

Tannhäusers Tischzucht

A thirteenth century German guide to good table manners

Translation and commentary by Volker Bach, (c) 2021

This poem survives from the thirteenth century in two copies, both of which are corrupted in transmission. I am following the attempt by its editor Winkler to reconstruct an original version which has an irregular rhyme scheme, but seems internally cogent. The attribution to Tannhäuser, a thirteenth century poet, most likely rests on the mention of his name in the text. As such attributions were often made *ex post facto*, we have no way of being sure on this point. However, the text itself clearly dates to the first half of the thirteenth century in its surviving form (the question whether it has older precursors is unresolved).

While we do not know the original context the poem was designed for, it is clearly didactic in intent – teaching proper table manners – and it is probably not too far-fetched to imagine it being recited to children or youths (as we would assume from lines 221-223). The text introduces various rules in no particular order, though a broad structure exists. In the introduction, the poet praises the usefulness of '*zuht*' – good manners – then speaks of religious obligations and charity before launching into the finer detail of table manners. He ends with discursions on hospitality, moderation in eating and drinking, and the material and spiritual rewards of leading a proper life.

The initial stanzas point to the social usefulness of manners – they raise your spirit and keep you from shaming yourself, 'sitting, red in the face' (19-20). In an aristocratic, elite society, manners served as a mark of class distinction, so shortcomings in this regard could threaten your social standing. Towards the end, the author makes even more sweeping claims, stating that proper manners are essential not only to social acceptance, but to salvation (*Kain ungezogen man der kan / Ze himlreich nymmer komen* 234-235). The equation of etiquette with virtue is complete – courtesy is next to godliness. In this man's heaven, no peasants need apply.

The main body of the text is concerned with concrete etiquette rules. The first set (21-32) – to begin a meal with a blessing, to be mindful of the poor and share your bread with orphans (if any are present) - carries religious overtones, though this is a brand of piety that must be seen to be done. Many of the rest show an overarching concern with personal hygiene. To understand their application, we must remember the way tables were set up at the time. Eating was largely done with the fingers (of either hand – other rules state that you should always use the hand away from your immediate neighbour). It was customary for two diners to share a bowl and cup, though spoons and knives were usually individual items. In this situation, having your neighbour eat in a cleanly fashion becomes a very immediate concern.

Aside from washing hands (139-142) and not scratching at the table (107-114) or picking your nose or ears (153-156) thus getting the fingers dirty again, an important rule seems to have been avoiding contact with another's saliva. Thus, the audience is told not to return a gnawed-off bone or bitten-off piece of bread (45-53) to the (shared) bowl, blow their nose (127-130) or to blow into the drink (83-86). Similarly, sauces and condiments (54-57) and even morsels of food to be eaten with a spoon (119-122) are not to be touched with bare hands. The poet does not tell us how to help ourselves – spoons or slices of bread could be used. The diner is also exhorted to wipe his mouth before drinking from the shared cup to avoid grease getting into the drink (91-94). Anyone who has ever shared dining implements will appreciate such courtesy.

Rules about mannerly eating often follow a similar pattern. Eating noisily or too close to the bowl is taboo (41-44, 57-64), as are drinking (79-82) or talking (65-69) with your mouth full, or picking your teeth with the knife (115-119). As the knife would be used to cut up bread and food for your companion as well as yourself, this rule is about more than aesthetics. Another important aspect is moderation. Courteous people do not drink from bowls (37-40), which seems to be associated with guzzling as well as with peasant manners), do not go for the food all at the same time (131-134), and eat with care and decorum lest they bite their tongues or fingers (!) (143-147). There are also some arbitrary rules of conduct that are specific to their time and place, the medieval equivalent of the salad fork, so to speak. For example, using a spoon to drink (not as outlandish an idea as we assume, especially when you consider that drinking vessels were often shared) is forbidden as peasant manners (33-36), bread must be cut away from the body, not towards it (71-

73) and the knife be held in a particular manner (98-101). It is also bad form to eat while your companion drinks (149-152), or to look at anyone while drinking (87-90). Today's flirtatious gesture is yesteryear's insult!

It is telling that the poem frequently criticises breaches of etiquette as 'worthy of uncourteous folk' (the association with the court as a place is very much alive at the time) or peasants, and dismisses those guilty of it as lacking in knightly virtues (even impugning their courage in lines 101-102). Etiquette, courtesy, virtue, nobility of birth, and membership of the elite are melded together into an indissoluble whole.

In a short digression (205-216), the poet explains the importance of wine and bread which he considers the central elements of any meal. However many courses are served, without bread and wine it isn't proper hospitality. Wine especially is singled out for praise in somewhat enigmatic lines (193-196) and it is pointed out specifically that the heathen do not believe in its qualities, an endorsement to the eyes of Christian nobles, no doubt.

The poem closes with stern warnings against overeating and excessive drinking, which are both hazardous to your health (161-176, 236-245) and endanger your very salvation (167-169, 234-235, 245-246). Yet the poet does not advocate excessive self-mortification (which he criticises in lines 185-188) but wise moderation. A good man is expected to bear both good and ill with equanimity and keep his impulses in check at all times (248-255). This ideal is the greater context into which we must fit the table manners outlined by our source.

Original Text	Translation
<i>Daz ist des tanhawsers geticht und ist gut hof zucht</i>	This poem was made by Tannhäuser, and teaches good manners at court.
<i>Er dunkt mich ain zühtig man Der all zucht erkennen kan Der kain vnzucht nie gwan Vnd im der zücht nie zeran</i>	I think him a well-mannered man (1) Who understands all propriety Who never was guilty of impropriety And never forgot his manners
<i>Der zücht der ist also vil Vnd sint ze manigen ding gut Nu wizzent der in volgen wil Daz er vil selten missetut</i>	There are many (aspects of) manners And they are useful for many things Know, then, that he who would follow them Very rarely does ill
<i>Die sprüch sint von grozzer zucht Die halten sol der edel man Vnd sind von manger vngenucht Die man dar an erkennen kan</i>	These verses tell of excellent manners That a noble man should obey And of many improprieties Which you shall thus know
<i>Die zucht ist sicherleichen gut Vnd wer der zücht recht tut Der sich vor vnzucht behut Den macht got vil hochgemut</i>	These manners are certainly good And whoever keeps them properly He guards himself from impropriety And God will give him good cheer (2)

*Da von rat ich mein freunden daz
Daz si wesen der vnzucht gehaz
Der seiner zücht nie vergaz
Wie selten rot er ye gesaz*

*Zu dem ezzen sült ir sprechen suz
Gesegen uns Jesus christus
Als ir dar zu gesezzen seit
Gedenkcht an got ze aller zeit*

*Wen ir ezzent so seit gemant
Daz ir der armen vergezzent nicht
So wert ir got vil wol erkant
Ist daz den wol von ew geschicht*

*Gedenkt an die grozz not
De waisen wa die sein da pei
Durch got so gebt in ew prot
So wert ir vor der hell frey*

*Chain edeln man selbander sol
Mit ainem löffel sawffen nicht
Daz zimt (un)hübschen lawten wol
Den dik unedeleich geschicht*

*Mit schüzzln sawffen niemendt zimpt
Swie des unfor doch maniger lob
Der sei freueleichen nimpt
Und in sich gewzzcet als er tob*

*Vnd der sich vbr die schuzzl habt
So er izzet alz ain swein
Vnd gar unsauberleich snabt
Vnd smatzt mit dem mund sein*

*Sümleich peizzent ab der sniten
Vnd stozzents in die schüzzl wider
Nach gepawrischen siten
Sülh vnzucht legent die hübschen nider*

*Etleicher ist also gemut
Wenn er das pain gnagen hat
Daz er wider in die schüzzl tut
Daz habet gar für missetat*

*Die senf und salzzen ezzent gern
Die süllen des vil fleizzig sein
Daz si den unflat verspern
Vnd stözzen nicht d finger drein*

*Der rawspert wenn er ezzen sol
Vnd in das tischlach snawtzt sich
Div baide ziment nicht gar wol
Als ich des kann versehen mich*

Thus I give advice to my friends
That they shall hate impropriety.
He who never forgot his manners,
How rarely did he sit red in the face!

At the table you shall speak thus:
Bless us Jesus Christ.
When you sit down to eat
Keep God in your mind at all times.

When you eat, be reminded
Do not forget the poor
For God will see good in you
If you do well by them

Think of the great need
Of orphans; if any are with you
For God's sake, give them of your bread
And you will be free from hell

No noble man himself should
Drink with a spoon
That is fitting for uncourteous folk
Among whom ignoble things are done

Drinking from bowls is fitting for nobody
Though some people would praise this impropriety
Who take their (bowls) boldly
And guzzle their drinks as though they are mad

And some bend over their bowls closely
And eat just like pigs
And snuffle quite uncleanly
And smack their lips

And some bite off from their bread
And put it back in the bowl
After the manner of peasants
Courtly people leave behind these ways.

Some are also wont
After they have eaten the meat off the bone
To put the bone back in the bowl -
Hold that for an evil deed.

Those who like their mustard and sauces
Shall have great care
That they guard from unclean habits
And not stick their fingers into it

He who clears his throat loudly at the table
And blows his nose in the tablecloth
Those two things are quite improper
As far as I understand these things.

*Wer snawdet als ein wazzerdachs
Vnd smatzt als ain payr sachs
So er izzet als etleicher phliget
Wie der gar sich der zucht verwiget*

*Der paide reden und ezzen wil
Div zwai werk mit anander tun
Vnd in dem slaff wil reden vil
Der kan vil selten wol gerun*

*Ob dem tisch lat daz brechten sein
So ir ezzent daz sümleich tunt
Dar an gedenket frawnd mein
Daz nie kain sit so übl stunt
Swelh man daz prot legt an den leib
Vnd sneidt sam di kranchen weib*

*Vnd werd ew pracht ain empelein
Mit saltz wenn ir ezzen welt
So süllt ir nicht greiffen drein
Mit plozzter hant daz übl stet*

*Ez duncht auch grozz missetat
An wem ich die vnzucht sich
Der daz ezzen in dem mund hat
Vnd die weil tricht als ein vihe*

*Etleicher plaset in den trank
Daz ist ein ungewizzen dank
Des spulgen sümleich gern
Der vnzucht sol man enbern*

*Etleicher uber den pecher sicht
So er trinket daz steht nicht wol
Den habt für ain degen nicht
Da man den pesten haben sol*

*E daz ir trinkt so wischt den mund
Daz du besmalzest icht den trank
Div hofzucht wol zimpt all den stunt
Vnd ist ein hofleich gedank*

*Zwischen den trahten mag ain man
Wol trinken ob im not peschicht
Ob er daz trank gehalten kan
Der allen lawten fuget nicht*

*Wer den finger auf daz mezzter legt
So er sneidet alz ein kürsner phligt
Wie selten der sich wol geregt
Da man den haiden an gesigt*

He who snorts like a seal (3)
And smacks his lips like a Bavarian Saxon (4)
When he eats, like many do;
How very much he forgets his manners!

He who wants to both eat and talk
Do those two things at the same time
That is talking in his sleep
He can rarely rest well

At table, do not make noise
While you eat, as many do it
And remember well, my friend
That never has any fashion stood so ill
As pushing the bread against your body
And cutting it like sick women do.

And when a dish is served to you
Full of salt (or sauce) when you are eating
Then you shall not help yourself
With your bare fingers, that is unmannerly.

It is also thought a great evil
From which I can tell poor manners
That someone has food in his mouth
And drinks at the same time, like cattle do.

And many blow into their drink
They are not likely to get thanked for it
Though many like to do it
You can do without such impropriety.

Some look over their cups (at others)
While drinking, that is not proper
Do not hold them for proper knights
Where the best are chosen.

Ere you drink, wipe your mouth
So that the drink does not get fatty
These courtly manners are fitting at all times
And tell of courteous thinking.

Between courses, a man may well
Drink if he feels thirst
And if he can get drink -
Not everybody has the right to that.

He who puts his finger along the knife
As he cuts, as furriers do;
How rarely has he kept (polite) company
Where the heathen were fought.

*Vnd die sich auf den tisch legent
So si ezzent daz stet nicht wol
Wie selten die helm wegent
Da man frawen dinen sol*

And those who lie down on the table
As they eat, that is improper;
How rarely did they move their helmets
Where service is paid to ladies.

*Ir sült die kel auch juken nicht
So it ezzent mit plozzter hant
Ob ez aber so geschicht
So nempt hofleich daz gwant*

You shall also not scratch your neck
As you eat, with your bare hand
But if it must happen
Politely use your garment

*Und juket da mit daz zimpt paz
Den ew di hant nicht vnsaber wirt
Die zukappher merkent daz
Wer sülh vnzucht nit verpirt*

And scratch with that, that fits better
As your hand does not get dirty
Onlookers pay attention
Who does not refrain from such unmannerliness

*Ir sült die zend stüren nicht
Mit mezzern als etleicher tut
Vnd als sümleichen noh geschicht
Wer des phligt daz ist nicht gut*

You shall not pick your teeth
With your knife, like some do
And other such things as happen;
Who does this does not do well.

*Wer mit löffeln ezze geren
Kan er da mit nicht heben auf
Der sol den vnflat verperen
Daz ers icht schieb mit vingern auf*

If you like to eat with spoons
And you can not pick up (a morsel) with it
Refrain from the unclean habit
Of pushing it onto the spoon with your fingers.

*Wer ob dem tisch des went sich
Daz er div gürtl weiter lat
So wartent sicherleich auf mich
Er ist nicht fisch piz an dem grat*

He who is used at the table
To loosen his belt,
It surely appears to me
He does not eat fish to the bone (does not do things right)

*Wer ob dem tisch snawtzt sich
Ob er ez reibt in die hant
Er ist ein gauch versich ich mich
Dem ist nicht pezzter zucht pekant*

He who blows his nose at the table
And rubs it off with his hand,
He is as boor, I reckon,
He knows no better manners.

*Ob daz geschicht daz man muz
Dreyn setzen ain schuzzlein
In wirt aller zucht puz
Greiffentz mit anandr drein*

If it should happen that
A new bowl is served to you
You will lose all manners
(If) you grab it all at once

*Wer mit prot ezzen sol
Der mit dem ander ezzen wil
Der sol daz pehuten wol
Ob er tugnt hat so vil*

If you are to eat with bread
And eat (share a bowl) with another
You shall watch well what you do
If you have enough manners.

*Ich hör von sümleich sagen
Ist daz war daz zimpt übl
Daz si ezzen vngetwagen
Den selben müzzen erlamen die knübl*

I hear it told of many -
If it is true, it is bad -
That they eat unwashed.
The fingers should go lame!

*Etleich sint so fröleich gar
Daz si nicht nemen irs munds war
Si ezzen also dunkt mich
Vnd peizzent in die vinger sich
Vnd in die zung hör ich sagen
Wem wil der den schaden klagen*

*Nu phlig wol der zücht dein
Vngaz solst du die weil sein
Als dein gemazz trinken sol
Daz ist hofleich und zimpt wol*

*Wer den vnflat von der nasen nimpt
Vnd von den augen als etleich tut
In die oren greiffen nicht entzimpt
So er izzet di driv sint nicht gut*

*Es ist selten nimmer gut
Der mit den andern ezzen sol
Daz er den gemazzen unreht tut
Mit vbrezzen daz zimpt nicht wol*

*Gen der naht sol niemen ezzen vil
Der wol dez morgentz gezzen hat
Wer sich dik vbrezzen wil
Dem wirt des soten selten sat*

*Vom übrezzen kumt vergift
Und übrig krankhait hör ich gehen
Von frazz vil sünden geschicht
Von trinken ist args vil geschehen*

*Ain hunger ist der pezzter wol
Wan der speise ezzen ze uil
Ez ist weger daz man hunger dol
Der nicht siech wesen wil*

*Von übrezzen kumt vil not
Ze vasnacht und ze ostertagen
Manig tawsent sint von ezzen tot
Daz in verdurben gar di magen*

*War dar umb versalzt sein prot
Daz er vertrinket sein gwant
Chumbt er da von in not
Der muz ain tor sein gnant*

*Swer an durst wil trinken vil
Vnd vil an hunger ezzen wil
Der nehnt wol dem tod sich
Der lebt nicht lang dunkt mich*

Some are even so joyful
That they do not keep control of their mouths,
They eat, it seems to me,
And bite their own fingers
And their tongues, I hear it told.
Who could they complain to?

Now take good care of your manners:
You shall not eat
While your companion drinks,
That is polite and proper.

Who takes the dirt out of his nose
And from his eyes, as many do,
Or puts his fingers in his ears, that is unseemly,
While eating, these three things are improper.

It is rarely a good thing
When you eat in company
That you violate good measure
By overeating, that is unbecoming.

In the evening, nobody should eat much
Who has eaten well in the morning.
If you would overeat heavily
You will have heartburn often.

Overeating causes poisoning
And other illnesses, I heard it say.
Many sins are caused by gluttony,
Much evil comes from drink.

Hunger is better
Than eating too much,
It is better to suffer hunger
If you do not wish to be sick.

Much suffering comes from overeating
At Carnival and Easter
Many thousands died of eating
Because they upset their stomachs.

He who oversalts his bread
So that he drinks away his garment
And suffers poverty from it
He must be called a fool.

He who would drink much without thirst
And eat much without being hungry,
He goes towards his death,
He will not live long, I think.

*Wer auch lützl schibt in munt
Als in der grozz hunger pestet
Er wirt vil selten wol gesunt
Dem ez die leng also get*

And he who puts little in his mouth
Although he feels great hunger,
He will rarely be healthy,
Over long, he will go the same way.

*Vil lawt sint an hunger tot
Vnd wez des selben noch geschicht
Von durst laident manig not
Die doch von durst sterbent nicht*

Many people have died of hunger
And of such things, as it happens,
And many suffer of thirst
Though they do not die of it.

*Got gesegen vns den trank
Der nie gvan anevanch
Vnd nymmer mag end nemen
Der laz uns den trank wol zemen*

God bless us our drink
That never saw a beginning
And may never see an end,
May this drink well befit us .

*Hie vor sprach her Freydank
Gut wein sei der pest trank
Des noch der Tanhawse gicht
Vil haiden des gelawbent nicht*

Freydank said this:
Good wine is the best drink
And thus spoke Tannhäuser:
Many heathens do not believe this.

*Ir sült die haizzen speise
Vermaiden seit ir weise
Swie groz ain hunger ew beste
Div pit tut vil manigem we*

You should avoid hot foods
If you are wise
No matter how great your hunger be
This hurts many.

*Div wirtschaft ist gar entwiht
Swa div spaise ist krank
Ez mag ein wirtschaft haizzen nicht
Ist da nicht prot noch trank*

Proper housekeeping has all fled
Where food is lacking
It can not be called housekeeping at all
Where there is no bread or drink.

*Swer machet ain hohzeit
Vnd wie manig tracht man geit
Da mag kain wirtschaft sein
Da sei nicht gut prot vnd wein*

And if someone makes a feast,
However many courses are served
There is no proper housekeeping
If there is no good bread and wine (with it)

*Wa man des schachzagls gert
Vnd wa mans (brot) von hunger mert
Da mag div kürtzweil geuallen nicht
Vnd ist die wirtschaft gar entwiht*

Where the chessboard is called for
And is steeped in drink out of hunger (5)
Leisure does not please well
And good housekeeping is all absent.

*Div lazzhait raitzet mannigen man
Daz er guts nicht enchan
Daz wirt ain ewiger tot
Vnd pringt manich sel in not*

Sloth leads many men
To not know right any longer
That will be his eternal death
And leads many souls to peril.

*Nu lat ew die zucht wol behagen
E daz si chömen zu iren tagen
Den kinden sol manz niht versagen*

Now let these manners please you well,
And, ere they grow into adulthood,
Children shall not be denied them.

*Wer all zucht behalten kan
Vnd lat die vnzucht vnderwegen
Der wird vor got ain liber man
Mag ers an sein tot gephegen*

*Wer all zucht kann bewaren
Vnd folget nach der zucht wol
Des sel mag vil wol gefaren
So der leib sterben sol*

*Verloren wirt kain wolgezogen man
Kain vngezogen man der kan
Ze himlreich nymmer komen
Also han ich vernomen*

*Chain slunt wirt nymmer weise gar
Des nempt an mangem frazz war
Nicht guts sinns hat auch der slauch
Der nicht acht wan auf den pauch*

*Vbrig speise vnd trunckenhait
Wer ez in der jugent vbn wil
Ez wirt im an dem alter lait
Vnd macht tumber lawte vil*

*Wer in der jugent wirt ain slauch
Vnd mit frazz an sein alter kumpt
Wirt im da von ain grozzer pauch
Wie lützel daz der sel frumpt*

*Ain man sol gut vnd arg vertragen
Vnd da pey zuchtikleich leben
Vnd sol da von nicht gar verzagen
Gat ez im vnderweilen nicht eben*

*Dem nie wart we dem wart nie wol
Der frum ez alls leiden sol
Als im nie lieb noch laid geschah
Paide lieb vnd vngemach*

*Der Tanhawser gemacht hat
Der red mit sümlicher rat
si leret wol für missetat
Der nicht ist frisch piz an grat*

*Dise gut ler hat ain ende
Got an vns alle vnzucht wend
Amen*

Text of Cod. Vindob. 2885 (fol. 39va - 41vb), following Winkler A.: *Selbständige deutsche Tischzuchten des Mittelalters. Texte und Studien*, Phil. Diss. Marburg/Lahn 1982, pp. 64 ff.

Who can live by all these manners
And leave behind all impropriety,
He will be beloved by God
When he may come to his death.

And he who can keep all propriety
And follow it well,
His soul may fare well
When the body comes to die.

No well-mannered man is lost
And no ill-mannered man may
Ever come to heaven,
So I was told.

No glutton ever becomes wise
You can see that in many a great eater.
Neither does the drunkard have good sense
Who cares for nothing but his belly.

Excessive eating and drinking;
Whoever indulges in his youth
Will rue it in his old age;
It makes many a stupid man.

He who becomes a drunkard in his youth
And comes to his old age with gluttony,
He gains a great paunch from this;
How little does this profit the soul!

A man should bear both good and ill
And live properly all the while
And should not despair
If things do not go smoothly at times.

Who never suffered ill never was well,
As he never knew love nor suffering
He shall suffer it all piously,
Both love and ill will.

Tannhäuser has made
This speech with much advice
It teaches well and ill deed
Him who eats fish to the bone (does things properly)

This good teaching ends here.
May God turn away all impropriety from us.
Amen.

1) *zuht* is a difficult word to render because it carries a breadth of meanings similar to the English 'breeding'. I am using 'manners', but there is a strong overtone of self-control and proper upbringing in the original phrase.

2) *hochgemut* is another very broad word that can be anything from nobility of character to good cheer to arrogance. What is probably meant here is that a well-mannered man will live a happy life.

3) '*wasserdahs*' (water-badger) is given as 'Seehund' in Lexer: *Mittelhochdeutsches Taschenwörterbuch*. It is quite possible that there are different dialect meanings, however. It seems implausible that Tannhäuser, born and raised in Austria, ever actually saw a seal.

4) This is an enigmatic phrase. It may be a dig at the house of Welf, erstwhile dukes of Bavaria and Saxony. The putative author Tannhäuser is traditionally associated with Emperor Friedrich II Hohenstaufen, a rival dynasty of the Welfs. Since the dukedoms had not been united since the 1180s, fifty years before Tannhäuser's life, a political background seems far-fetched

5) This is an unclear verse. Winkler amends '*bröt*', reading that where people are reduced to steeping bread because there is nothing else to eat. Of course, if it is read as written, people trying to eat a chess set makes a compelling image in itself.