

We know of the literature which was performed orally in German courts during the classical medieval period (the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century) through books which, often by chance, have survived until modern times. These books are manuscripts which were produced about 100 years after the death of the poets whose poems are contained in them. For us today it is not only very difficult to reconstruct the path which leads from the oral production of the poetry in about 1200 to its written record in manuscripts in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but also to follow the progress of those manuscripts from the time of their production until now.

Courtly German literature was - to a large degree - not read privately, but recited publicly: to all intents and purposes this was an oral culture. Like all cultures of this type, it was based on a capacity of individual memory which is much greater than our own; and it is probable that the Middle High German poems, which were part of the collective memory of the courtly audience, would have been transmitted orally for a number of years; they would probably have been part of the repertoire of the travelling minstrels, the *Spielleute*, who would have used the melodies which accompany the poems to aid their memories. We do not know exactly when these poems were written down for the first time on parchment: the poets themselves might have dictated them to a scribe, from memory, or - if they knew how to write - from small wax boards. It is possible that these pages of parchment were then later joined together, and used as a basis for the production of a manuscript. But the truth is we simply don't know with any degree of certainty how it is that the orally recited poems of the classical period were written down so many years later in a manuscript.

It may be difficult for us to understand the process whereby the poems were recorded in the manuscripts so long after the poets themselves had died; however, it is in part also difficult for us to follow the progress of the manuscripts themselves from the place of their production in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the libraries in which are to be found today.

The production of a medieval manuscript was doubtless a costly and time-consuming affair. To be able to write on parchment a very special competence was necessary: this work was considered to be an art in itself. Certain special instruments were needed, and only an expert would have been able to use them correctly. The parchment would first have to be prepared before it could be written on: it would have to have been scraped with a razor, cleaned with a pumice stone and then polished with a goat's tooth to stop the ink from running. We think that one scribe would have been able to produce something like three folios per day. And then, of course, there are the miniatures which many manuscripts have, and these would have taken much longer to produce. This of course meant that book production was a long-drawn-out process, and therefore that medieval libraries were kept very small. Even such an important library as the one at Reichenau had, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, only about 1.000 books: when compared to our own library in Porto, this seems ridiculously small.

The journey of the most famous manuscript which records Middle High German poetry - the Manesse manuscript - is paradigmatic of that of many medieval books. It was probably written in Zurich in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, use being made of the library of the Zurich merchants Manesse for its production; it is a very rich document with 426 folios, 137 miniatures and some 6,000 strophic verses.

We know little of the place where the Manesse manuscript was produced. Today it is to be found in the Library of University of Heidelberg in Germany, where it arrived in 1888, after the German Kaiser had been able to bring it from the Royal Library in Paris, where it had stayed since 1657. We also know that during the Thirty Years War it had been the property of the Kurfürst Friedrich of the Palatinate. It appears that Friedrich had obtained the manuscript from the Swiss merchant Johann Philipp von Hohensax, who had in turn bought it in Flanders in 1588. Although this journey of the manuscript, which has led it from library to library, may be somewhat confusing, it is certainly much clearer than its earlier history: we know *nothing* of what had happened to the Manesse manuscript between its production in Zurich in about 1320 until its appearance Flanders in 1588.

The somewhat confusing history of the manuscript is reflected in its name: unofficially we call it the Manesse manuscript, after the owners of the library from which the poems were copied. Officially, however, it is known as *Die große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift*, as it is to be found in Heidelberg; it is registered as the *Codex Palatino 848*, since at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was to be found in the famous Palatinate Library: for critics of the manuscript tradition, who have established a classification by letters, this manuscript is designated as the ms. C; critics of the last century called it the Paris Manuscript (as it used to be in the Paris Library).

When we look back at Middle High German poetry and the history of its transmission through books like the Manesse manuscript, we might think that that history has now finished; and yet of course that would be wrong. It is

doubtful if the Manesse manuscript will ever leave Heidelberg University Library: why should it? But certainly it still holds some secrets. Fragments of manuscripts with Middle High German poetry are still sporadically being discovered in archives or libraries, and then we have to look again at the other manuscripts and sometimes make new critical editions of the works of poets like Walther and Wolfram, and review our old interpretations. Despite the information revolution which has so changed our libraries, they - like the books which are in them - still hold mysteries waiting to be revealed...

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