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HILDEBRANDSLIED

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# THE HILDEBRANDSLIED

*Translated from the* OLD HIGH GERMAN  
*into* ENGLISH ALLITERATIVE VERSE

*By*

FRANCIS A. WOOD



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To

The star of my life and the strength of its striving,  
The ward of the weal that upwells in my breast,  
The chalice of love with its lavish outpouring,  
The home of my heart and its haven of rest.

*Mīnes libes sterno,      du dār mir sterkī farlīhis;  
warta dera wanna,      diu mir wonēt innan brusti;  
dera minna kelih,      du mit miltī mih labōs:  
sō hwār dīna huldī hērisōt,      ist mīn herza heime.*





## THE HILDEBRANDSLIED

The *Hildebrandslied*, or the Lay of Hildebrand, has been discussed, analyzed, and annotated by so many that even the mention of their names would require several pages. Suffice it to say that in all these discussions the poem has been treated from every viewpoint. But my object here is simply to give through an English translation some idea of the meter and contents of this heroic song.

The poem tells us of a combat between father and son. This is a widespread motif found in many other languages. In the older form the outcome is tragic, the father killing the son. Some would therefore see in this an Indo-European myth of winter and summer or night and day. Others claim that from an oriental source the legend traveled from people to people. A third group, with more reason, believe that a saga based on an occurrence that is common to all lands might well have had an independent origin in these various lands. For in the days when war was a pastime as well as an everyday business, and when exile was so common as to give us such words as German *Elend* (OHG. *elilenti* 'anderes Land, Verbannung') and English *wretch* (OE. *wrecca* 'exile; wretch'), combats between father and son might easily arise under any sky or at any time, and might be sung by bards who knew nothing of each other's lays.

The combatants in our poem are connected with historical characters. But history and tradition are

much at variance. According to the former, Theodoric the Great (Dietrich), King of the East Goths, had in childhood been a hostage at Constantinople. In the year 488 A.D. he started on an invasion of Italy, and the next year defeated Odoacer (Ottokar) at Verona.

But the tradition on which the *Hildebrandslied* is based tells us that Dietrich was driven by Ottokar from his native land. With him, to the King of the Huns, goes the young Hildebrand, leaving his wife and little son at home. Many years later Dietrich returns with a conquering host, in which is Hildebrand, now an old man. In the opposing host is Hadubrand, a doughty warrior. Without knowing each other these two, as champions of their respective armies, meet for a trial of arms. But first the elder man asks the younger the name of his father, and learns that his opponent is his own son. The father then reveals his identity. But the son, fearing treachery and because he had heard that his father was dead, refuses to believe that his antagonist is Hildebrand. The father urges and implores, but the son takes this for the signs of cowardice. No warrior of the olden time could then refuse combat. The fight begins, and is at its fiercest when the poem breaks off. But there can be no doubt that it results in the death of the son.

The form in which the poem comes down to us dates from about 800 A.D. But we know that it was copied from an earlier MS and that this earlier MS was written down from memory or dictation. How old the original was we cannot tell, but probably before 750.

The meter is that of the Germanic alliterative poetry. In this each line is divided into two half-lines, each



half-line containing two stressed syllables with an occasional secondary stress in some types. Only stressed syllables are counted as alliterating. So that in any one line not more than four alliterating words would occur, usually not more than three, and often only two. Any vowel may alliterate with any other vowel. As a rule it is the first consonant that alliterates, not the initial combination of consonants. But *sk-* (*sc-*) rimes only with *sk-*, *sp-* with *sp-*, and *st-* with *st-*, never with each other or with any other combination.

Any half-line has a choice of five different types. In the scheme given below the stressed syllable (*arsis*) is indicated by an acute accent, the secondary stress by the grave, and the unstressed syllable or syllables (*thesis*) by  $\times$ . The types are as follows:

A :  $\acute{\text{a}} \times | \acute{\text{a}} \times$  or  $\acute{\text{a}} \grave{\text{a}} | \acute{\text{a}} \times$ , as in 5<sup>r</sup>

B :  $\times \acute{\text{a}} | \times \acute{\text{a}}$ , as in 6<sup>r</sup>

C :  $\times \acute{\text{a}} | \acute{\text{a}} \times$ , as in 41<sup>2</sup>

D :  $\acute{\text{a}} | \acute{\text{a}} \grave{\text{a}} \times$  or  $\acute{\text{a}} | \acute{\text{a}} \times \grave{\text{a}}$ , as in 44<sup>r</sup>

E :  $\acute{\text{a}} \grave{\text{a}} | \acute{\text{a}}$ , as in 14<sup>2</sup>

These types may be varied, (1) by resolving the stress, that is, allowing two short syllables in place of a long one; (2) by increasing the number of syllables in a beginning or middle thesis up to a possible ten; (3) by anacrusis in A, D, and E; (4) by allowing two syllables in the final thesis of A and C; (5) by admitting a thesis after the first arsis in D and E. Besides these are found swell-verses with three arses in each half-line, as in lines 17, 18, 39, 40. They regularly occur in groups and indicate excitement.

The following translation<sup>1</sup> aims to give the spirit as well as the meter of the *Hildebrandslied*. Though not a literal translation, it nevertheless closely follows the thought of the OHG. poem. I have perhaps failed to preserve the ruggedness of the original because I feared to allow myself its metrical license. The modern ear, with its different sense of rhythm, might have been offended by a too close imitation.

Inasmuch as the poem at the time it was written down was archaic in form, I have made use of some archaic words and phrases in the translation. In the arrangement of the lines I have followed Elis Wadstein, *Beiträge zur Erklärung des Hildebrandsliedes*, Göteborg, 1903. It seems to me this gives by far the best sense. Lines or half-lines supplied are put in brackets. Thus lines 67<sup>2</sup>-74 are added to complete the poem—it is hoped in the spirit of the original.

I heard this tale [of hap and harm],  
 That two warriors wielded their weapons amain,  
 Hildebrand and Hadubrand, between two hosts.  
 The father and son fastened their armor,  
 5 Buckled their harness, belted their swords on  
 Over coat of mail as to combat they rode.  
 Hildebrand spake then, the hoary-hair'd warrior,  
 More wise in life's wisdom: he warily asked,  
 And few were his words, who his father was

<sup>1</sup> This was made in the year 1908 substantially as it appears here, and was read at a public lecture at the University of Chicago the summer of the same year. Later appeared Professor Gummere's translation of Hl. in his book: *The Oldest English Epic, Translated in the Original Metres*, New York (Macmillan), 1909, pp. 170-77. Because of this I delayed to publish my translation, but see no cause for putting it off longer. My translation certainly does not infringe upon his copyright.

- 10 In the folk of the foemen.    "[Thy friends would I  
     know,  
 And kindly tell me]    what kin thou dost claim.  
 If thou namest but one,    I shall know then the others:  
 The kin of this kingdom    are couth to me all."  
 Hadubrand answer'd,    Hildebrand's son:
- 15 "This lore I learned    from long ago,  
 From the wise and old    who were of yore,  
 That Hildebrand hight my father:    my name is  
     Hadubrand.  
 Off to the east he wander'd,    the anger of Ottokar  
     fleeing,  
 Marching away with Dietrich,    and many a man  
     went with him.
- 20 He left in the land    a little one lorn,  
 A babe at the breast    in the bower of the bride,  
 Bereft of his rights:    thus he rode to the east.  
 But later Dietrich    lost my father  
 And lived henceforth    a lonely man.
- 25 For the foe of Ottokar,    so fierce and keen,  
 Was the dearest of thanes    to Dietrich his lord.  
 He was fain to fight    where the fray was thick:  
 Known was his bravery    among bold warriors.  
 I can not believe    that he lives longer."
- 30 "I swear by the God    who sways the heavens  
 That the bonds of blood    forbid our strife."  
 Then he unclaspt from his arm    the clinging gold,  
 Which was wrought of coin    that the king had given,  
 The lord of the Huns:    "With love I give it."
- 35 But Hadubrand answer'd,    Hildebrand's son:  
 "With the tip of the spear    one takes the gift  
 From the sharpened edge    of the foeman's shaft.  
 Thou thinkest, old Hun,    thy thoughts are deep,  
 Thou speakest alluring words,    with the spear it  
     would like thee to wound me.

- 40 With untruth art thou come to old age, for trickery  
clings to thee ever.  
It was said to me by seafarers  
Coming west over the wave that war slew him.  
Dead is Hildebrand, Heribrand's son."
- "Great Weirdwielder, woe worth the day!  
45 For sixty winters and summers I wander'd,  
Battling with foemen where blows keen fell.  
From the scarpèd wall unscathed I came.  
Now the son of my loins with the sword will hew  
me;  
He will deal me death or I dash him to earth.
- 50 But now canst thou strike, if strong be thine arm,  
Canst win the harness from so hoary a man,  
And strip the spoils from the stricken foe."  
Hadubrand answer'd, Hildebrand's son:  
"Full well I hold, from thy harness rich,  
55 That thou comest hither from a kindly lord,  
In whose kingdom thou wast not a wandering  
wretch."
- "The heart of a coward would the Hun now have  
Who would shrink from a foe so fain to fight,  
To struggle together. Let each now strive  
60 To see whether today he must bite the dust  
Or may bear from the field the byrnies of both."  
Then first they hurled the hurtling spears  
In sharpest showers that shook the shields.  
Then they clasht with their brands, the battle-  
boards bursting,
- 65 And hewed with might the white linden  
Till they shivered the shields with shattering  
strokes,  
As they wielded their weapons [in wild warfare.  
They thrust and lasht and thundered blows  
Till the blood of the twain forth burst in streams



70 And mingled hot on the hardened heath.  
 Then with might the father all fiercely smote:  
 Through helm he clove down clean to the teeth.  
 Thus he dasht to death his dearest and nearest,  
 The blood of his blood, the bone of his bone.]

A much later version of the same material is found in Dutch and German. Though based on the same tradition, it has no connection with the earlier story. In the later version the two warriors have degenerated into braggart knights whose encounter on the highway is like the quarreling of street brawlers.

The following translation is made from the late Middle High German version printed in Müllenhoff und Scherer's *Denkmäler*, II, 26 ff. The poem consists of riming couplets combined into stanzas of four lines. Each line is divided into two half-lines containing three (or occasionally four) accented syllables. The rhythm is often limping and the rimes not always exact. E.g., the first two lines of the fourth stanza are:

*'Das ensoltu nicht tun,' sprach sich von Bern her Dietrich,  
 'Wan der jung her Alebrant ist mir von herzen lieb.'*

"I will go from the land ariding," said Master Hildebrand,

"On the way that leads straight onward to Bern, the pleasant land.

The place I know no longer, and many a day has past,  
 The years are two and thirty since I saw Lady Utè last."

"Wilt thou go from the land ariding," spake up Duke Abelung,

“Who will meet thee on the greensward?     A valiant  
thane and young.  
Who will meet thee on the marches?     Thy son Sir  
Alebrand.  
Though thou ride with eleven others,     he will tilt with  
thee, spear in hand.”

“If at me the wanton upstart     should ever dare to ride,  
I’ll shatter his shield of linden,     and humble his  
haughty pride.  
I’ll hew in twain his byrnie     with broadsword and with  
spear,  
So that he will run to his mother,     and rue it for a  
year.”

“Now that shalt thou do never,”     said Dietrich, Lord  
of Bern.

“To Alebrand, the younker,     my heart in love doth  
turn.  
Thou shalt bespeak him softly,     thy lord’s behest now  
hear,  
That he may grant thee passage     if he hold my favor  
dear.”

As he rode to the Garden of Roses,     where Dietrich’s  
sway doth hold,  
There he found great strife and stour     from a warrior  
strong and bold:  
A warrior young and sturdy     rode up with spear in  
hand:  
“Now tell me, thou old graybeard,     what seekest thou  
in this land?”

Thy harness is bright and shining,     as wert thou of  
royal kind.



Thou thinkest me, a younker, with glaring eyes to  
blind.

At home shouldst thou abide now and of thyself  
shouldst take

Good care by the glowing ingle." The gray-beard  
laugh'd and spake:

"Should I abide at home now and by the fireside cling?  
My heart for all these many years was set on wander-  
ing,

On wandering and warfare until my dying day.

In doing this, my stripling, my beard is growing  
gray."

"I will pluck thy beard so hoary, that know to thy  
disgrace,

Until the blood rose-color'd shall trickle down thy  
face.

Thy buckler and thy harness must thou give up to me.  
Besides thou art my captive if thou alive wouldst  
be."

"My buckler and my harness have often saved my life.  
I trust the Lord of heaven I shall win to-day in strife."

Thereupon they ceast from speaking, each drew his  
own keen brand;

And what both warriors long'd for was ready at their  
hand.

I know not how the stripling the blows on the gray-  
beard laid

So that the hoary Hildebrand for once was sore  
afraid.

He nimbly sprang far backward, full seven yards, I  
trow.

“How now, my little stripling, that was a woman’s  
blow.”

“If I learn’d that from women, ’twere shame upon my  
hand;  
For I have many knights and squires within my  
father’s land,  
And I have many knights and counts all at my  
father’s court,  
And what I have not learn’d as yet shall be my future  
sport.”

He grab’d him by the middle, where he was lank and  
lean,  
And swinging hurl’d him backward far out upon the  
green.

“Now tell me, little stripling, for now will I thee shrive,  
If so thou beest a Wolfing, thou mayest remain alive.

Who rubs against old kettles is smircht, as I am told,  
As it befalls thee, younker, from me a warrior old.  
Thy shrift must now be given upon the heath so green,  
I tell thee now in earnest, thou younker bold and  
keen.”

“Of wolves thou just now spakest that on the wold do  
roam.

I am a thane full noble, and Greece was once my home.  
My mother is Lady Utè, a duchess proud and grand,  
And my much beloved father is the aged Hildebrand.”

“If thy mother is Lady Utè, a duchess proud and grand,  
Then I am thy dear father, the aged Hildebrand.”  
He open’d his golden helmet and kist his lips so red.  
“Now God be thank’t in heaven that neither of us is  
dead.”

“Ah father, dearest father, the wounds I gave to thee,  
I would they three times over had fallen upon me.”

“Now say no more, I pray thee, my sorrows now are  
done,  
Since God has brought together the father and his  
son.”

It lasted from the noonday until the vespertide,  
The while the younker Alebrand into the town did  
ride.

What wore he on his helmet? A glittering wreath of  
gold.

Whom kept he ever by his side? His father dear and  
old.

He led him to his mother's house, gave him the chosen  
seat.

This seem'd to the careful mother an honor all un-  
meet.

“Ah son, my well beloved, is this an honor fit  
That a captive man should ever at the head of the  
table sit?”

“Now hold your peace, dear mother, and let me set  
you right:

He met me 'mong the heather, and might have slain  
me quite.

And hear ye, dearest mother, no captive shall he be.  
It is Hildebrand the aged, and he is dear to me.

Come, mother, dearest mother, and pay him honor  
fine.”

Straightway she rose and fill'd his cup with mellow-  
hearted wine.

What glitter'd on his finger? A ring of gold she knew.  
This dropt he in the goblet of his wife so dear and true.

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