

CHAPTER TWENTY

History of the German Language 3 Middle High German

As was mentioned in the last chapter, the works of Notker show a very late type of Old High German (OHG) in which many of the vowel distinctions in unstressed syllables evident in earlier OHG were on their way to being levelled out. Notker died in 1023. The beginning of the Middle High German (MHG) period is usually set at about 1050. There are a number of reasons for this, both linguistic and historical.

First of all, there were differences in the types of texts and who wrote them. OHG texts were written almost exclusively by members of the clergy, whose business was the Christianisation of Germany. The pagan past with its emphasis on fate, rather than God, as the determiner of all things, was definitely at odds with Christianity and therefore not to be encouraged. As a result we have practically nothing of a pre-Christian nature in OHG. (Fortunately, some of the original Germanic myths were retained in the literature of Medieval Iceland, from which we have gleaned what we know about the Germanic pantheon.)

The Holy Roman Empire was established with the coronation of Otto I by the Pope in 962. Over the next two hundred years a number of events of importance in the history of Europe took place. In 1066 there was the Norman conquest of England, which was to change the character of the English language. In 1095 the first of the Crusades, which were to continue over the next two hundred years, began. Part and parcel of the development of the medieval court was the development of knighthood. The knights were to become almost the sole authors of the German literature of the so-called "Classical" age of Middle High German literature, which reached its high point in about 1200. The typical MHG classical text concerned the ideals of chivalry and reflected the structure of the medieval court.

The Holy Roman Empire reached its peak under Frederick I (Barbarossa), who ruled from 1152 to 1190, when he died on the way to the Third Crusade. Under him the Holy Roman Empire, which until then had been basically a union of German states, became the dominant political power in Europe. This dominance and the romantic ideals which accompanied the rise of chivalry were to end by 1250 with the death of the last Hohenstaufen emperor, Frederick II.

Knighthood had developed from military needs. Mounted and armored soldiers (cavalry) were practically invincible except by other mounted and armored soldiers. Foot soldiers had no chance against them until gunpowder and guns were invented. Therefore the elite of the armies of the

various courts were the knights. Horses, weapons and armor were expensive, with the result that the knights tended to come from the affluent classes, which, in a society based on land ownership, were the landowners. The knights came to be a separate social class with more in common with knights from other countries than with the peasantry in their own countries. Under Frederick I knighthood developed greatly as a result of constant warfare. In 1184 he knighted both of his sons in a festival at Mainz which was attended by nobles from all over Europe and which lasted for days. This put the finishing touches on the special social position of the knights, who had long had their own entrance rituals and terminology. Knights were referred to as *ritter*, *rîter*, or *rîtære* and the honorific *herre* or *her* was added to their names. The most famous poets of the era had names like *her hartmann von ouwe* and *her wolfram von eschenbach*.

The French were a generation or two ahead of the Germans as far as the development of knighthood and chivalry are concerned, and German knights had learned much from the French during the Second Crusade (1147-49). There was also a great deal of intermarriage between French and German nobility. All of this contributed to the French influence on German, the dominant foreign influence on German during the Middle Ages, both in terms of outright linguistic borrowing and in terms of literary borrowing, for the two dominant literary genres of the classical MHG period had their immediate origins in France. These genres were the courtly love lyric and the court epic. The former concerned the love, usually unrequited, of a knight for a highborn lady, the latter concerned the adventures of a knight in his attempts to obtain *zuht* "good breeding and manners", *mâze* "self restraint" and *êre* "the esteem of his peers". There were sub-genres within each of these types.

The writers of love lyrics were known as *Minnesänger*. *Minne* was the MHG word for love and was usually applied to love directed at one higher than oneself (*hôhe minne*). The poetry was very stylised, especially during its early period, and is not to be taken as autobiographical. Since the poetry was so stylised and restricted in its subject matter (women from the non-noble classes were not allowed to be the targets of *minne*, for instance), the poets concentrated on perfecting metre and rhyme and on developing new variations on old themes. The high period of Minnesang was between about 1150 and about 1250.

One poet who broke with the conventions was Hartmann von Aue (*her hartmann von ouwe*), who in one of his poems made the extraordinary statement that he found high-born women tiresome and that he would rather spend his time with lower-born women (*mit armen wîben*) who did not keep him waiting and who treated him as he treated them. The greatest of the lyric poets, Walther von der Vogelweide, took Hartmann's lead and wrote a set of poems concerned with a lady of non-noble birth, (keeping in mind that this is all fictional), probably a lady-in-waiting at the court, including the two poems which follow. The first poem is addressed by the man to his would-be lover, the second is addressed by the woman (at a later stage of the relationship) to an unknown confidante or to the world in general. (The translations make no claim to poetic elegance themselves. They are rather an attempt to reproduce the sense of the MHG text.)

Walther von der Vogelweide - "Bin ich dir unsmære"

Bin ich dir unsmære,
des enweiz ich niht: ich minne dich.
Einez ist mir swære;
dû sihst bî mir hin und über mich.
Daz solt dû vermîden.
ine mac niht erlîden
selhe liebe ân grôzen schaden.
hîlf mir tragen, ich bin ze vil geladen.

Whether I am repulsive to your sight
I don't know, but I love you.
One thing causes me great pain -
you look past me without seeming to notice me.
Please don't do that.
I can't abide that
kind of love without great suffering.
Help me carry this, I am too heavily laden.

Sol daz sîn dîn huote,
daz dîn ouge mich sô selten siht?
Tuost dû daz ze guote,
sône wîze ich dir dar umbe niht.
Sô mît mir daz houbet
- daz sî dir erloubet -
und sich nider an mînen fuoz,
sô dû baz enmügest: daz sî dîn gruoze.

Is that your form of protection,
that your eye never looks at me?
If you have a good reason for this
I will not condemn you for it.
Therefore avoid looking me in the face -
you have my permission to do so -
but look down at my foot
if you can't risk more: let that be your greeting.

Swanne ichs alle schouwe,
die mir suln von schulden wol behagen,
sô bist duz mîn frouwe;
daz mac ich wol âne rûemen sagen.
Edel unde rîche
sint si sumelîche,
dar zuo tragent si hôhen muot:
lîhte sint si bezzer, dû bist guot.

Whenever I look at all of those ladies
who for good reasons should greatly impress me,
Nevertheless, you are the lady for me.
I can say that without boasting.
They are all
elegant and influential
and have happy and proud hearts.
Though they are your social betters, you are good.

Vrouwe, dû versinne
dich ob ich dir z'îhte smære sî.
Eines friundes minne
diust niht guot, da ensî ein ander bî.
Minne entouc niht eine,
si sol sîn gemeine,
sô gemeine daz si gê
dur zwei herze und dur dekeinez mê.

My lady, make it clear in your own mind
whether I mean anything to you.
The love of only *one* lover is of no use
if the love of the other is not present.
One-sided love cannot last,
Love must be shared,
But shared in such a fashion that it penetrates
Two hearts and no more.

Notes: The rhyme scheme is in every stanza the same - a, b, a, b, c, c, d, d - and all of the rhymes are perfect rhymes. In each stanza the number of stressed syllables per line follows the pattern 4, 5, 4, 5, 4, 4, 4, 5. This is technically very sophisticated poetry.

Walther von der Vogelweide - "Under der linden"

Under der linden
an der heide,
dâ unser zweier bette was,
dâ mugt ir vinden
schône beide
gebrochen bluomen unde gras.
vor dem walde in einem tal,
tandaradei,
schône sanc diu nahtegal.

Ich kam gegangen
zuo der ouwe:
dô was mîn friedel komen ê.
dâ wart ich enpfangen,
hêre frouwe,
daz ich bin sælic iemer mê.
kuster mich? wol tûsentstunt:
tandaradei,
seht wie rôet mir ist der munt.

Dô het er gemachet
alsô rîche
von bluomen eine bettestat.
des wirt noch gelachtet
inneclîche,
kumt iemen an daz selbe pfat.
bî den rôsen er wol mac,
tandaradei,
merken wâ mirz houbet lac.

daz er bî mir læge,
wessez iemen
(nu enwelle got!), sô schamt ich mich.
wes er mit mir pflæge,
niemer niemen
bevinde daz, wan er unt ich,
und ein kleinez vogellîn:
tandaradei,
daz mac wol getriuwe sîn.

Under the linden tree
on the heath,
that is where the bed for the two of us was.
There you can find
lovingly picked flowers
and grass.
Before the forest in a valley
"Tandaradei"
sang the nightingale beautifully.

I came on foot
to the meadow.
My lover had arrived there before me.
There I was received
as a high-born lady
so that I will be happy forever more.
Did he kiss me? Probably a thousand times.
Tandaradei
Look how red my mouth is!

There he had made
in great splendor
a bed of flowers.
That will cause inner
laughter
in anyone who comes along that same path.
From the roses he will be able
Tandaradei
to discern where my head lay.

That he lay with me,
If anyone were to know that,
(God forbid!) I would be ashamed.
What he did with me,
Let no one ever
Know that except him and me
And a little bird
Tandaradei
Which can probably be trusted to remain silent.

Notes: The rhyme scheme here is different - a,b,c,a,b,c,d,e,d - and there are nine rather than eight lines per stanza, the eighth line being in each case the bird call *Tandaradei*.

The most famous court epics from the classical period were written by Hartmann von Aue (*der arme Heinrich*, *Iwein*, *Erec*, *Gregorius*), by Wolfram von Eschenbach (*Parzival*), by Gottfried von Straßburg (*Tristan*) and by an anonymous Austrian poet who retold and embellished the story of the fall of the Burgundians at the hands of Attila (*der Nibelunge nôt*, also often known as *Das Nibelungenlied*). Of these, *Iwein*, *Erec* and *Parzival* are Arthurian tales of knightly prowess and the striving to attain perfect knightly qualities and *mâze* "moderation" in all things. *Tristan* is similar and also Celtic, although not Arthurian, in its origins. *Gregorius* and *der arme Heinrich* are didactic moral tales concerning actual people who through some fault, usually *hôchmuot* "pride", lose their standing in the community and must strive to regain it.

Der Nibelunge nôt is different. In this epic poem we get a glimpse of Germanic history and of the pagan Germanic concepts of fate and tribal loyalty so completely suppressed by the church during the Old High German period. It is the one great monument of "altgermanische Heldendichtung" in the German language.

The best MHG poets wrote a type of German which was reasonably uniform and which could be spoken and understood (for the poetry was recited at court) in any part of the German-speaking area. Through studies of the rhyme patterns scholars have established that Middle High German had 9 short vowels, 8 long vowels and 6 diphthongs, plus an unstressed vowel /ə/. This is a considerable increase over Old High German, where there were 5 short and 5 long vowels and six diphthongs.

The MHG stressed vowel systems had the form laid out below. The conventional spelling used in editions of MHG literature and in grammars of MHG is used.

Short			Long			Diphthongs		
i	ü	u	î	iu	û	ie	üö	uo
e	ö	o	ê	œ	ô	ei	öü	ou
ë								
ä		a	æ		â			

There are a few strange spellings here which deserve some explanation. In the long vowel system the symbol **iu** represents a long high front rounded monophthong /y:/, **œ** represents a long mid front rounded monophthong /ø:/ and **æ** represents a long low front non-round vowel /æ:/. In the short vowel system **ä** was the short counterpart of long **æ**, **ü** was the short counterpart of long **iu** and **ö** was the short counterpart of long **œ**. The symbol **e** was /e/, the short counterpart of long /ê/, and **ë** was apparently a vowel which was more open than **e** but less open than **ä**, probably a short /ɛ/.

The obvious difference between these systems and those of OHG lies in the presence in MHG of front rounded vowels (umlauted vowels). OHG did not have these vowel phonemes, although the sounds probably did occur allophonically. The umlauted vowels arose as the result of partial assimilation of back vowels to a following high front vowel or consonant (i, î, j). The high back vowel /u/, when followed in the next syllable by a high *front* vowel (/i, î/) or by /j/ (the consonantal equivalent of /i/) became a front vowel, but it retained its height and lip rounding. Similarly the mid back rounded vowel /o/ became a mid *front* rounded vowel before a following high front vowel, and /a/, a back unrounded low vowel, became a *front* unrounded low vowel /æ/. The same changes occurred in both the short and the long vowel systems, and diphthongs consisting of two back rounded vowels also developed fronted allophones. The distribution of back

vowels and their fronted counterparts was predictable - front vowel allophones occurred before /i, î/ or /j/ of a following syllable, back vowel allophones occurred elsewhere.

At the end of the OHG period all unstressed vowels began to merge to /ə/, a change which was complete by the time of the classical MHG period. The result was that both front rounded and back rounded vowels, e.g. /y/ and /u/, now occurred in the same phonetic environment, i.e. before /ə/ in a following syllable, and were therefore in contrast. Substituting /y/ for /u/ in a word would cause a change of meaning. /u/ and /y/ were therefore now separate phonemes, as were /o/ and /ø/, /a/ and /æ/, etc.

Another MHG innovation was the so-called *Auslautverhärtung* referred to in the last chapter. Voiced obstruents were devoiced at the ends of words, and this was actually reflected in the orthography. Note, for instance, the word *mac* in the first poem and the words *munt* and *pfat* in the second poem above. These are NHG *mag*, *Mund* and *Pfad* (pronounced [mɑ:k, mʊnt, pfɑ:t]). The result of this final devoicing was a situation much like that which obtains in NHG today: final voiced obstruents did not occur, and there was a regular alternation in different forms of the same word between medial voiced obstruents and final voiceless obstruents, e.g. MHG *der tac*, *die tage*.

The final MHG phonological innovation was that the OHG sequence /sk/ fused to form a voiceless palatal fricative written in MHG *sc*, pronounced [ʃ]. This added yet another fricative to the already overloaded alveolar/palatal series. This fricative functioned between vowels as a *double* consonant, so we can represent it there as -ff-, otherwise as ʃ. MHG *s* must have been pronounced somewhere between MHG /z/, which was surely a dental or alveolar fricative like NHG /s/, and MHG *sc*, which was probably essentially like NHG /ʃ/. We know this because sometimes MHG *s* merged in NHG with MHG /z/ to NHG /s/, and sometimes it merged with MHG *sc* to NHG /ʃ/. And sometimes it merged with neither and became NHG /z/.

A number of words beginning with /p/ were introduced from French and from Latin. This reestablished the contrast between /p/ and /b/ which had been lost in the High German Consonant Shift. The MHG poets also consistently distinguished *k* and *g* with no indication that their *k* had shifted to /k^x/, and the /d/ ≠ /t/ distinction of OHG was retained in MHG, so that we therefore had a voiced-voiceless contrast in all three consonant series, whereas OHG had had it only with the dentals/alveolars.

The distinction between long consonants (doubled consonants) and short consonants was maintained throughout the MHG period.

A number of sound changes occurred during late MHG times which led to a totally different system of consonants and vowels in NHG. These changes will be discussed in the next chapter. This chapter concludes with a comparison of the verb and noun paradigms of OHG, reprinted from the previous chapter, and their counterparts in MHG. The OHG forms are listed first in italics. The MHG forms follow in roman type.

Present Tense

	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG
Sg. 1	<i>gibu</i>	gibe	<i>biugu</i>	biuge	<i>legu</i>	lege	<i>salbôm</i>	salbe
2	<i>gibis</i>	gibest	<i>biugis</i>	biugest	<i>legis</i>	legest	<i>salbôs</i>	salbest
3	<i>gibit</i>	gibet	<i>biugit</i>	biuge	<i>legit</i>	leget	<i>salbôt</i>	salbet
Pl. 1	<i>gebamê</i> s	gêben	<i>biogamê</i> s	biegen	<i>legamê</i> s	legen	<i>salbômes</i>	salben
2	<i>gebet</i>	gêbet	<i>bioget</i>	bieget	<i>leget</i>	leget	<i>salbôt</i>	salbet
3	<i>gebant</i>	gêbent	<i>biogant</i>	biegent	<i>legent</i>	legent	<i>salbônt</i>	salbent

Past Tense

	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG
Sg. 1	<i>gab</i>	gap	<i>boug</i>	bouc	<i>legita</i>	legete	<i>salbôta</i>	salb(e)te
2	<i>gâbi</i>	gæbe	<i>bugi</i>	büge	<i>legitôs</i>	legetest	<i>salbôtôs</i>	salb(e)test
3	<i>gab</i>	gap	<i>boug</i>	bouc	<i>legita</i>	legete	<i>salbôta</i>	salb(e)te
Pl. 1	<i>gâbum</i>	gâben	<i>bugum</i>	bugen	<i>legitum</i>	legeten	<i>salbôtum</i>	salb(e)ten
2	<i>gâbut</i>	gâbet	<i>bugut</i>	buget	<i>legitut</i>	legetet	<i>salbôtut</i>	salb(e)tet
3	<i>gâbun</i>	gâben	<i>bugun</i>	bugen	<i>legitun</i>	legeten	<i>salbôtun</i>	salb(e)ten

Nouns

	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG	OHG	MHG
Sg. N.A.	<i>tag</i>	tac	<i>knio</i>	knie	<i>geba</i>	gëbe
G.	<i>tages</i>	tages	<i>knewes</i>	knie(we)s	<i>geba</i>	gëbe
D.	<i>tage</i>	tage	<i>knewe</i>	knie(we)	<i>gebu</i>	gëbe
I.	<i>tagu</i>	--	--	--	--	--
Pl. N.A.	<i>tagâ</i>	tage	<i>kneo</i>	knie	<i>gebâ</i>	gëbe
G.	<i>tago</i>	tage	<i>knewo</i>	knie(we)	<i>gebôno</i>	gëben
D.	<i>tagum</i>	tagen	<i>knewum</i>	knie(we)n	<i>gebôm</i>	gëben
Sg. N.A.	<i>gast</i>	gast	<i>kraft</i>	kraft	<i>zunga</i>	zunge
G.	<i>gastes</i>	gastes	<i>krefhti</i>	krefte	<i>zungûn</i>	zungen
D.	<i>gaste</i>	gaste	<i>krefhti</i>	krefte	<i>zungûn</i>	zungen
I.	<i>gastiu</i>	--	--	--	--	--
Pl. N.A.	<i>gesti</i>	geste	<i>krefhti</i>	krefte	<i>zungûn</i>	zungen
G.	<i>gestio</i>	geste	<i>kreftio</i>	krefte	<i>zungôno</i>	zungen
D.	<i>gestim</i>	gesten	<i>kreftim</i>	kreften	<i>zungôm</i>	zungen

As can be seen, this looks more like NHG than did OHG, but there is still a long way to go before we arrive at the sorts of paradigms which we get in NHG. The merger of unstressed vowels to /ə/ has caused many previously meaningful distinctions in the unstressed syllables of nouns and verbs to be lost. Compare, for instance, the OHG and MHG forms of the word for tongue. In particular it is interesting to note in the nouns that a noun singular vs. noun plural distinction on the basis of umlauted vowels in the plural and non-umlauted vowels in the singular has *not* yet established itself - compare *kraft* with its modern counterpart. It is also interesting that *-n* as a marker of the plural of feminine nouns has also not yet established itself, compare *gëbe* and *zunge*.

Much of the history of NHG after 1350, which will be the subject of the next chapter, is to a great extent the history of the sorting out of the chaos introduced into the inflectional paradigms of German by the late OHG or early NHG merger of unstressed vowels to /ə/.