The smaller (religious) poetic monuments in early Middle High German typically present us with a variety of problems, first in the evaluation of their transmission and in the provision an edition, and secondly in the interpretation of their social and literary-historical position. Judgements on these works are frequently passed on without question from one literary history to another (admittedly with occasional divergences), and those deemed least significant are sometimes ignored completely. Nevertheless, in the period between around 1050 and 1170, when the entire German vernacular literary output can be contained in a handful of modern volumes, careful attention even to those smallest works is of some importance. Friedrich Maurer noted with regret in the introduction to the final volume of his edition of the texts that he would not be able to provide a Sachkommentar on the various individual works.1 Such commentaries have been provided in some instances, usually for the more extensive poems such as Ezzos Gesang or the Summa Theologiae, but many of the smaller pieces remain largely neglected. Considerations of the early Middle High German poems on a broad basis are in any case also relatively rare. It is, nevertheless, worth examining even those texts of apparently small significance for what they may reveal about artistic intent and about the interaction with theology at a time in which the vernacular is in the immediate process of establishing itself as a literary medium. The ideas remain principally theological; the function of these works is principally (if not exclusively) literary in essence, however, given that a practical-theological use, such as an actual hymnic role within the liturgy, is unlikely.

Contextualisation at this stage, too, is double-edged: the vernacular works need to be regarded against the background of equivalent productions for which the medium of Latin was used; however, care must be taken (and it is even more difficult when we are faced with a fragment) to avoid making value judgements that do not set vernacular pieces against the far more developed and hence potentially more

sophisticated Latin literature. Equally we are faced with quite specific problems of evaluation: individual features -- such as brief and unelaborated allusions to exegetical commonplaces, for example -- might simply indicate the nature of the audience as one expected to grasp such points precisely without further explanation. Even apparent chevilles (as the line als wir id wale wizzen, v. 6 of the text under discussion here) may be assessed (negatively) on style grounds, but may also betoken an intentional inclusivity of poetic voice and audience.

The case of the Middle (Ripuarian) Franconian fragment from the Rhineland, (possibly from the region of Cologne) known by the modern designation Von Christi Geburt provides a clear demonstration of the situation. The scraps of surviving manuscript text are in Innsbruck, were edited twice in the nineteenth century, and then again in the most comprehensive of the more recent collections of early Middle High German poetry, that by Friedrich Maurer. In