

*Reprint from*

# Quarterly Journal

OF STUDIES ON

# ALCOHOL

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VOLUME 6 · NUMBER 4

MARCH 1946

# Classics of the Alcohol Literature

## *The Ocean Cruise of the Viennese*

### A German Poem of the Thirteenth Century

COMMENTS AND PROSE TRANSLATION BY

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UP to the thirteenth century there was apparently no drink literature in Germany. There were neither songs in praise of wine or beer, nor rhymed or prose stories of drinking, nor any sermons directed against inebriety. The lack of such literature as well as the absence of administrative or legislative documents touching upon alcoholic excess indicates that inebriety was perhaps an individual and rare occurrence in knightly Germany before 1200.\* The folk epics and the courtly epics mention wine incidentally and without emphasis in descriptions of banquets and there is an occasional mention of making men drunk in order to overpower them.

In the thirteenth century there is the first indication of wine being used in Germany outside of social ceremonial, as a means of recreation. Ulrich von Lichtenstein (d. 1275 or 1276), one of the last minnesingers, complains that wine was taking the place of women.† The first specimens of German drink literature appear in the second half of the thirteenth century. There are the *Weinschlund* and the *Luo-deraere* by DER STRICKER (dates unknown), the master of farcical rhymed stories, the *Weinschwelg* of unknown origin, and *Der Wiener Mervart*‡ by a poet who had adopted the pseudonym DER FREUDENLEERE. Either no other writing of this poet has survived or he may have used this pseudonym on this one occasion only.§ The *Wein-*

\*Tacitus' ideas of German drunkenness in his times (late first, early second century) were greatly exaggerated. In that period drinking was entirely a function of clan gatherings, with perhaps no individual drunkenness at all.

†Compare my introduction to Helen Simpson's translation of Obsopoeus' *Art of Drinking*. Quart. J. Stud. Alc. 5: 647-61, 1945.

‡From certain circumstances mentioned in the poem it has been concluded by several authorities that it must have been written between the years 1254 and 1283.

§Schädel, 1842, and Lütcke, 1843, believed that DER STRICKER was the author of the *Mervart* but other historians rejected this suggestion on highly cogent linguistic grounds. See VON DER HAGEN, F. H. *Gesammtabenteuer*. Stuttgart, 1850; vol. 2, p. lxii.

*schwelg* and the Stricker's two stories describe individual excessive drinkers. The *Luoderaere* pictures a true compulsive drinker with all the classic symptoms. The *Wiener Mervart* tells the story of the drinking party of some wealthy Viennese merchants. None of these four stories alleges any widespread intemperance. The burghers of the *Mervart* are not supposed to be habitual sots but rather responsible citizens who, relaxing from their cares, went too far on an occasion.

These four thirteenth-century poems do not speak of intemperance as a German national vice as in the case of the drink literature of the late fifteenth century and particularly the sixteenth century. The tone of these thirteenth-century poems is light, even if they do not approve of drunkenness, and it is evident that they were not written at a time of alarming intemperance.

That this first evidence of the use of wine for other than simple social ceremonial in Germany should have come in the middle of the thirteenth century is significant. As Mumford points out,\* it was that century rather than the times of the Reformation which gave birth to capitalistic society. The simple structure of knightly society with its spiritual values was slowly being replaced in the thirteenth century by a much more complex and demanding economic system, with greater gains but also greater risks. This was achieved at the expense of the spiritual ideals.

The author of the *Wiener Mervart* actually suggests that drinking is a means for recovering that simple, joyful bliss of which a mercenary age had deprived man. The introductory lines of the *Mervart* deplore that men have lost their ability to find joy in simple, virtuous ways and have chosen the worship of earthly goods instead of honor. The poem then describes rich Viennese merchants who spend their time hunting wealth and who are never without worries. One late afternoon in summer these men gather in a tavern housed in a kind of summerhouse or arbor.† They become heated by the sweet wine and vow to charter a ship and cross the ocean for a crusade in the service of the Lord. As they become more drunk and insecure on their feet they imagine that they are on the high seas and that the ship is pitching in a storm. They fear for their lives and practically give up hope when suddenly they discover what they believe to be a dead passenger, actually one of them who was lying in a drunken stupor. Believing that the

\*MUMFORD, L. *The Condition of Man*. New York, 1944; p. 159.

†In modern Vienna, too, drinking places are often located in garden restaurants with arbors. They are known as *Heurige*; that word designates also new wine.

ocean was angry because of the dead man on board, they decide to toss him into the sea. They throw him out the window and the wretched man breaks a leg and an arm. On sobering up they find their victim and they have to pay a heavy fine for the damage they had caused.

In the last sections of the poem the author disapproves of such wild drinking but nevertheless he thinks that those who devote their lives to mercenary aims could do worse than to get drunk and become at least a little human.

The pseudonym DER FREUDENLEERE\* means the joyless one. For a man without joy he told a rollicking good drinker story. His pen name would suggest a dour, thin-lipped moralist. However, his indignation was not roused by the drinking behavior which he described but rather by those conditions of the world from which relief had to be found in such coarse entertainment.

The idea of drunken men imagining themselves at high seas was not original with DER FREUDENLEERE. The basic story element is contained in the ancient anecdote of Trireme House first recorded by Timaeus of Tauromenium† (c. 346–c. 250 B.C.). The anecdote is given here in the version of Athenaeus‡ (late second and early third century A.D.):

Timaeus of Tauromenium says that in Agrigentum there is a house which is called the "trireme" from the following circumstance. A party of young fellows were drinking in it, and became so wild when overheated by the liquor that they imagined they were sailing in a trireme, and that they were in a bad storm on the ocean. Finally they completely lost their senses, and tossed all the furniture and bedding out of the house as though upon the waters, convinced that the pilot directed them to lighten the ship because of the raging storm. Well, a great crowd gathered and began to carry off the jetsam, but even then the youngsters did not cease from their mad actions. The next day the military authorities appeared at the house and made complaint against the young men when they were still half seas over. To the questions of the magistrates they answered that they had been much put to it by a storm and had been compelled to throw into the sea the superfluous cargo. When the authorities expressed surprise at their insanity, one of the young men, though he appeared to be the eldest of the company, said to them, "Ye Tritons, I was so frightened that I threw myself into the lowest possible place in the hold and lay there." The magistrates,

\*It was quite common in those times to adopt a pen name. Many of the medieval German poets are known by their pseudonyms only, for instance DER STRICKER, who has been referred to above.

†Sicilian historian. His work is known through quotations and the stringent critical remarks of Polybius.

‡*The Deipnosophists*, II, 37; translation of the Loeb Classical Library.

therefore, pardoned their delirium, but sentenced them never to drink too much, and let them go. They gratefully promised. . . . "If," said he, "we ever make port after this awful tempest, we shall rear altars in our country to you, as saviours in visible presence, side by side with the sea gods, because you appeared to us so opportunely." This is why the house was called the "trireme."

DER FREUDENLEERE adapted this story in a most original manner. The theme became popular in Germany, where many writers produced variations of it,\* none as good as the *Wiener Mervart*. The story does not seem to have been worked up by poets of other nations. The only mention of the story of Trireme House in English literature is by Burton in the sixteenth century. In his *Essay on Drunkenness*, 1804, Dr. Thomas Trotter mentioned the story but erroneously ascribed the original anecdote to Plato.

The 706 lines of the *Wiener Mervart* are gathered in short, paired rhymes with the exception of the triple rhymes at the endings of sections. The sections are of irregular length. There is no formal strophic structure. A short section is given here as a sample.

Uf einer louben dô geschach  
diz vrôliche hûs gemach,  
Dâ die herren sâzen,  
[beide], trunken und(e) âzen,  
Und[e] heten kurze wîle [vil] gnuok,  
die spise man vür sie truok;  
Da was gestrôuwet gruenez gras,  
beide, becher unde glas  
Wart dâ seldom laere;  
sie trunken âne swaere,  
Unz in daz bat erwarmete;  
ir keinen daz erbarmete,  
Sie trunken alle zuo der stunt  
daz tiefe glas an dan grunt

Durch des wînes sueze;  
des wurden in die vueze  
Als die kugeln sinewel;  
ez ist wâr und niht ein spel;  
Der wîn was guot und niht sûr,  
etlicher sînen nâch gebûr  
Zejungest niht erkante.  
dar nâch man lieht enbrante,  
Diz geschach vil drâte,  
dô der âbend nâhte,  
Dô huob sich trinken aber, als ê,  
sie hiezen vaste holen mê;  
daz tet dem wirte nirgen wê.

The *Mervart* is contained in the Heidelberg Ms. and in the Kalocsa† Ms. It was first printed from the former in 1814 and from the latter in 1817. The two Mss. are regarded as one; there is hardly any difference between them except for the spelling of several words.

For my prose translation of the *Mervart* I have used the texts of

\*E.g., Hugo von Trimberg in his *Renner* (c. 1300); Johann Michael Moscherosch (1601–1669) in his *Philander von Sitteswald*; Abraham a Santa Clara (1644–1709) in his *Bescheidessen*. In the present century the story has been placed in a modern Viennese setting.

†Frequently misspelled Kalocza.

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von der Hagen\* and of Lambel.† But for the omission of repetitious lines and of words which evidently served the purpose of the meter only, I have adhered as closely to the original as the rendering of the spirit of the poem in another language would permit.

### THE OCEAN CRUISE OF THE VIENNESE

In olden days this world was such that people could enjoy themselves in virtuous ways and all their knowledge they did turn to goodly purpose. Whatever they began had noble worth. But now the world's turned upside down and all are seeking earthly goods; of blissful mood but little is now found. The rich care more for wealth than bliss. Good cheer is rare, but all are pleased by gold and crave it. Men bowed to Mistress Honor once, but now they bow to wealth. Yet, here and there you still will find some virtuous men who love their honor more than shameful wealth, and whose ideals are decency and courtly ways.

From truthful lips I heard a tale most wondersome: Hermann the Burgrave of Dewin,‡ whom disgrace never touched, who never stooped to shameful deeds, recounted it. He's worthy of a prayer for his soul. He was a well bred man of noble ways and truthful to his friends as well as strangers. May God relieve his soul of sin all through the grace of Holy Trinity. 'Twas he who told this tale. The *Freudenleere* has made now into rhymes what in Vienna he was told by worthy men.

In Austria you'll find a jolly life and many things are yours if you have gold. Now, in this town there is a kind of bath of which I heard it said that men have been denuded there of garb and silver. He who will seek this bath will reach his goal whether his purse be fat or meager. I do not like this bath but otherwise I praise the town. Vienna well deserves much praise. Many a horse and mount you'll find, diversions, too, of many kinds, the melodies of strings and songs and stories. All this Vienna has, and loveliness and wit, too, are for sale. He who has cash finds many luscious things: the Danube's tasty fish, sweet wine and pretty maidens gay, and wealthy, too.

The quaint old story in this town occurred. Upon a time some wealthy burghers, friends and strangers, met to drink a wine that was so good that it could change the saddest mood into a cheerful one. They sent for food such as is served at courts, and spices which would sweeten their wine more. They drank well through the day until they vanquished all their sadness.

It was a bower where this gay carousal came to pass. There sat the men and ate and drank and had much fun. Cut grass was spread out on the floor and here their food was served, and hardly ever were their glasses empty. No worry touched them as they drank and they got heated by the wine. Nor did they rue this, but they drank right to the bottoms of their glasses. The sweetness of the wine gave roundness to their feet; they walked on globes. Yes, this is true and

\*VON DER HAGEN, F. H. *Gesamtabenteuer*. Stuttgart, 1850; vol. 2, pp. 467-85.

†LAMBEL, HANS. *Erzählungen und Schwänke*. Leipzig, 1872; pp. 216-36.

‡Documents of the thirteenth century mention the Burgraves of Dewen but the existence of a Hermann of this family is not documented.

not pretence; the good wine caused them not to recognize their nearest neighbors. As evening neared they lit the lights but drinking did continue. Not to the sorrow of mine host they ordered more and more.

And as they drank it seemed to them their wealth was growing. One whom the sober work day never saw without his worries now pledged to give his silver and his clothes to his good friends. Another one confessed his sins; a third one listed all his kin from Adam's rib, as far apart as Acre and as Prague. They chatted and they told each other tales. Pride would not let the notary be outdone by the other men, he ordered more cool wine. They drank and no one would refuse a drink. One man told of an ocean cruise, another spoke of pilgrimage to St. Jacob of Compostella, a third one told of war against the pagan Prussians. And loud of voice they drank at a fast clip so that some strong men fell upon their benches. But one of them became so nimble that he jumped on tables and on chairs and ever since he has been limping.

As this went on, a man of wealth spoke up and said: "If I may have your ear, I'd like to speak of an idea I have." And all cried out, "Bring wine, and we shall listen to your words."

"It seems to me that all of you should follow my advice and cross the seas to serve the Lord, for we have wealth and can afford to show Him our gratitude. My life and my estate I shall not spare in doing this."

"So think I too," his neighbor quoth. And then another three, and lastly all, spoke up and said, "It is a noble aim that should be sought across the seas." And not long did they wait. They shouted loud. The drinking mates cried all together, "Through God's grace, all of us, accompanied by troops, should go abroad." It was the flow of wine that helped make up their minds that got them ready for the task, and so the ocean cruise was undertaken.

They vowed that all together they would go and, as the custom was, the first goal was Jean d'Acre.\* This plan pleased all. And close they drew around the table now. They cast off all the evil thoughts they might have had. They spoke of all the wonders which they would accomplish. It was the force of wine that worked their brains. They ordered food and drink for their good ship. Their words were big; their deeds were small. They thought of all the things they needed for their trip—of silver and of gold, of which they had enough at home. The notary brought wine and said, "Let rest the words, and let us drink." He poured much wine. Mine host was there among the best as he joined with the pilgrims. One sent for electarium,† another one gave nutmeg; this one gave ginger, this man galangal.‡ Another man gave clove and other spice. And then they drank the wine which turned the young men old and made the aged young. Many a drink was drunk, but one man urged them to get started, for still the sea was far away.

They raised their voices and they sang so that the summerhouse was rocking

\*The landing place of crusaders until 1291 when the Sultan of Egypt captured it. This would place the date of the poem before 1291.

†Electuary, an ancient medicine made from some powder mixed with honey or syrup.

‡Rhizoma galango. The dried and powdered rhizome, tasting like a mixture of ginger and pepper, was used as a drug.

to and fro. The boon companions who had turned their minds toward the sea were all convinced by wine that they were on their way toward the harbor and they'd have sworn that they had traveled half the trip. They ordered that the ship might be well cared for; they gave commands to up the sails. The strength of wine had turned them into fools. With childish pleasure did they prattle and so the time flew by.

As midnight came they got elated from the wine, their mood was high and they believed they were at sea. They left behind their heartaches and they sang kyrieleison. "Here we go sailing in the name of God." And one of them commended wife and child into the care of a good friend: "Do loyally take care of them, of body and of soul."

And so they sailed with joy. They prayed that God may send them favorable wind. The notary supplied more wine, but I'd have thought that they had wine aplenty. They drank now hard and fast. The sweet breath of the wine hit them right in the eyes. One of the men was lying in deep sleep, another one was shouting, a third was stumbling, the fourth said: "How the ship is pitching!" "A storm is rising," said the fifth. The sixth got scared of the great wind and crossed himself. The wine deluded them. They thought the seas were causing what was caused by drink. "My head is splitting," yammered one, "a storm is threatening, but let God's will prevail." Much grief was voiced among them now, they feared for life and for their souls, for child, for wife, and for their wealth. Thus sagged their recklessness.

The wine began to storm and from their lips came vows. With hands and feet they did assure they would atone for anything they may have done.

"Would God we hadn't gone to sea!"

"The wind is playing havoc with the keel!"

"Oh, how I rue my sins!"

Their brains were raging. The morning neared, the stars were not more seen, they sailed with sorrow and they had not reached half ways to Brindisi. "Lord, help us poor creations of thine hand, give us advice that we may perish not."

But then one of them saw a fellow who had fallen under a bench. "My fellow travelers, we may praise the Lord for we shall be delivered yet from waters' perils. Here lies a pilgrim dead. Because of this the seas have raged against us. Come, follow me, let's take the dead man and let's throw him overboard. The ocean then will cease to rage."

"Yes," said they all, "the ocean is so pure it stands no evil."

They all agreed and quickly they stood up for, although drunk, they still could walk. They grabbed their neighbor whose sweet wine had soured, and yelling loudly in their wrath they dragged him to a window. The man began to shout: "Let go of me, cannot you see that I'm awake and well as any one of you?" "Nay," said they all, "for well we know that thou hast reached thy end and art not able to return to life." And then they carried him in spite of pleas and protestations and dropped him through the window right into the street—what disgrace—on the sticks and stones. He broke a leg and arm in that bad fall. That was an evil feast, May I be spared such ocean cruise. And if it's this that sweet wine does, I'll have to stay with other folks.



Well, then with joy they took their seats, they drank again and strife and heartaches were forgotten. The summerhouse was wet with wine. The seas did no more harm to them. They said: "It was great luck we saw the man whom death had claimed. Had he remained aboard we'd never have escaped. God drove him out and rid the keel of him with His own hands and granted our prayers." And then they sang their songs of praise.

The injured man was shouting: "Woe, what did I do to call for such revenge? My leg is broken and my arm has gone in two." The rich man pitifully cried over his great disaster so that the street resounded with his shouts. But the "crusaders" were in their best mood and sang so loudly that they did not hear the fellow's words. By this time dawn was breaking. One man said: "'Tis good for us that we have sailed t'ward Acre; in soul and body will the Lord reward us, He'll keep His eyes on our families and soon on our landing." These stupid Viennese were not aware that all the time they had not left Vienna where they were born and raised. So did the wine delude them. Full daylight had arrived. Thus I may say these fellows must have gone out of their minds. They all had stumbled on the sheaves and tumbled all over the place. The burgher who had called out in the night and had not slept, now stopped his shouting. This one was still quite stunned although he had been praising the great strength of wine. This other man had slept so deeply that you thought he never would recover from his sleep. And that one ached all over from his fall, he bled so that he never would forget his folly.

The neighbors who had heard the noise came over in the early morning hours. These men were sober and they said: "Throughout the night you've had much fun; you've stayed up long enough and made much noise. Is any wine left over? The sun has risen well over the trees." And then the toppers spoke: "You should think well of us, for with high minds we sailed unruly seas which no one can resist. But God at all times did not fail us. He gave us favorable winds, but later there arose a mighty storm so that the seas were pounding at the keel. Then our woes began. We thought we all would drown. To our luck we suddenly espied a pilgrim who was lying dead. By God's own will we threw him overboard, and our pilot gave us that advice. And so we overcame the stormy winds and thunderbolts."

The sober men could not restrain their laughter. The taverner was lying right among his drunken guests. The bookkeeper had dropped upon a bench and lost all track of his accounts. The wine had not been paid for yet. But then the man who had been cast into the seas began to wail again. When he was found the sober ones were crowding where the man had fallen from the window into such great filth that they did not know who he was until he gave his name and then they knew he was one of the best. "Forsooth," they said, "this truly is poor fun; this man will have a hard time to recover: the book of fate has not been read aright."

As his friends saw what damage had been done to this rich man their anger rose. They had a mind to slay those men who caused his plight. "What evil have you done to our friend? His body is in pieces. We shall avenge this lowly deed." The men replied: "Your words are strange to us, we did the rightful thing, so help us God whom we were serving. If you accuse us we'll defend our cause:

great was our peril that we barely did escape. God knows, we'd grieve if you'd turn enemies on us. For what we did was at the mariner's behest; we were not led by childish folly."

The friends, however, boiled with hatred, their swords were rattling and they stormed and raged. The calmer ones stepped in and pleaded with both sides, and tried to understand the happenings. True, they were sorry for the victim but were glad that drunkenness, not meanness, caused all this. Yes, everyone could see that mighty drinking brought about the deed. Then one by one they led the drunken men to bed for needed rest. They carried home the man whose fall had nearly killed him. The toppers rested for three days until the wind storms and the strength of wine had left them.

Great were their cares when they got up; it dawned on them that drunkenness had pawned their senses. St. Gertrud's toast went sour.\* Their neighbor who'd been hurt had not enjoyed his trip. He took them all to court and there began Krimhilde's plight.† Their faces reddened as they saw what they had done to this good man: The burghers did their best with arguments and they were lucky that the man was satisfied at last with a large fine. They had to pay two hundred pounds for all the damage they had caused him. And as they weighed the silver out the sweet wine got a sour taste. A real and honest ocean cruise would not have cost them more. He who does not drink sparingly and drinks more than is right will not be master, but the servant of his wine. Honor suffers when one drinks too much.

Now hear what wine will do: It brings good cheer to men and women when they're sad and if they use it with good sense. But those who overdrink get hurt in honor, body and in their possessions. Wine may cause evil, it may become the bane of souls. He who goes beyond the limits causes his soul's disaster. Hard drinking has its share in all the mortal sins. Men and women, beware that drunkenness may not lead you into struggles. But to the good of God and of this world are those who drink within their measures. Now, I'd advise good drinking for those men to whom the earthly goods mean more than honor. At times such men should fill their heads with wine so that at least in drunkenness their avarice should wane and for a time at least some kindly thoughts may enter them. Disgraceful is the man whose thoughts dwell at all times on his possessions. There is no remedy for him who serves such evil and whose honor is checkmate; and may God bar him from the wheel of fortune. This tale of ocean cruise is done and let its fame be known. And now that I have come to end this verse a pair of rosy lips I'd love to kiss.

\*Wayfarers used to drink a toast to the memory of St. Gertrud, patron saint of travelers.

†This is a facetious allusion to the Nibelung song.