

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 truelove 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.