved in the world. As he develops his own original thought, however, he moves increasingly into considerations which before he knows it—indeed we don't know just when—begin to attract serious critical concern from certain of his superiors.

**The thought of Eckhart.** It is impossible to encapsulate the metaphysical thought that Eckhart now enters in his forceful determination to further the speculative traditions Catholic orthodoxy found itself in. We know that by 1326 some of Eckhart's superiors have begun to support an inquisitorial campaign against his teaching and writings. The essence of their concern is the implication, considered embedded in his developing thoughts, that a direct and 'mystical' access to God is possible, and is grounded in the nature of our thought. The implications of such a position, for the organized church, are plainly immense. By this kind of suggestion Eckhart would seem to take the experience of God directly onto himself, and, although being a monk, and belonging to the Church, he would seem to be adopting an independent, directly mystical relation to God, which would bypass the institution of the Church. (Martin Luther, the driving force behind Protestantism, is one of many who were struck with the force of Eckhart's thought, and its relevance to the simplification of the Church.)

**Charges against Eckhart.** When one enters the charges against Eckhart, however, the entire matter appears highly complex, and there are reasons to suppose that the inquisition into Eckhart's thought, before the conclusion of which he died, was driven by inner factional rivalries as much as by genuine intellectual insight. The charge against him is based on an interpretation of his view of the nature of thinking, which Eckhart thought to be presuppositionless, identical with its own thought, while God, as the ultimate thought, was the base from which we are as we begin to think. Whether or not this perspective entailed assuming a direct, mediation-free address to God remains open to discussion to this day.

### Reading

#### *Primary Source Reading*

Davies, Oliver, *Selected Writings: Meister Eckhart*, 1996.

#### *Secondary Source Reading*

Turner, Denys, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Religion*, 1995.

#### *Further Reading*

Davies, Oliver, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*, 1991.

***Original language reading***

Ruh, Kurt, *Meister Eckhart. Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker*, 1989.

**Suggested paper topics**

Reconstruct, in your own language, the thinking of Meister Eckhart which brought down on him at least the initiation of inquisitorial charges. Can you see the view point of the administrative forces aligned against Eckhart? Can you understand the defense Eckhart gave of himself? What is that defense?

Does the Christian thinking of Meister Eckhart seem to you to resemble the thinking of the German literary thinkers one encounters among the minnesingers or in Parzifal? Does Eckhart, for that matter, seem to you have a literary imagination as well as a strong philosophical mind? Would that be one reason for his continuing influence, to our day, over writers?

**EXCERPT** [http://catholicprimer.org/eckhart/eckhart\\_sermons.pdf](http://catholicprimer.org/eckhart/eckhart_sermons.pdf)

Sin is also an eternity of hell, for eternity is in the will, and were it not in the will, it would not be in the consciousness. Now, people say when they commit sin that they do not intend to do so always; they intend to turn away from sin. That is just as though a man were to kill himself and suppose that he could make himself alive again by his own strength. That is, however, impossible; but to turn from sin by one's own power and come to God is still much more impossible. Therefore, whosoever is to turn from sin and come to God in His heavenly kingdom must be drawn by the heavenly Father with the might of His divine power. The Father also draws the Son who comes to help us with His grace, by stimulating our free will to turn away from, and hate sin, which has drawn us aside from God, and from the immutable goodness of the Godhead. Then, if she is willing, He pours the gift of His grace into the soul, which renounces all her misery and sin, and all her works become living. Now, this grace springs from the centre of Godhead and the Father's heart, and flows perpetually, nor ever ceases, if the soul obeys His everlasting love. Therefore He saith in the prophets: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee." Out of the overflow of His universal love He desires to draw all to Himself, and to His Only-begotten Son, and to the Holy Ghost in the joy of the heavenly kingdom. Now, we should know that before our Lord Jesus Christ was born, the Heavenly Father drew men with all His might for five thousand, two hundred years; and yet, as far as we know, brought not one into the heavenly kingdom. So, when the Son saw that the Father had thus strongly drawn men and even wearied Himself, and yet not succeeded, He said to the Father: "I will draw them with the cords of a man." It was as though He said, "I see well, Father, that Thou with all Thy might, canst not succeed, therefore will I myself draw them with the cords of a man." Therefore the Son came down from heaven, and was incarnate of a Virgin, and took upon Him all our bodily weaknesses, except sin and folly, into which Adam had cast us; and out of all His words and works and limbs and nerves, He made a cord, and drew us so skillfully, and so heartily, that the bloody sweat poured from His sacred Body. And when He had drawn men without ceasing for three and thirty years, He saw the beginnings of a movement and the redemption of all things that would follow.