

German Literature: a Very Short Introduction, Nicholas Boyle

(Oxford University Press, 2008)

Additional topic to be included in the German version:

The Empire, the Princes, and the Towns (to 1517)

In 962 the elected (Saxon) king of the East Franks, later known as Germans, Otto I, ‘the Great’, was crowned Emperor by the twenty-five year-old Pope John XII in Rome. Otto thus inaugurated both the constitutional arrangements under which the German-speaking territories of Europe were governed until the nineteenth century and an equally long tradition of German involvement in the affairs of Northern Italy. The ‘Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’, however, never re-established, as Otto had hoped, the firmly centralized administration of Charlemagne, whose lands had begun to fall apart into the future France and Germany on his death in 814. The office of Emperor remained elective, its power was always exercised jointly with an assembly of rulers within the Empire, the ‘Diet’ or ‘Reichstag’, and although there was an Imperial chancery and eventually a supreme court, there was no Empire-wide bureaucracy, army, or system of taxation. The powers of government, and even of peace and war, lay with nominally lesser lords: in the first period after Charlemagne with five great dukes, then, as the Emperors sought to undermine the dukes’ positions, with an increasing plurality of counts and margraves, ecclesiastical princes – bishops and abbots – and Imperial free cities, which received privileges and autonomy in exchange for siding with the Emperor against other local rulers. None the less, in its early centuries the Empire had an indispensable role in defending Germany against Norman, Slavonic, and Hungarian invaders and in protecting the northward trade-routes of the burgeoning city-states of North Italy and their connections not only with the commercial centres of South Germany but with the German and Bohemian silver

mines from which they derived most of their bullion. Even in later periods of internal dissension and apparent decline it provided a legal framework for the resolution of conflicts and a court of final appeal for the oppressed, it protected many smaller territories from external predators, and so it permitted the survival of more personal forms of government into the age of larger nations and encouraged cultural variety. In the later twelfth century, with Europe on the verge of a population explosion, and of a long-term economic expansion, the Empire reached its zenith under two powerful figures, Frederick I, 'Barbarossa' (1122-1190) and his son, Henry VI (1165-1197). Henry's son, Frederick II (1194-1250) was more remarkable still, but his long minority occasioned a destructive civil war and he spent most of his reign in Italy and Sicily where he built up a richly multicultural court.

The domains of Barbarossa and Henry VI extended from the Baltic to Cyprus and from Poland to Provence, and the third crusade, on which Barbarossa died, paved the way both for the disgraceful sack of Constantinople in 1204 and for Frederick II's crowning as King of Jerusalem in 1228. The Emperors' German heartlands were opened up to intellectual currents flowing across this vast area, and in the relative peace and growing prosperity of the second half of the twelfth century Germany enjoyed the first flowering of a coherent secular literary culture of its own. There had been monastic writing in Old Saxon and Old High German from about 750 to about 1050 but it had no secular public, little of it has survived – Biblical paraphrases, translations from Latin, prayers, charms and a single fragment of an almost pre-Christian heroic poem, the *Lay of Hildebrand* – and it was gradually lost from view as the language changed. The ambitious worldliness of the rulers who then made Middle High German literature possible is reflected in one of its first monuments, the

anonymous *Chronicle of the Emperors*, Europe's first universal history written in a vernacular language. Not that the Emperors themselves were great patrons of literature (though Henry VI wrote his own love poetry). Like so much in the Empire, that role belonged to more local lords, and the writers from whom they commissioned the works which would be recited or sung for their entertainment were usually their own officials. Writing was no longer confined to monasteries and a whole new class was growing up, clerically educated perhaps but not necessarily ordained, which could use its literacy for secular purposes, whether of business or of pleasure. These *ministeriales*, who might hope eventually to join the nobility themselves, included some of the greatest names in Germany's first literary Golden Age. Hartmann von Aue (c. 1160 – c. 1210) and Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1170 – c. 1220), both of them lay 'ministerials', drew on the Northern French romances of Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1135 – c. 1190) and adapted the tales of King Arthur and his court to the tastes and interests of their German listeners. Since literacy, non-Biblical narrative, and fiction itself, were all something of a novelty in Germany, by contrast with the French and Anglo-French world from which the Arthurian material came, a certain literary self-consciousness pervades these adaptations. The landowning, horse-breeding, cavalryman or 'knight' (German, 'Ritter'; French, 'Chevalier') was the crucial element in the military power-structure that gave security to the feudal state. In the chivalrous world of the Arthurian and similar epics, with its jousts and 'adventures', the ministerial poet flattered his audience with a transfigured image of their way of life, lived for its own sake and freed from its social and political function. In the chivalrous fiction the distinction between greater and lesser nobility was obliterated – all were equally 'knights' – a self-imposed code of honour took the place of external legal and political obligation, and, particularly in the formal lyric, a cult of

unconsummated (because socially unreal) love replaced the affective and dynastic considerations that in fact determined relations between the sexes. For the great writers of course these escapist presuppositions were only a starting-point: Wolfram's *Parzival* (c. 1200 – 1210) is psychologically rich (Parzival's relation with his mother is particularly complex), theologically nuanced (Parzival thinks he has shown knightly fealty to God, but God has not reciprocated), and aware of the connections between the Christian and the Islamic worlds (no doubt a reflection of the renewed crusades). Walther von der Vogelweide (c. 1170 – c. 1230) was virtually a professional poet and singer, moving from patron to patron, and became the supreme master of 'Minnesang', love-poetry inspired by the troubadours of Provence and their Northern French equivalents, the 'trouvères'. But his independence is manifest in the range of his writing and in the sovereignty with which he bends the genres to his own purposes: his women are not silent ciphers but as pleasure-loving and as pained by absence as the men; he is an outspoken commentator on the political turbulence of the era after the premature death of Henry VI; and he reflects for himself, rather than for any patron, on the passage of time and on growing old.

But other voices were to be heard in the early thirteenth century that did not assort so well with the polite fictions of international chivalry. Nothing is known of the author or origins of the *Lay of the Nibelungs* (c. 1200), which tells the story, known also to Old Norse and Old English writers, of the death of Siegfried and Kriemhilt's murderous revenge, but its grim fatalism and its unflinching, Homeric, familiarity with violence seem, like the contemporary Icelandic sagas, an echo of an earlier Germanic and heroic attitude to life, perhaps evoked by the disarray of the civil war and intended by a clerical author as a critique of the behaviour of the secular princes. Of the author of the greatest and most idiosyncratic medieval German

narrative, the unfinished *Tristan* (c. 1210) of 'Master' Gottfried von Strassburg, we know only his name. His title 'Master', like the learning manifest in his work, suggests a university-educated cleric, perhaps a lawyer, from a well-to-do family, outside the immediate entourage of the prince-bishop (from whom Strasbourg gained its independence in 1205, becoming an Imperial free city). An air of detachment pervades the poem: the subject itself does not really belong to the Arthurian cycles; the story of the adulterous, consummated love between Tristan and Isolde hardly exemplifies the knightly code at its best; the writer seems to appreciate the values of love and honour but has a sharply ironical eye for the weakness, deceit, and self-delusion of the leaders of society whose task, supposedly, is to uphold them; and he speaks slightingly of the tourneys, quests, and other paraphernalia of chivalrous romance. Another power was rising in thirteenth-century Germany: the strength of the Empire did not reside solely in the class which provided its armies with their cavalry, whose military significance declined anyway after the invention of gunpowder around 1250, but in the growing economies of its towns. The population of Strasbourg itself multiplied sevenfold between 1150 and 1250 and by the time plague and a worsening climate halted Europe's economic expansion in the later fourteenth century Germany had several major urban centres, notably Cologne, Augsburg, and later Nuremberg, with around 50,000 inhabitants and comparable therefore to contemporary London. The growth of trade along the Rhine and across Germany's southern plateau to the newly settled area in the east, of the Swabian linen industry, and of metalwork and craft manufacturing, provided the capital for families of financiers, such as the Augsburg Fuggers. The modern commercial and banking system, born in Italy around 1200, of which the German cities were soon a part, brought with it new political and cultural attitudes. The free cities, like the Italian

city-states, may have been oligarchic rather than democratic in any modern sense, but after they had thrown off princely overlordship they were self-governing, through elective councils, and once the guilds, representing industry, had won a place alongside the merchants and bankers, political and economic life were closely integrated. Military and feudal values, such as obedience and honour, were overshadowed by values derived from the economic process, such as productivity and enjoyment, and by an interest in the spiritual significance of the material world. Above all the monetarization of economic relations, the replacement of feudal dues and payments in kind by rents paid in cash, a process which in urban areas was largely complete by the end of the thirteenth century, had a fundamental effect on conceptions of personal identity. With the breaking of the physically tangible link between producing and consuming, individuals, particularly those not involved in the economic process of work, and particularly those not allowed a significant political identity either, were freed to think of themselves as primarily centres of – at least, potential – consumption and enjoyment, an attitude which can be called ‘bourgeois’, in the strict sense. Women, therefore, particularly those from monied families and those living in religious communities, were the first to give literary expression to this new sense of the self. Mystical writers from Mechthild von Magdeburg (c. 1210 – 1283) to the great Dominican theologian and spiritual director of women religious, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 – 1327), found new linguistic and literary resources to describe the infinite and eternal pleasure of the life of the soul with God: Eckhart coined some of the most important abstract words in the German language, including ‘Bildung’. The influence of the mystical school round Eckhart, who was active both in Strasbourg and in Cologne, travelled down the Rhine to the Low Countries. There it inspired the movement known as *devotio moderna*, which returned and spread

through the towns of Germany: lay and monastic communities, both male and female, devoted themselves to running schools and to cultivating the inner life in the sombre atmosphere of the European depression that followed on the Black Death of 1348-9, in which Germany lost a third of its population. The best-known literary product of *devotio moderna* was Thomas of Kempen's (Latin) manual *The Imitation of Christ*, (1418), its best-known pupil the Dutch humanist Erasmus. An altogether different response to the spiritual extremity of the time was *The Bohemian Ploughman* (*Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, c. 1405) of the Prague official Johannes von Tepl (c. 1351 – c. 1415), a prose dialogue which sought mastery over personified Death through language – through the rhetorical resources of the over-elegant German then being elaborated in the (otherwise increasingly ineffectual) Imperial chancery.

After the death of Frederick II the authority of the Emperor's office declined sharply. The constitution of the Empire as some 1600 virtually autonomous territories was confirmed by the Golden Bull of 1356, but if peaceful coexistence was the theory, the reality was often enough dog eat dog. The local princes, spiritual as well as temporal, struggled to consolidate and extend their possessions, and especially to reabsorb the towns, centres both of prosperity and of insubordination. Culturally, the battle might seem to have been won by the towns. Civic pride and wealth expressed themselves in some of the greatest monuments of Gothic architecture, such as the cathedrals in Strasbourg (1277), Cologne (c. 1290), Ulm (1377), and Milan (1386). New trends in the visual arts flowed in from the urban centres of Italy and the Low Countries and converged in the sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider (c. 1460 – 1531), and in Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528), the two artists of world stature produced by fifteenth-century Germany. As literacy spread, the new concept of individual identity, reinforced by the

practice of solitary and silent reading, rapidly made obsolete the literature of feudalism, and after the rise of mysticism chivalrous themes survived only as the material of burlesque, of self-conscious revivalism, or of transformation into spiritual allegory. Outside the devotional realm much of the literature of the closely-knit urban communities was collective or anonymous in origin: love-songs, drinking-songs and ballads, later lumped together as 'folk-songs', some of them still known today; liturgical and biblical dramas; the strictly regulated work of the literary guilds of artisans known as 'Mastersingers'. Narrative, whether in verse or prose, was often coarse, humorous, or obscene, and satirical in purpose. The collection of the exploits of the rogue Till Eulenspiegel (Owleglasse) and the Low German animal epic *Reynard the Fox* achieved European currency. So did the more purely satirical *Ship of Fools* (*Das Narrenschiff*, 1494) of Sebastian Brant (1457-1521) which, illustrated by Dürer, was the first German best-seller of the age of print. Johann Gutenberg's printing-press set up in Mainz around 1445 was the most influential contribution to world-culture made by the medieval German town, but in less than a century it was followed by another, almost equally important – the Lutheran Reformation.