

THE MIDDLE DUTCH NIBELUNGEN FRAGMENTS

R. Wakefield

There are two Middle Dutch Nibelungen Fragments, four manuscript pages, known as Manuscript T.¹ These short Fragments, discovered by C.P. Serrure in the 1830's,² are now in the collection of the British Museum. Both Fragments are related in content to the well-known Middle High German epic, *Das Nibelungenlied*, and evidence suggests the period 1260-1280³ as the copying date for both. Fragment I relates the scene during the hunt where Sivrit releases and then recaptures a wild bear at the hunting camp. Fragment II describes the lament of Kriemhilt and the people after Sivrit's murder. In the century and a half since Serrure's discovery of the Fragments, there has been very little scholarly interest; in fact, secondary literature on these Fragments is extremely sparse. Only two articles of note have appeared in the past 18 years, and these two, the first by P.B. Salmon⁴ and the other by Norbert Voorwinden,⁵ confirm the nearly unanimous conclusion of their few predecessors: Ms. T is a very bad Middle Dutch translation of two episodes from the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. Though it is quite impossible to open the file on Ms. T in order to support the notion that it is actually a high-quality translation from the *Nibelungenlied*, certain contradictions in the literature indicate that a detailed prosodic analysis of the Ms. T Fragments is well worth doing. Furthermore, as will be seen in what follows, the results of this prosodic analysis suggest a new position of importance for the Ms. T Fragments: they appear not to be bad translations from the MHG *Nibelungenlied*, but rather to be remnants from an earlier, now lost, Low Franconian tradition of heroic epic.

Salmon builds a strong case against assigning too much importance to Ms. T. He considers it a translation from the MHG *Nibelungenlied* and further believes he can identify the IQ branch of MHG Nibelungen manuscripts as the text from which the Middle Dutch translator worked. He cites the following points as evidence of the low quality of the translation:

- 1) The translator appears to jumble words in order to find a rhyme.
- 2) The translator appears to make several grammatical errors.
- 3) The scenes, when compared with the original, seem to be

depicted illogically.

- 4) The translator uses filler verses such as *dat doe ic u verstaen* much too frequently.

Salmon is aware, however, that not all the evidence supports the conclusion that Ms. T is a poor translation from the *Nibelungenlied*. He cites two bits of evidence which might indicate that the Fragments are actually based on older texts.

- 1) The Ms. T Fragments are shorter than the corresponding depictions in the *Nibelungenlied*, whereas 13th-century translations (e.g., MHG epics from French models) are longer than the originals.
- 2) The longline rhymed couplet is the organizing unit of the Middle Dutch Fragments, a form much older than the 4-line stanza organizing the MHG *Nibelungen* longlines.

Salmon concludes, however, that the Ms. T Fragments do not descend from a different tradition of heroic songs about Sivrit. For Salmon, the evidence indicating a mediocre translating effort weighs more heavily on the scales.

Voorwinden differs with Salmon only in certain details. He bristles with some hostility at the assumption he sees behind the labeling of the two Middle Dutch Fragments as Ms. T of the *Nibelungenlied*, namely the assumption that Middle Dutch is a dialect of Middle High German. Voorwinden also disagrees with Salmon's identification of the IQ branch of MHG Nibelungen manuscripts as the texts from which the Middle Dutch translator worked. He demonstrates convincingly that Ms. T, if one perceives it as a translation, is not sufficiently close to any surviving MHG manuscript to allow the establishing of a translation-original relationship. But such disagreements amount to little more than bickering over details. On the main points, Voorwinden agrees entirely with Salmon. After considering the possibility that Ms. T might be a late survivor of an independent Dutch tradition of oral heroic epic, he rejects the notion and concludes, as does Salmon, that the Middle Dutch Fragments are very poor translations from the MHG *Nibelungenlied*.

Given the slim evidence in favor of viewing Ms. T as a late survivor of an early Low Franconian tradition, one would have to agree, however reluctantly, with the conclusion of Salmon and Voorwinden. Any revision of their judgment will require the introduction of new evidence. Though Salmon and Voorwinden undertake a fairly detailed linguistic investigation, neither

analyzes the prosody of the Fragments, at least not in the manner of a recent prosodic investigation of Nibelungen Ms. B.⁶ In this analysis, the distribution of such linguistic features as lexicality across the halflines of the verse revealed structuring principles of poetic form more profound than such externals as the presence of caesura and rhyme. Given the factor of doubt introduced by both Salmon and Voorwinden concerning the true provenance of these Middle Dutch Fragments, it seems possible that a detailed prosodic investigation of the type already completed for Nibelungen Ms. B might yield invaluable additional evidence.

Before a prosodic analysis can proceed, however, some preliminary remarks are in order. Nibelungen Ms. B represents a text and poetic form from the late 12th or early 13th century. It can be viewed as a single point in the dynamic process of changing poetics. The results of a prosodic analysis of Ms. T are likely also to reveal a point, perhaps an earlier or a later point, in the Germanic verse tradition. Thus, in order to interpret the results, it is important first to summarize the development of certain key prosodic characteristics in the Germanic tradition from its beginnings on up to ca. the 17th century. In short, we need a thumbnail sketch of the Germanic verse tradition to provide us a framework within which we can interpret the results of our prosodic analysis of Ms. T.

It is generally agreed that heroic epic or song in all Germanic languages up through the 9th century (and probably beyond) is composed in a verse form known as Germanic alliterative verse.⁷ Though many freedoms are possible, the literature composed in this form shares the following characteristics.

- 1) A longline broken by a caesura into halflines.
- 2) Each halfline with at least one alliterating syllable, sometimes two.
- 3) Alliterating syllables are mostly lexical syllables in words which contribute something significant to the meaning of the longline unit. Or, to put this another way for the modern reader, endrhyme is **not** a structuring principle in alliterative verse.
- 4) Line length as measured by the number of syllables per halfline shows tremendous variation. This variation is especially striking in its contrast with the syllable-counting verse which dominates the Germanic tradition in later periods.

Our thumbnail sketch will continue to focus on the four key prosodic categories introduced in our discussion of alliterative verse above.

In the 9th century, especially in the works of Otfried, one finds the beginnings of endrhyme in the Germanic verse tradition. Over the several centuries between Otfried and the Nibelungenlied,⁸ the following changes occur.

- 1) The longline broken by caesura into halflines continues, but it is joined in this period by a shortline, approximately the same length as the halfline.

- 2) Alliteration recedes in importance as endrhyme becomes increasingly popular. Although some transitional texts appear to have both endrhyme and alliteration, endrhyme is far more important in this period as a structuring principle of the verse. Rhymed couplets invariably organize the basic verse units.
- 3) The distribution of lexical syllables is no longer an unpatterned occurrence of one or two at any point in the halfline as was the case in alliterative verse. Instead, a pattern of alternation begins to emerge: beginning especially in the sensitive rhyme position, one finds alternating lexical and nonlexical syllables. This pattern of alternation is one which feels "natural" to modern readers. It seems logical to assume, however, that some transitional early texts might combine endrhyme with the unpatterned occurrence of one or two lexical syllables per halfline as was evidenced in alliterative verse. Such transitional texts would not reveal the alternating lexical/nonlexical pattern which comes to be associated with endrhyme verse.
- 4) There remains some freedom in the lengths of halflines/shortlines, but deviations grow less as we approach the 13th century. Romance syllable-counting verse is clearly exerting a strong influence on the Germanic verse of this period.

The final period in this thumbnail sketch stretches from the Nibelungenlied to the sweeping 17th-century prosodic reforms of Daniel Heinsius, popularized in Germany and Scandinavia by Martin Opitz.⁹ In general, this period continues the trends noted above in the transition from alliterative to endrhyme verse.

- 1) A few texts continue with longlines broken by caesura into halflines, though now the most frequent unit is the shortline.
- 2) Endrhyme dominates; rhymed couplets organize the basic verse units. In a few cases such as the MHG Nibelungenlied, epic verse borrows a stanzaic form from the lyric tradition.
- 3) The distributional pattern of lexical/nonlexical syllables across the line unit is one of alternation, with the pattern most clearly evident in and near the rhyme position.
- 4) Variation in line length virtually disappears as the tradition becomes one of strictly syllable-counting verse.

This all-too-brief sketch of the Germanic verse tradition has been of necessity highly selective, and I have taken the risk of oversimplification all along the way. Keep in mind, however, that the purpose of this presentation is not the writing of a history of Germanic verse, but the creation of a context within which the results of our prosodic analysis of Ms. T can be interpreted. If that context emerges with some clarity, then I hope to be forgiven for the necessary sins of omission in my outline. Allow me at this point to summarize, again very briefly, the development we have traced in each of the four key prosodic categories.

- 1) From the longline broken by caesura into halflines, we discern a trend to the more frequent use of the shortline.
- 2) Beginning with alliterative verse, we experience a transition to endrhyme verse. The endrhyme verse is most frequently organized by rhymed couplets, although there are a few later examples (e.g., Nibelungenlied) of stanzaic organization borrowed from the lyric tradition.
- 3) The distribution of lexical/nonlexical syllables across the line units begins with the unpatterned occurrence of one or two lexical syllables per halfline in alliterative verse

and changes gradually thereafter to an underlying pattern of alternation in endrhyme verse; the alternating pattern emerges with particular clarity at or near the rhyme position.

- 4) The length of line units in terms of the number of syllables begins with tremendous variations in alliterative verse, but then changes gradually in endrhyme verse to a strictly syllable-counting concept.

An analysis of Ms. B of the *Nibelungenlied* has already revealed how this text fits into the prosodic tradition. Our analysis of Ms. T will have as its first purpose a prosodic comparison with Ms. B, and then, given differences between the MHG Ms. B and the Middle Dutch Ms. T, an attempt will be made to determine whether the points of contrast indicate for Ms. T an earlier or a later stage in the development of Germanic epic verse.

We must begin our analysis of Ms. T with a careful investigation of the physical condition of the manuscript itself. Though transcriptions of Ms. T exist, a brief glance at the manuscript reveals that many halflines have been reconstructed totally or in part by helpful editors. These reconstructed halflines are inadmissible as evidence in our detailed analysis. Ms. T comprises four sheets, each with space for 36 longlines. Thus, were the manuscript in perfect condition, the pages would offer us 288 halflines of text. Unfortunately, the manuscript has been trimmed, resulting in the loss of parts of 78 halflines¹⁰ and the exclusion of 5 complete halflines.¹¹ Eleven additional halflines are in part indecipherable.¹² Thus, our prosodic analysis will be based on the remaining 194 halflines,¹³ verse units which are not mutilated and which are unambiguously decipherable. Subsequent references to Ms. T apply solely to the 194 halflines which are the object of our analysis.

Physical evidence in Ms. T reveals that the scribe has marked each caesura with a dot. In Ms. B, the scribes seldom marked the caesura, including rather a rhyme dot at the end of almost all longlines. This emphasis on the caesural position versus the rhyme position in Ms. T may indicate a stubborn remnant from alliterative verse. One suspects, in any case, that the poet of Ms. T, as Salmon already noted, was not entirely comfortable with rhyme. Ms. T shows no physical evidence of being organized into stanzas. The only apparent organizing principle is the rhymed couplet. Ms. B, by contrast, shows frequent physical evidence of the 4-line stanza, since the scribes invariably initiate stanzas in the manuscript with a majuscule. Thus, the reader's visual impression of Ms. T is an uninterrupted progression of longline couplets, broken by caesural dots into halflines, whereas Ms. B presents longline couplets ending with rhyme dots and, additionally, majuscules marking the division into 4-line stanzas.

Our calculations for Ms. T will proceed in much the same fashion as was accomplished with Ms. B.¹⁴ Variations in halfline length are quite limited in Ms. B. A range of 5-8 syllables accounts for 97.9% of ascending halflines, and a range of 4-7 syllables includes 97.7% of the descending halflines.¹⁵ In Ms. T, we find similarly tight constraints on halfline length: all ascending halflines are included in the range of 5-8 syllables, and 97.7% of descending halflines are included in the range of 4-7 syllables. Clearly, neither Ms. B nor Ms. T shows much affinity with the free variation in halfline length evident in the earliest stages with alliterative verse.

The next step in our analysis of Ms. T involves the distributional pattern of lexical/nonlexical syllables across ascending and descending halflines. In Ms. B, the pattern is strikingly one of alternation with a high frequency of lexical syllables in caesural and rhyme positions and then alternating nonlexical/lexical syllables as one moves back from the cadence-final verse positions. A similar attempt with Ms. T is only partly successful. There is, to be sure, a high incidence of lexicality in the caesural and rhyme positions,¹⁵ but the positions preceding rhyme and caesura do not show the striking alternation evident in Ms. B. Granted, some slight alternation is apparent in the pattern for Ms. T, but it is not nearly so well defined as with Ms. B. Rather, in Ms. T the **pattern** of lexical syllables across the halfline appears to be less important than the **number** of lexical syllables per halfline. Table A below gives the distribution of halflines in Ms. T according to the number of lexical syllables per halfline.

TABLE A

The Distribution of Halflines in Ms. T
According to the Number of Lexical Syllables per Halfline

Number of Lexical Syllables	Number of Halflines	% of Total Halflines
ZERO	4	2.1
1	45	23.2
2	113	58.2
3	30	15.5
4	2	1.0

As is evident in Table A, there is a remarkable clustering of halflines with one or two lexical syllables (81.4%). This distribution is also what we would expect to find, though perhaps even more pronounced, in the halflines of alliterative verse at the very beginning of the Germanic tradition. Thus, with respect to the distribution of lexical/nonlexical syllables, we find that Ms. T

appears to hark back to a much earlier stage, perhaps back to texts in transition from alliterative to endrhyme verse.

Our prosodic comparison of Mss. T and B has revealed a number of interesting similarities and differences. Table B below summarizes the main points and indicates whether the differences suggest an earlier or later stage in the verse tradition for Ms. T.

TABLE B

MIDDLE DUTCH MS. T COMPARED TO MHG MS. B

Similarities

- a) Minimal variations in halfline length.
- b) Longlines with endrhyme.
- c) High incidence of lexical syllables in caesural and rhyme positions.

Differences

- a) Ms. T has caesural dots; Ms. B has rhyme dots.
—> Ms. T suggests an earlier stage.
- b) Ms. T is organized by longline couplets; Ms. B is organized by 4-line stanzas.
—> Ms. T suggests an earlier stage.
- c) Ms. T focuses on the **number** of lexical syllables per halfline with most halflines showing a preference for one or two lexical syllables; Ms. B focuses on the distributional **pattern** of lexical syllables across the halfline with most halflines showing a preference for an alternating pattern.
—> Ms. T suggests an earlier stage.

Salmon, in considering the relationship between the Middle Dutch Ms. T Fragments and the MHG *Nibelungenlied*, mentions the longline couplets and brevity of presentation in Ms. T as possible indicators that this manuscript represents an older text than that preserved in the MHG versions. For lack of further evidence, Salmon rejects the possibility that Ms. T harkens back to an independent *Nibelungen* tradition and opts instead to depict it as a poor translation from the IQ branch of MHG texts. Voorwinden, while rejecting Salmon's identification of the IQ texts as a direct source for Ms. T, concurs in most other respects with Salmon's conclusions. My prosodic analysis of Mss. T and B reveals some significant differences in poetics. In every case, the differences suggest an earlier stage in the Germanic verse tradition for Ms. T than for Ms. B. Since it is not logical for a translation to precede its original, I suspect we must regard Ms. T in a very different light. The Middle Dutch Fragments **may** seem a poor translation from the MHG *Nibelungenlied* and **may** show such a vague relationship to existing MHG manuscripts simply because the Fragments **are not translations** from MHG originals. The Ms. T Fragments suggest by the greater age of their prosodic characteristics that they may be descended from an early, now lost, Low Franconian tradition of heroic epic.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹British Museum Manuscript Egerton 2323.
- ²C.P. Serrure, "Het Nevelingen-lied," *Vaderlandsch Museum* 1 (1855), 21f.
- ³Norbert Voorwinden, "Die niederländischen Nibelungen-Fragmente (Hs. T)," *ABäG* 17 (1982), 185.
- ⁴P.B. Salmon, "The *Nibelungenlied* in Mediaeval Dutch," in *Mediaeval German Studies Presented to Frederick Norman* (London, 1965), 124-137.
- ⁵Voorwinden, 177-188.
- ⁶Ray M. Wakefield, *Nibelungen Prosody* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).
- ⁷Andreas Heusler, *Deutsche Versgeschichte* I (Berlin, 1925-29).
- ⁸Heusler, I-II.
- ⁹Heusler, II-III. See also: Theodoor Weevers, *Poetry of the Netherlands in its European Context 1170-1930* (London, 1960), p.26; Ray M. Wakefield, "The Early Dutch-German Poetic Tradition," *ABäG* 14 (1979), 175-188.
- ¹⁰Fragment I: ascending halflines 1-36 and descending halflines 63, 67, 70. Fragment II: ascending halflines 2-36, 38 and descending halflines 59, 62, 65.
- ¹¹Fragment II: ascending halflines 1, 37 and descending halflines 1-2, 37.
- ¹²Fragment I: ascending halflines 56, 71-72 and descending halflines 12-15.
- ¹³Fragment I: ascending halflines 37-55, 56-70 and descending halflines 1-62, 64-66, 69-69, 71. Fragment II: ascending halflines 39-44, 46-48, 50-69, 71-72 and descending halflines 3-11, 16-36, 38-58, 60-61, 63-64, 66-72.
- ¹⁴Wakefield, pp. 23-66. The final descending halfline in each *Nibelungen* stanza shows length and patterning distinct from the other ascending and descending halflines in the stanza. For this reason, the comparison with Ms. T includes only the four ascending halflines and the first **three** descending of each *Nibelungen* stanza.
- ¹⁵Wakefield, pp. 27-42.
- ¹⁶In the caesural position in Ms. T, 93.8% of all syllables are lexical syllables. In the rhyme position, the proportion of lexical syllables to all syllables is 89.2%.