Tannhäuser

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MINNESONGS

The six minnesongs fall into three groups of two songs each: summer songs, winter songs, and minne parodies. All of the summer and winter songs were probably sung for dancing, and the parodies may have been. Unlike the dance songs of Neidhart, they have no narrative. Since none contain references to historical events or persons, they cannot be dated,45 but there is some indication that not all were composed at the same period in the poet's career. With regard to form, the songs are quite representative of their period. The rhyme schemes are complex, although not unusually so for a time which stressed technical virtuosity. Five of the songs have three stanzas (the favorite number among thirteenth-century composers), the remaining one has five stanzas (the second most popular number). All stanzas have Stollen form and most are somewhat longer than average for the period, especially among those which do not tell a story.46 The mood varies from carefree gaiety to light melancholy. Tannhäuser's characteristic irony extends from a tactful, but detailed description of his sweetheart's figure to slapstick parody of the standard conventions of minne.

The poet's two summer songs (VII and XV) are closest to the stereotype of the classical minnesong. Indeed, one scholar calls them "höfische Lieder, ganz im alten Stile" and suggests that they may have been composed before the poet developed a style of his own.47 But the very fact that they are obviously dance songs distinguishes them from the formal courtly lyric of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, which does not mention dancing. The first of the summer songs begins with a brief dance invitation that is followed by a description of scenes and sounds of spring — leafy forests, singing birds, and blooming fields — among which all life becomes young again. The stanza concludes with the narrator's saying that he too could be happy if the object of his affection so wished. The second stanza continues with the portrayal of the beauties of May which have brought joy to all the world. The singer alone is sad, and only the lady's kindness can change that. The final stanza is devoted entirely to her and his feelings toward her. She was cordial to him when she saw him at the

45 Kummer, p. 67, believes that the songs are in chronological order in the manuscript.
46 A detailed analysis of the structure and metrics of Tannhäuser's songs appears in Günther Müller, "Strophenbindung bei Ulrich von Lichtenstein," ZfdA, 60 (1923), 47.
47 Oehlke, p. 33; Wolff, p. 359, likewise thinks that they belong to the tradition of "hohe Minne."
dance, but society is so watchful that he cannot find a way to be alone with her. The song is divided about equally between nature and the lady, and, in spite of the singer's pangs of love, the prevailing mood is that of happy springtime. Besides, the lady — in contrast to the conventional heroine of the minnesong — has not tried to discourage him. There is certainly nothing new in this composition. It is a variant of a pattern — beauties of nature, beauty of a lady, love for the lady — which was often used in the mid-thirteenth century. However, the language is not at all hackneyed nor is the impression one of obvious imitation.\textsuperscript{48} Despite the familiar content and structure, the expression is fresh and the emotion genuine.

The other summer song is composed in the longest and most intricate Ton of those by Tannhäuser in the Manesse Manuscript. It consists of sixteen lines which rhyme: a a b c d e e b c d f d f f b b. The Stollen and the first half of the Abgesang are made up of dimeter and trimeter lines, usually without an Aufsatz, but the end of the Ton has a pentamer and a hexamer line which break the staccato effect of the short lines and perhaps indicate a change in the tempo of the melody. The first stanza is taken up by an account of the flowering heath and of forest birds competing in song. Then in the long final line the singer injects a personal note — as in the introduction to the previous song — by saying that much of his sorrow is leaving him. In the following stanza we discover the reason for his sadness when he tells of how he sang to happy young people under the linden in years past, and adds that merriment has now disappeared from society and no one cares for his singing. In the last stanza the narrator says that his sorrow nevertheless would end if his lady would console him. He then would praise her above the beauty of May and show that no one else pleased him so much. He concludes by asking her to observe how nicely he acts when thinking of her.

The progression of the stanzas — joys of May, deterioration of society, hopes for consolation from the lady — follows no established pattern and is the invention of the poet. His use of the final three lines in each stanza is especially noteworthy. The first, a pentamer, sums up or emphasizes what has been said in the thirteen preceding short lines; the second and third lines, dimeter and hexamer respectively, show how the singer is affected by the situation. The first stanza contains the traditional nature introduction and is exceptional only in that the description of nature here, as in the preceding work, takes up a much greater than average percentage of the total composition. The theme of the second stanza — the changing times and the corruption of society — appears frequently in the lyric verse of the thirteenth century, but it is most unusual to find it in the customarily lighthearted and frivolous summer dance song. The treatment of the singer's feelings toward the lady in the third stanza is traditional

\textsuperscript{48} Lang, p. 111, believes the song was strongly influenced by Neidhart and cites a number of parallels which, however, do not establish the dependence of Tannhäuser's work on those of the older poet.
until one comes to the last two lines. Here there is certainly a humorously ironic implication that the lady would ordinarily not expect such proper behavior from the singer when he was thinking of love. Despite some melancholy notes, the song ends in a light vein which is quite in keeping with a celebration of the rites of spring.

Because of the middle stanza, the song has been attributed to the poet's later years. Of course, one cannot positively identify the narrator with his creator. However, the implication that the former has fallen on hard times sufficiently agrees with similar statements in the Leiche and Sprüche to warrant the assumption that a certain amount of autobiography appears in the stanza. If so, it was composed after the death of Tannhäuser's generous patron, Duke Friedrich.

The first of Tannhäuser's winter songs to be discussed here (XI) is the most charming of his minnesongs. Composed for Christmastide festivities, it dispenses with the nature introduction, which establishes a bleak and melancholy mood for the typical winter song. Instead, the narrator starts with a summons to merriment, a promise of joy, and an offer to sing a dance. With this, he calls attention to the vortenzerinne, who soon commences a solo dance to show the others what steps are to be used. The rise and fall of the sash at her hips as she glides forward gives him a warm feeling of pleasure. With the second stanza an enthusiastic and frankly sensuous description of her beauty begins. This description pours out through the rest of the song as if the narrator could not say enough to do justice to his subject. At first he addresses her directly, praising hair, eyes, lips, cheek, throat, breasts, and interrupts his compliments at times to encourage her to dance on — and to whirl so as to expose more of her figure. In the third stanza, with a sudden change of direction, the narrator describes her tiny feet, her legs, and — quite unexpectedly — her thighs, hips, and mons. The last stanza tells us that the girl is not only beautiful, but that she talks entertainingly and leads a virtuous life. The narrator pledges his heart that he has seen nothing so fine in the entire country.

Although the song gives an initial impression of simplicity and lack of sophistication, there is nothing naive or accidental in its composition. The basis is the cataloguing technique which is so characteristic of Tannhäuser's verse. To avoid monotony, the narrator continually changes his audience. First he addresses the group as a whole, then the beautiful dancer, again the group, and finally — in the ecstatic last stanza — himself. The description is also broken up by references to the dance. The narrator volunteers to sing for the dance, starts the vortenzerinne off, tells the others when they should begin, and later even gives instructions as to specific dance movements. He reminds one of the caller at a modern square dance, and he may actually have been performing just such a function.

Tannhäuser's chief means for maintaining interest and creating suspense throughout his lengthy enumeration of feminine charms lies, of course, in his arrangement of them. It soon becomes apparent to the listener (and the reader)
that the narrator, having started at the top of the lady's head, is proceeding steadily downward. At the moment of greatest tension, he breaks off and, beginning at her feet, moves upward. Then, when it appears that he has been just teasing and can go no further, he does. The audience was no doubt thinking of the song in which Walther too describes the head and feet of his lady, and breaks off, saying:

ob ich da enzwischen loben muoz,
sō wæne ich mé beschowet hân.\(^4^9\)

The surprise comes when Tannhäuser allows his narrator's fancy to take over once the limits of his vision have been reached.

The *Ton* of the song has a structure in which short and long lines alternate throughout. The effect is that of a dance tune, but one with a deliberate tempo. It is no doubt a *tanz*, rather than a *reie* melody. The rhyme scheme is simpler than that of either of the summer songs.

The second winter song (VIII) begins in the traditional way with a description of a winter scene — a faded heath and a forest barren of leaves — and a cry of regret that nature should look so dismal. The atmosphere of gloom carries over to the singer's own affairs when, at the end of the first stanza, he says he will be greatly pained if his lady should forget him. In the following stanza the singer asks his audience to help him thank his lady for her kindness, since he can expect a reward from the white one, should he make her red grey be brown. If he brings her the apple Paris gave Venus, she will even permit him to be called her *amis*. In the last stanza we learn that she opposes his every wish and that he would leave her if he could. She wants the sun, the moon, and the North Star from him. A comparison of this song to the preceding ones is revealing with regard to the character of the poet: he can be relatively serious about joy, but sorrow evokes his laughter. He ridicules the idea of service to a lady and, in doing so, pokes fun at the lady, the singer, and even the audience. For the song is half finished before they can guess that the lament is a fake and that they have been tricked.

Although there is no mention of dancing, there can be little doubt but that it is a dance song; probably all thirteenth-century songs of the seasons are. The *Ton*, with its constantly changing line-lengths and its predominance of dimeter and trimeter verses, points to a *reie*, rather than a *tanz*, although winter songs were usually sung to the latter. It has been suggested that this song and the following two were influenced by Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendiens*.\(^5^0\) If so, they were composed after 1256, the year in which Ulrich's novel was completed. However, neither here nor elsewhere does Tannhäuser refer to

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\(^{5^0}\) Oehlke, p. 41; F. Mohr, p. 66.
Frauendienst, and there are many earlier works from which he could have got the idea for minne parody.

The above composition exaggerates the lover’s plaint in an established lyrical form, the winter song, to produce comedy instead of pathos. The impression given is that this occurred almost as an afterthought and with no intent to create a particular type of verse. To be sure, in the true minne parodies (IX and X) the design to exploit the humorous potential in the concept of service is obvious from the start. The first begins by saying, “steter dienest der ist gőt” and then for three stanzas presents a list of the lady’s demands. She wants him to exchange the Danube for the Rhône, build her an ivory house on the surface of a lake, and bring her, among other things: a Galilean mountain on which Adam sat, a tree from India, Parzival’s grail, the apple of Paris, and Noah’s ark. If he accomplishes these tasks, she will give him whatever he asks — when Mouse Mountain melts like snow. The singer thanks her, calls her the very soul of kindness, and is happy in anticipation of his reward, although he is a little troubled about finding the ark. The plaint appears in the refrain, in which regret is voiced that the lovely, beautiful, and kind one does not turn his pain to joy. Thus the stanzas and the refrain present contrasting points of view — cautious optimism and helpless despair — and so accentuate the humor of the situation. In the thirteenth-century performance, the refrain would have been sung by the audience.

The Ton of the song is quite long, the verses are relatively uniform in length, and the rhyme scheme is simpler than those of the summer and winter songs. The stanzas are made up almost entirely of tetrameter and pentameter lines, which would indicate a moderate rhythm. The refrain, however, consists of tetrameter and trimeter lines, which favor a more rapid tempo. If the song was used for dancing, one might assume that the dancers alternated between tanz and reie. Tannhäuser was apparently the first poet to compose songs with minne parody as the central theme. But traces of it appear in both epic and lyric works from the beginnings of courtly verse and it is sometimes quite pronounced in Parzival and the works of Neidhart. The connection of impossible deeds to minne was not new and the moving of a river is mentioned in several earlier songs. Friedrich von Hausen’s lady insists that those who try to keep her from her lover will sooner change the Rhine into the Po than succeed.\textsuperscript{51} Ulrich von Gutenberg’s knight says in one song that it would be easier to separate the Moselle from the Rhine than his loved one from his heart, and in another that it would be harder to get him to renounce her than to turn the Rhine into the Po.\textsuperscript{52} Heinrich von Morungen applies the simile of the impossiibele task directly


\textsuperscript{52} Lachmann, \textit{Des Minnesangs Frübling}, 71, 39-40; 75, 6-7.
to the lady when his knight claims that it would be easier to bend down a tree
with a word than to get her to grant his request.53

The song is the only one by Tannhäuser to be included in a second manuscript,
appearing in one of the early fifteenth century54 as well as in the Manesse
Manuscript. In addition, there is a ten-stanza revision and expansion of the work
in the Kolmar Manuscript. One might, therefore, assume that this was the
most popular of Tannhäuser's songs.

The following minne parody also gives the theme of the song — service and
reward — at the very beginning. Then the singer asks the audience to thank
the lady for her kindness to him which, as it turns out, consists only of promises.
Once more there are requests for fantastic exploits and presents. The former
include interfering with the normal flow of Rhine, Elbe, and Danube, controlling
both weather and seasons, digging a moat around the earth, and flying like an
eagle. As gifts, she would like, among other things: a star, the light of the
moon, and the fabled salamander who lives in fire. A humorous leitmotif is
supplied by the lady's repeated assurance — nine times in three stanzas — that
the singer will certainly get what he wants if he satisfies what she appears to
consider quite reasonable desires. His reaction is to proclaim, "ir herze ist ganzer
tvgen de vol," but only the actual performance could show whether this is intended
to be mock naïveté or open sarcasm. The refrain throws further light on the
situation by hinting that the lady is not serious and is only putting the singer
off. The refrain also makes fun of the minnesong convention which insists
that the lady's name be kept secret.

The Ton provides an interesting contrast between stanza and refrain. The
structure of the former is very simple, consisting of twelve tetrameter lines with
alternating rhyme. The refrain, on the other hand, is quite complex in form,
having verses of one, two, three, four, and five feet. The predominance of dimeter
and trimeter lines also indicates a more rapid tempo than that of the stanza.
The simplicity of the alternating rhyme of the stanza likewise contrasts with
the virtuosity of the refrain, which has a a a a b b b.

It has been pointed out that Tannhäuser is reluctant to take misfortune seriously.
Perhaps for the same reasons, he does not take a scornful woman seriously enough
to give her substance as a character. The lady in the first three songs is quite
well-defined for a heroine of minnesong. She is a graceful and beautiful dancer
who laughs readily and talks in a charming manner. She has curly hair, pink
cheeks, tiny feet — to name only a few of the physical characteristics given.
But the lady of the last three songs is not described at all. We know what she
says, but no more. And her words appear in indirect discourse. She is, therefore,
a complete abstraction, merely a symbol of the exaggerated Minnedienst which
is the source of Tannhäuser's ironic laughter. Laughter is central to all of the

53 Lachmann, Des Minnesangs Frübling, 127, 32-33.
54 Berliner Hs. Ms. germ. 2°922.
songs. In the summer songs it is a laughter of pure enjoyment of the spring, the dancing, and the sight of the beautiful girl who has herself such a talent for laughter. (The touch of melancholy in the second summer song comes from the awareness that there is not as much laughter as in former years.) In the first winter song the appearance of the girl causes the singer to laugh with pleasure; the chief source of his laughter here, no doubt, is the surprise of his audience when he describes her form so completely. The laughter of the last three songs is evoked in part by the hapless figure of the lovelorn knight and in part by the awareness that an established literary convention is being parodied.

One sees in Tannhäuser's minnesongs a skillful use of form to emphasize content and avoid monotony. The stanzas of the first five end in a line which is significantly longer than the others and is used to sum up the impressions of the stanza. The Stollen of three of the songs also end with a line which is longer than average and serves a similar purpose. The uniform structure of the stanzas of the minne parodies is balanced by the more complex form of their refrains. Rhyme is used to give unity to individual stanzas, but never to link them with each other. In five songs the Stollen are connected by rhyme; in two of them Aufgesang and Abgesang are joined in this way. The poet likes to rhyme in series; the sequence a b c appears in four of the songs.