Tannhäuser

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing is known of the life of the thirteenth-century poet and composer Tannhäuser except for what can be learned from the relatively few lines of verse which have been ascribed to him by medieval anthologists. As far as can be determined, he appears in no official document of his time and is mentioned by no contemporary. However, since he frequently refers to himself and others in his songs, literary historians have accumulated a considerable amount of biographical material, much of which is of dubious validity. For the biographers have seldom fully weighed the fact that Tannhäuser was a humorist — with a marked tendency toward irony — and that he composed to amuse, rather than to enlighten his audience. It is certain that nothing he says about himself is to be fully trusted, and it is well to be cautious in assessing his remarks about other people and about current events.

The mystery of Tannhäuser begins with the name itself, the source of which is four songs in the Manesse Manuscript — in them the poet refers to himself as “tanhusere.” Since this designation was placed at the head of the section in which Tannhäuser’s verse appears, without a given name, von, her, meister, or any other title, it is clear that the scribe could not identify the poet more closely. There were many places called Tannhausen with which the poet might have been associated, but it is also true that “der tanhusere” (the backwoodsman) would have been a good pseudonym for a professional humorist in a sophisticated, courtly society. Such pen names were certainly not uncommon among the poets of the day; one thinks of “Der elende Knabe,” “Gast,” “Meister Irregang,” “Suchenwirt,” “Rumsland,” “Der Unverzagte,” among others. If the name is fictitious, one is inclined to assume that the poet was a Spielmann or goliard, associated with no particular family, castle, or town. His occasional displays of learning, his bits of French, Italian, and Latin, and his pastourelle-like songs could also point to the goliard.¹ However, most scholars who have dealt with Tannhäuser believe

¹ E. Kück, rev. of Zu Tannhäusers Leben und Dichten, by Alfred Oehlke, AfA, 17 (1891), 208, says that the poet was a goliard: “Nun hat aber die höchst eigentümliche zufällige gelehrtmacht, die zuweilen heidnisch naive, keineswegs rohe sinnlichkeit Tannhäusers nirgends im deutschen minnesang, wol aber in der lat. vagantendichtung ihres gleichen; es ist sicher viel eher erweisbar, dass er vagant, fahrender kleriker, als dass er adliger war, was durch jenes ja freilich nicht ausgeschlossen wird.” Wilhelm Braun, “Zur Heimatfrage der Carmina Burana,” ZfdA, 73 (1936), 195, insists that Tannhäuser was a Spielmann or goliard: “Wie schon gesagt, sind die Pastourellen nur einem Fahrenden angemessen; wenn nun Siebert ... ihren frivol-parodistischen Zug
that his knowledge is drawn from courtly verse, rather than from biblical, theological, or classical lore. And they maintain that the poet’s subject matter, his general tone, and his attitude toward political events and the higher nobility indicate that he was a knight.\(^2\)

If the poet did belong to the minor nobility, the question arises as to whether he can be identified with a specific family. His language points to a South German or Austrian origin, but does not indicate more. Most of the earlier Tannhäuser scholarship makes him a member of a prominent Austrian Thannhausen family which is first mentioned in a Salzburg document of 1275.\(^3\) More recent scholarship usually connects him with one of the families of minor nobility which were located in the vicinity of Nürnberg. This is because of a reference by Tannhäuser to that city. As a result of an erroneous translation of a word in one of his songs, several scholars maintain that he belonged to a family which took its name from the village of Thannhausen, southeast of Nürnberg. One has attempted to identify the poet with a Liupolt Tanhusaer, presumably of that village, who appeared in a document of 1246.\(^4\) A third family which has been claimed for Thannhäuser is that of the Lords of Tanne, whose ancestral home was apparently in Untersiegsdorf on the Traun River between Salzburg and Linz.\(^5\) Several times during the nineteenth century the inhabitants of Untersiegsdorf

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\(^1\) Ludwig Wolff gives a concise summary of the majority opinion in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserslexikon*, IV (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1953), 355.

\(^2\) However, Robert von Raab, "Die Thannhausen im Mittelalter," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde*, 12 (1872), 1-33, states that extant historical documents cannot establish whether or not the poet was a member of the Salzburg-Carinthian Thannhausen family.

\(^3\) Karl Weller, "Zur Lebensgeschichte des Tannhäuser [sic]," *Festgabe für Karl Bohnberger*, ed. Hans Bihl (Tübingen: Mohr, 1938), pp. 154-63. Franz Martin, "Der Tannhäuser — kein Salzburger," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde*, 80 (1940), 83-86, also refers to the document and assumes that the poet is either Liupolt or Siboto Thanhusera. Johannes Siebert, "Zum Tannhäuser," *ZfdA*, 77 (1940), 55-60, presents arguments against both possibilities. Wolff, p. 356, states that Siboto could not have been the poet since the former was a member of the Order of Teutonic Knights during the period when Tannhäuser was presumably wandering from court to court in search of a generous and permanent patron. Actually, all of the evidence which is supposed to link the poet with the Tanhusaers of the 1246 document or with the Bavarian village of Thannhausen is most tenuous.

\(^4\) Otto Denk, "Der Minnesänger Tannhäuser und seine Heimat," *Das Bayernland*, 28 (1916-17), 225-28, claims that this is the most probable home of the minnesinger. He also tells of a sixteenth-century picture in a church in nearby Bergen which apparently depicts the hero of the Tannhäuser ballad.
considered erecting a monument to the poet, but the plan was never carried out.

The most interesting, and least plausible, of the theories as to Tannhäuser's identity is that he was the Heinrich von Ofterdingen who appears as a character in the thirteenth-century poem, "Der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg." Several scholars have maintained that Heinrich, like others in the poem, was an actual minnesinger, and August Wilhelm Schlegel suggested that he was the author of the Nibelungenlied. Other works, including the "Sängerkrieg" itself, have also been attributed to him. The attempts to determine Tannhäuser's family by means of the armorial bearings pictured in the illumination in the Manesse Manuscript have been unsuccessful, for the escutcheon shown there is that of none of the Tannhäuser, Thannhausen, Tanne, or Ofterdingen families. It is clear that the artist, like the scribe, knew nothing of the poet and was drawing from one of Tannhäuser's songs for inspiration. The painting shows a front view of a handsome young man who is dressed in a greenish blue tunic and robe and a white mantel on which a large cross is sewn. Red and green vines wind on both sides of the standing figure. It is an artist's representation of a pilgrim and is based on Tannhäuser's so-called crusade song. The vines perhaps refer to the predominance of spring songs among his works.

Although there are wide differences of opinion as to Tannhäuser's origins, relatively little disagreement exists as to the authorship of the works which medieval scribes have attributed to him. Everyone accepts all the verse which appears after his name in the Manesse Manuscript as being his. Opinion is about evenly divided with regard to the authenticity of the Sprüche which are ascribed to Tannhäuser in the Jena Manuscript. The majority of scholars who have commented on the poem about table manners which follows his name in a late fourteenth-century manuscript have refused to accept it as his. And no one considers genuine the verse which the fifteenth-century Kolmar and Wiltener Manuscripts attribute to Tannhäuser, except that which is a corruption of verse in the Manesse Manuscript. Nevertheless, some scholars believe that Tannhäuser

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8 C. T. L. Lucas, Ueber den Krieg von Wartburg, Historische und literarische Abhandlungen der königlichen Deutschen Gesellschaft zu Königsberg, No. 4, Part 2, 1838. But F. Zander, Die Tannhäuser-Sage und der Minnesinger Tannhäuser [sic]: Zur öffentlichen Prüfung der Schüler des Königl. Friedrichs-Collegiums (Königsberg, 1858), p. 20, objects that Tannhäuser was considerably younger than any actual Heinrich von Ofterdingen would have been.
9 Wolfgang Golther, "Tannhäuser in Sage und Dichtung des Mittelalters und der neuen Zeit, Walhalla, 3 (1907), 46.
composed a great deal more than is extant and has been identified as his.\textsuperscript{11} The present study treats the Manesse and Jena poems: in all, seven Leichte, six minnesongs, and four Spruch cycles.

The discussion of the poet's compositions presents them according to subgenres, rather than as they appear in the manuscripts, and stresses particularly matters of form and style. The conclusion is reached that the most typical characteristic of his genius is irony, and it is largely around this element that the chapter on sources and reception turns. The consideration of the legend begins with an explanation of its probable origin and continues with a history of how it flourished during the Middle Ages, vanished in the seventeenth century, was revived by the Romantics, and again declined during the present century. Throughout the account an attempt is made to evaluate the impact of the legend on medieval and modern German literature.