

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. Untersuchungen 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 worldwide, 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....