

The *Nibelungenlied*: Epic vs. Romance

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By some of the criteria that might be applied, the *Nibelungenlied*, written in the first decade of the thirteenth century, is the only work written in German that possibly deserves the name epic. It is not of course the only one of epic scale (to apply first the crudest criterion of all); nevertheless, with nearly ten thousand eight-beat lines of Middle High German, it is substantial enough. As for other criteria, it is true enough to say that the *Nibelungenlied* has played a major part in shaping the general understanding of the term 'epic' by German scholars.

It must also be doubted whether close proximity or even a close relationship to an oral tradition has much relevance as a criterion in this particular case. The question as to the oral ancestry of the *Nibelungenlied* is of considerable interest of course.¹ But it shows few of those stylistic features which lead scholars to conjecture immediate oral sources in the case of Homer. The German work exhibits a high level of structural and linguistic sophistication; even if all this is owed to the last poet alone, one would still have to judge the work artistically far removed from its oral sources. Moreover, Kullmann has demonstrated that the oral poetry theory is not necessarily universal; what has been recorded in recent times in the south Slavic states is not likely to be a clear reflection of what happened in twelfth century Germany.²

On the other hand, the *Nibelungenlied* is virtually the only work in German to take the heroic characters of a Germanic past, and to depict for us their deeds of yore on a grand epic scale in a wondrous *mélange* of

¹ Cf. K.H.R. Borghart, *Das Nibelungenlied. Die Spuren mündlichen Ursprungs in schriftlicher Überlieferung*, (Amsterdam 1977), and M. Curschmann, "Nibelungenlied und Nibelungenklage. Über Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im Prozess der Episierung" in: *Deutsche Literatur im Mittelalter. Kontakte und Perspektiven*, (Stuttgart 1979), S.94.

² Kullmann, "Oral poetry theory and Neoanalysis in Homeric research." in *Greek-Roman and Byzantine Studies* 25(1984)307-323.

myth and distorted history. The anonymous poet is not much given to passing moral comment on what he relates, apart from general regrets at the treachery and frequent deploring of so much *leid*. The heroic feats are, superficially at least (and of this there is more to be said), shown for their own sake; superhuman strength, endurance, resolution and steadfastness are held up for our admiration. If this description may be allowed to convey a definition of 'epic', then it is this definition which underlies the general assignment of the *Nibelungenlied* to the category. The heroic ethos, the heroic age, heroic deeds and, to no small extent, grand size make up the most useful definition of epic in German.³

To non-Germanists it may seem a cause for wonder that such a work was not written in Germany well before the thirteenth century, given the extensive evidence elsewhere for a long and active heroic era for the Germanic peoples. The umbrous age of the migrations, a span of a thousand years following the time of Christ when Germanic peoples came gradually to dominate all Europe north of the Alps, spawned many a fine tale of blood and guts and courage undaunted. The evidence is all there, most notably in the traditions of other Germanic peoples, the Saxons and the Nordic races.

But to Germany itself the art of writing came comparatively late; and when it came, it came as the well-directed instrument of a new monastic culture. With few exceptions, the first writers of German were indifferent to the barbarous heroic matter, where not actually hostile. Nothing heroic remains from the Carolingian age but a few worthy fragments of lays, chance survivals. Then, before secular writing on any scale appears, the heroic age is past; a new matter comes in with the fanciful Arthurian romances and the exciting love-cult from France.⁴ In recognising this, our surprise is less at the lateness of the epic *Nibelungenlied* than at the fact it was written down at all when it was. And yet, the survival of manuscripts indicates its great popularity.

For a long time the *Nibelungenlied* was felt simply to be an exception to the fashion of its own time. After all, the first decade of the thirteenth century also sees the appearance of Germany's two greatest romances: the *Parzival* of Wolfram and the *Tristan* of Gotfried. The *Nibelungenlied* was easily lodged in a different category. It was, after all, the German National Epic — what proud nation can be without one?⁵

³ The phrase "heroic epic" is perhaps the apt one here, cf. S.L. Wailes, "The *Nibelungenlied* as heroic epic" in F.J. Oinas, *Heroic epic and saga. An introduction to the world's great folk-epic*, (Bloomington and London 1978), pp.120 - 143.

⁴ At the same time it is possible to discern a certain continuing (or revived?) interest in heroic matter in the thirteenth century: e.g. *Biterolf und Dietlieb*, Türlin's *Die Krone* and *Waltherius*.

⁵ Friedrich von der Hagen, *Der Nibelungen Lied in der Ursprache mit den Lesarten der verschiedenen Handschriften*, (Berlin 1810), H. Naumann, "Das *Nibelungenlied*. Eine staufische

Here, after all, we have Sivrit the marvellous dragon-slayer doing his stuff, grinding the faces of the Danes into the ground; and here German history is turned into noble tragedy: the doom of the royal house of Burgundy, of the sons of Gjuki. Beside the refined chivalry of the contemporary romances the tone of the *Nibelungenlied* is heroic too: grand and direct or raw and brutal, whichever epithets you may prefer. Some eighteenth and nineteenth century readers actually judged it superior in certain respects to the *Iliad*.⁶

But as soon as scholarship got beyond investigating the *Stoffgeschichte* to look at the work itself, the basis for calling it purely heroic began to look insecure; questions even began to be asked about whether it was epic.⁷

It is essential here, because of the definitions habitually used by German scholars, to preserve Ker's polar contrast of epic and romance as genres.⁸ To do otherwise would simply require us to find other, equivalent terms for describing what is peculiar about the *Nibelungenlied* as a heroic work in an age of feudalism. Accepting this, we may say at once that the work's epic nature has been severely compromised by the new spirit of romance at the outset of the thirteenth century. Furthermore, this compromise is not merely a matter of superficiality, but involves matters quite essential to its existence as a work on this 'epic' scale.

The Lays of the elder Icelandic Edda present the matter of the *Nibelungenlied* in its most ancient known form. These lays, originally the products of a pre-literate era, were not recorded until some 60 years after the date of the *Nibelungenlied* however; we should beware of seeing them as reliably "authentic" in every aspect. They present us with two tales that are related by little more than their common characters: on the one hand the murder of Sigurd (Sivrit); on the other the downfall of the Burgundians. There is in the latter a quite unconvincing, and surely unauthentic, hint that Attila is merely avenging the death of his sister Brünnhilde when he kills his wife's brothers. More significantly, one version of the tale of Sigurd's murder mentions a raven's dark prophecy that the Burgundians will meet their end at the hands of Attila. But the Icelandic sources contain no suggestion that this doom represents just deserts for the dastardly deed they have done. Least of all do they hint that Guthrun harbours any thoughts of revenge against her brothers for the

Elegie oder ein deutsches Nationalepos?" *DVjs* 42(1942)41-59; Friedrich Panzer, *Das Nibelungenlied. Entstehung und Gestalt*, (Stuttgart and Köln 1955), p.467.

⁶ A.W. Schlegel, *Geschichte der romantischen Literatur in Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, Bd 4, (Stuttgart 1965), p.110.

⁷ G. Holz in *Der Sagenkreis der Nibelungen*, (Leipzig 1907), p. 31, with the phrase "ein ritterliches epos" is one of the first to acknowledge what the work owes to its own age.

⁸ W.P.Ker, *Epic and romance*, (London 1957).

killing. Rather she tries, despite her wretched treatment at their hands, to warn them of the Hunnish leader's murderous intent. And when they are dead, she actually avenges *them*, burning down the hall over Attila and his men while they are powerless from inebriation. If an epic poem was possible using the story in this form - a tale of supreme sibling-loyalty, of the sister who slays her husband to avenge her brothers - there is no evidence it was ever attempted. And for the twelfth century, major changes were needed; a spouse-killing could no longer be made acceptable.

The essentials of the Sivrit story remain in the *Nibelungenlied*, though Brünnhilde's ring of fire is gone, to be replaced by a sort of triathlon, a competition of physical strength which makes her a figure much more analogous to Sivrit himself. The second part, the Attila matter, is drastically altered. Here, Kriemhild (as Guthrun is now called) marries Attila in order to procure the means of avenging herself on her brothers for Sivrit's murder; she pursues this aim quite ruthlessly to a successful end. Here it is the wronged spouse who initiates the final slaughter; this frequently discussed shift from *Sippentreue* to *Gattentreue* or, conversely, from *Gattenverrat* to *Sippenverrat*, an adaptation to the social values of a new age, is what makes the tale viable as an epic of the High Middle Ages. It is surely not possible to imagine any of our ancient Germanic heroes behaving like this to a brother out of loyalty to love. The Icelandic sagas have instances enough of wives and betrothed becoming a significant factor in the incessant feuding, but for any warrior in the England of Alfred or the Germany of the *Hildebrandlied* actually to kill his own siblings to avenge a spouse is scarcely conceivable. There the bond of kinship remained supreme; whatever bond of affection there might have been between husband and wife rated little mention. Ironically enough, the dying Sivrit in the *Nibelungenlied* prefers to entrust his wife to her own murderous brothers rather than to his own people back at Xanten. But by so doing he only gives them the chance to wrong her further, which they promptly do.

Plainly it is too simplistic to argue that the shift from kin-loyalty to spouse-loyalty was only possible after the twelfth century had elevated love - or more specifically, the literary sentimentality surrounding sexual attraction - to such moral heights. Saxo Grammaticus in his well-known statement concerning the *notissimae perfidii Kriemhildae* provides clear evidence that the shift in the story was established well before the mid-twelfth century, that is to say, before the first dateable poem of courtly love had been written in Germany. Neither Saxo nor the *Nibelungenlied*, moreover, see Kriemhild's bitter revenge as in any way laudable. At the same time it is surely true that the shift makes little sense

without the general ethical climate-change of the preceding centuries, a renunciation of the fierce and warlike clan-loyalties of the migrations period to a milder Christian spirit of spouse-loyalty and eventually to the moral school of romantic love.

Without this shift, the *Nibelungenlied*, as a work of epic proportions combining the two tales of Sivrit's murder and the downfall of the Burgundians with reasonably consistent characterisation, was hardly possible. And this shift, no less than an earlier want of literacy, is the reason why it first appears only in the thirteenth century; the changed tenor of the age was needed to make it. The story was thus obliged to abandon a fundamental part of its roots in the native social and ethical soil of heroism, looking for new inspiration from a new age, in order to become a coherent whole. But if the loyalty-shift is certainly a *sine qua non*, it is still only a beginning in the adaptation the story had to make; much more is lost from the heroic character of the matter in locating it in an age of chivalry.

The foremost gain from the shift lies in the consistency of characterisation won by the figure of Kriemhild. It is often claimed that she is the central character of the thirteenth century work.⁹ In a sense this is so: the work begins with her oneiromantic intimations of a fatal love, and ends with the universal doom which that love invoked. Yet others still find her characterisation implausible, in particular the move from the demure courtly maiden of the first half, to the *valandinne*, the 'she-devil', of the second. Equally one might argue that the central thread is Sivrit; if his love and wooing fill the first half, then he provides thereby the engine of the rest: his loss inspires in Kriemhild that implacable hatred which drives all the second half.¹⁰ I would contend that the real 'hero' here is perhaps love itself, just as it is in *Erec et Eneide*, in *Yvain*, and, if in a somewhat changed manner, in *Parzival* and *Tristan* too. True to the habit of the High Middle Ages, characterisation is not so much used to portray a rounded personality as to show how an individual responds to those moral forces which should shape and determine his life. Of these love is one of the greatest.¹¹

Sivrit's heroic deeds, those that we are shown, are often made to seem a trifle ridiculous. Though we should admire them as heroic deeds

⁹ B. Nagel, *Das Nibelungenlied. Stoff - Form - Ethos*, (Frankfurt/M 1965), p.102. describes the *Nibelungenlied* simply as a 'Kriemhildroman'. Similarly Körner, J., *Das Nibelungenlied*, (Leipzig und Berlin 1921), p.60.

¹⁰ B. Nagel (note 8) applies the term 'Siegfriedroman'.

¹¹ Cf. G. Schweikle, "Das NL - ein heroisch-tragischer Liebesroman?" in: J. Kühnel et al (ed.), *De poetis mediæ aevi quaestiones. Festschrift Käthe Hamburger*, (Göppingen 1981), (GAG 335), pp. 59 - 84, and also Magdalena Revue, "L'amour dans le Nibelungenlied" in: Danielle Buschinger, (ed.) *Amour, mariage et transgressions au Moyen Age*, (Göppingen 1984), (GAG 420) pp.63- 72.

no doubt, they are nevertheless clearly done for love. Coming to Burgundy expressly to woo Kriemhild, he single-handedly conquers the Saxons and the Danes and is rewarded with a glimpse of her. He then agrees to conquer Brünnhilde on the clear understanding that Kriemhild will be the prize. The slaying of the dragon, an earlier adventure which cannot be linked to this love and is therefore quite superfluous here - except as an explanation for his invulnerability - is tossed off in *three* lines of report by another character.¹² The winning of the Nibelungen hoard however, likewise outlined when Sivrit first comes to Worms, is actually re-enacted as a component of the Iceland adventure, or at least part of it is. No attempt is made to provide a consistent motivation for Sivrit in this, making it seem one of the most absurd parts of the work. He returns to the hiding-place of his treasure disguised as a stranger, and proceeds to fight for it as an intruder, much like a mafia-boss breaking into his own headquarters, cheating the security and beating up the guards just to test the system and to prove that he is still tougher and more wily than all of them. To me this seems inexplicable, unless one supposes the poet wished simply to suggest how all this, too, was done for love's sake.

But if love is what inspires Sivrit's heroism, it is no less his doom: and by this I don't mean simply the quaint, heart-shaped linden-leaf - the twelfth century's usual poetic symbol of love - which provides the necessary Achilles' heel by falling on his back when he bathes in the dragon's blood. The true weak spot is Kriemhild, who is weak because she loves him. Hagen is able to play upon her earnest desire to protect him, thus inveigling her into betraying just where the lime-leaf fell. Outwitted, love puts Sivrit's secret in the hands of his arch-enemy.

Given the larger-than-life, heroic stature of Sivrit, we need hardly wonder that his heroic love-service appears as something altogether grander than anything performed by Sir Gawain or Sir Lancelot. Nor, given that we are at the beginning of the thirteenth century, can we wonder if it arouses a matching and reciprocal passion in the perfect courtly maiden Kriemhild. She is first described to us as an ideal, a recipient of love; in the early *aventiuren* the poet calls on many of the linguistic and metaphorical resources of twelfth century *minnesang* to present these two as the perfect, young, courtly couple. It is no wonder too that, since by the very definitions common in the twelfth century love is absolutely inextinguishable, her passion turns to a hatred no less inextinguishable when it is despoiled of that which aroused it.

But if the protagonist in the *Nibelungenlied* is love, a force otherwise so positive and irresistible in the literature of the courtly age of

¹² Hagen in 100, 2-4.

Germany (and unknown, at least in this form. to its heroic age) what possible antagonist is there to undo it? What actually motivates the grim Hagen? The poet has quite skilfully blended the ancient motif of a Brünnhilde affronted in her honour with a plausible characterisation of Hagen as a political murderer. Social considerations, in the broadest sense, are what motivate him. In this we may seem less far removed from the heroic ethos of the epic, where honour and loyalty to a leader are the prevailing inspirations. It is certainly true that Hagen, though well-developed and rounded, seems of all the characters most unchanged from the skimpy picture of him we can elicit from the Icelandic sources. Nevertheless, this Hagen is a truly twelfth century character, and his loyalties sometimes betray it. It is where these loyalties conflict with others, specifically with the loyalties of love, that the elements of romance and epic conflict most strikingly in the work; this conflict is that which specifically makes the character of the *Nibelungenlied*.¹³

At the same time, the king to whom Hagen is so unswervingly loyal is scarcely what any self-respecting sixth-century germanic warrior would have called a king. Gunther is, not to mince words, a bit of a wimp. Except at the end of the work, where the poet pulls out all stops for a grand heroic finale, and cowardice would be aesthetically pointless anyway since there is nothing left for any of the Burgundians to do but die with his boots on, Gunther does nothing worthy of note; and he does not a few things that are unworthy of note. He is decidedly a moral coward, and the best thing that can be said about his physical courage until that magnificent last stand in Attila's hall, is that at least he manages to conceal his terror when confronted by the muscular, hectoring Brünnhilde. Hagen can scarcely have owed loyalty to this man for his fittingness as a leader, because he is the strongest hero. Yet Hagen is nothing if not a discerning man (he is repeatedly portrayed as the brains behind the whole Burgundian establishment). So whence springs his loyalty? The clue to this question comes so early that a twelfth century audience would never have reached the point of asking it. On Sivrit's first arrival at Worms, challenging all the Burgundians single-handedly to a fight and threatening in heroic style to wrest their lands from them, Gunther's outraged response is simply to invoke against this violence a legal claim: *Wie het ich daz verdienet ... des min vater lange mit eren hat gepflegen, daz wir daz solden verliesen von iemannes kraft?*¹⁴ While the dialogue goes to and fro in this vein, Hagen stands silent for a noticeably long time; finally, with a fine prophetic irony, he declares darkly: *... uns mac wol wesen leit, allen dinen degenen, daz er*

¹³ For this view of the work see in general H.Rupp, "Das Nibelungenlied - eine politische Dichtung", *WW* 35(1985)166-176.

¹⁴ 112, 1-3

ie gereit durch striten her ze Rine. er soltez haben lan. im heten mine herren solher leide niht getan¹⁵ - "my lords would never have done him such an affront".

Hagen is no lover of such swashbuckling heroics as Sivrit here represents. Rather he identifies himself entirely with the legality and propriety of Gunther's title and its possession. Lawful and proper kingship is what he upholds, not the man Gunther as such. A law-and-order man, faithful to the juristic rule which the institution of medieval monarchy embodies, ready to defend the orderly rule of a society where due constitutional and legal claims are respected, he incorporates an exclusive loyalty to the idea of the state, that totalitarian commitment which suffers no rivals. It is hardly surprising that Hagen has no interest in love and the lovelier sex - or indeed that fair maidens are wont to shudder when protocol requires them to kiss him. If the text does not labour the point of Hagen's loyalty to the law rather than the man, it is surely because it simply went without saying in the twelfth century climate. Unlike in that earlier age which, under the pressure of fact, openly acknowledged the rule of might and sung its praises in many a lay, by the twelfth century political authority is generally conceived as a matter of legitimacy: dukes are dukes because they inherited the title, or received it from a king who, if not in the case of Germany a hereditary monarch, was elected by a no less proper procedure of law. The literature of the time knows a fair number of other weak kings (King Mark is an obvious instance); this manifestation of concern at the consequences of the principle of constitutional and legal rule is at the same time an acknowledgement of that principle. All Europe had slowly learnt the lesson: political chaos could ensue where the fortuitous weakness of the king's person - it may of course be only a relative weakness - was seen as weakening his claim to the throne; and that political chaos was a greater evil than to be ruled by weakness. In the *chansons de geste* weak kings are so numerous that it has been recently suggested this genre had here, and in many other points, no small influence on the *Nibelungendichter*.¹⁶

Of course, constitutional, legal rule of this sort is successful only as long as all respect it utterly, like Hagen. If a Ghengis Khan sweeps in from the east (or a Sivrit from the north), eager to grab all he can in defiance of constitutional rights, then only military might can oppose him. It seems to be one of the poet's concerns to show how the rule of law is only as strong as the force which upholds it - policemen must of necessity carry guns and

¹⁵ 121, 1-4.

¹⁶ Alois Wolff, "Nibelungenlied — chanson de geste — höfischer Roman. Zur Problematik der Verschriftlichung der deutschen Nibelungensagen" 171-201. *Passauer Nibelungengespräche 1985*, (ed.) F.P. Knapp, (Heidelberg 1986), pp. 124- 151.

kings must have armies.

Sivrit's arrival at Worms seems indeed like an invasion from an earlier, heroic age bursting in on the orderly world of Burgundy, an age where might could supplant right. It is significant how the blow is parried: it is certainly not by any means which Hagen, as the supreme exponent of legality, can wield. If he is so long silent at that first meeting we may be sure, knowing Hagen, that this quietness is not just respect for the word of his lawful monarch, but also dumbfoundedness. He, and he alone, knows Sivrit and knows what an unopposable threat he presents. Neither Hagen nor the poem's reader need harbour any doubt that if Sivrit makes the threat real, he will win. In a moment he could slaughter the entire court and every Burgundian soldier it could muster to oppose him. Hagen can rack his agile brain in vain; the lawful society he upholds has no means to handle such a lawless menace as this. It is striking that when at last Hagen rises to rid the land of this continuing danger (for so he sees it), he himself must resort to the means of lawlessness, to a treacherous murder. At that first meeting he is rescued (which is to say, Burgundy is rescued) by another force already lodged in the belligerent Sivrit's heart: the loveliness of the King's sister. Just as battle seems inevitable and the doom of the Burgundians sealed, the poet tells us simply: *Do gedâhte ouch Sivrit an die hêrlîchen meit*.¹⁷ As he remembers what he actually came here for, all his hostility is quickly dissolved in sweet amity; Gernot, the elder of the king's two brothers, offers hospitality and the visitor accepts. A friendship begins, and Sivrit becomes the military champion of the Burgundians. For them he wins the war with the Saxons and the Danes, to be rewarded with Kriemhild's company; he strikes a bargain with Gunther to win him Brünnhilde's hand, in exchange for Kriemhild's. In what seems the perfect twelfth century solution, love has tamed the anti-social force and made a useful instrument of it for maintaining the lawful state.

But to Hagen this cannot seem the perfect solution at all. After all, as Ovid taught the High Middle Ages (and no doubt nature did too), love is no reasonable thing; it does not willingly submit to any rules. A whole generation of *minnesänger*, contemporaries of our *Nibelungendichter*, spent their idle hours lamenting what an irrational force love is, so unpredictable in its onset, so unamenable to restraint. To the totalitarian Hagen it must seem that this love which has supposedly tamed Sivrit is little better (if at all) than the violence he first evinced; to the constitutional state it owes no loyalty and obedience whatsoever, and only so long as its interests and those of the state coincide can it be relied on. What will

¹⁷ 123, 4.

happen if these interests diverge, or even conflict?

The erotic drive, previously damned by centuries of Augustinian asceticism, is seen afresh by the twelfth century as a prominent part of the *natural* in man. It is rehabilitated by a new emphasis on the Creator God, one who made nature and saw that it was good. Just *how* it was that love could be ethically good, remained obscure to the poets of the 12th century, yet it remained an unshakeable article of their faith that somehow this was so. In every romance of the period, from Hartmann von Aue through to Gotfried and Wolfram, the question is implicitly asked as to the virtue of *minne*. In Hagen's behaviour, in his distrust of Sivrit and desperate treachery, we see just another version of that question.

The heroic grandeur of Sivrit, those larger-than-life qualities that make him so 'epic' a figure, are here made part of the metaphorical language of the twelfth century, standing for the natural in man, the impulsive and irrational, the anarchic force which menaces a society bound by necessary human laws. The sheer immensity of his love, immense as his natural strength, is a measure of how that era saw it. In the same metaphorical way we may view both the figure of Brünnhilde, near-equal in natural strength to Sivrit, and Gunther's aspiration to subdue her and win her in marriage. So society would in fact bind love with the control of its laws - in marriage. Yet Gunther cannot do this without Sivrit's help: much as it may wish to, society has no means of its own to restrain the violent in us; it must simply use what superior violence it can - policemen must indeed carry guns. While the era of chivalry might boldly try to portray its sophisticated love-cult as having tamed the barbarism of an earlier age, there remain always those sceptics who ask how thorough is the taming. How can one say that Sivrit, in submitting to the civilised demands of decent society at Burgundy for the sake of winning his love, has in fact *submitted* to morality itself, acknowledging its superiority? Love is merely pursuing its own end with cunning. What will stop love at some future time, its end once gained, from turning its irresistible and destructive force against society? This prospect is what Hagen cannot contemplate. His fears seem to be coming true in the famous quarrel of the queens, when Kriemhild asserts the superiority of her husband over the king. *ich han einen man, daz elliu disiu riche ze sinen handen solden stan*, declares Kriemhild. By this, Hagen is driven to murder; so he provokes a frustrated love to cause just that destruction in the second half of the work which he had sought to avert.

Hagen's inability to trust Sivrit is the logical product of his representative role in the metaphorical argument of the work. Given that his loyalty to the legal, social order is absolute, he can never put confidence in a power that conforms only while love, rather than the law,

bids it to do so. While he skilfully exploits the power of love's affection in Sivrit - it is he who suggests sending him against the Danes, and he who proposes enlisting the hero's help for the winning of Brünnhilde - he just as skilfully uses it eventually to encompass Sivrit's murder. And Hagen is, in the language of the metaphor, quite right. Society had to resort to deceit, not law, to persuade love, in the figure of Brunnhilde, that she must submit. Once this deceit is made public by Kriemhild's angry assertions, Hagen sees no choice but to destroy the threat with another deceit. Night and day he murmurs at Gunther's ear how they would control many lands if Sivrit were gone.

While in the deceit of which Brünnhilde is made victim the poet appears to suggest that all this subjugation of love to the social order is but empty pretence, he is otherwise at pains to stress that there was no actual threat from a Sivrit who was prey to love. After that initial scene at Worms, just as soon as the thought of Kriemhild has rendered him docile, Sivrit never once does anything at all to menace the state of Burgundy - on the contrary he is its most reliable and useful ally, and a friend. 'What a treacherous murder!' the poet cries time and again. 'What had he done to deserve it?' But that is only the poet speaking. Hagen does the murder because Burgundy cannot control Sivrit - and because to him the very possibility of a Sivrit uncontrolled cannot be countenanced.

From this situation springs the whole tragic irony of the second half: there was no threat, until Hagen, by his opposing it, created one. With Sivrit lost, the love he embodied turns to hatred; the long, blood-steeped revenge of Kriemhild naturally follows. By trying to annihilate the threat he so feared, Hagen actually provoked it, calling down Burgundy's destruction.

This savage twist is enough to carry all the second half of the work. Indeed the sort of metaphorical argument outlined above is largely missing from the second part of the work, except in as far as the implication of the first part places it there. Heroism and grand events stand in the foreground here. The resolve of the Burgundians rather to die defiant and valiant in battle than to surrender meekly, inspired by Hagen's heroism, is what gives the work epic flavour and scale here. In this way a fundamental, though by no means irreconcilable, difference in character remains between the two halves of the work; it is as though the process of blending those disparate sources evidenced in the Icelandic is still not really complete. Such a difference makes me sympathetic to the view that there was in fact an earlier work which is now lost. This belief, on which scholarship has waxed hot and cold over the years, was first advanced by Andreas Heusler

himself¹⁸; it conceives a text, generally known as *Diu ältere nôt*, written about the mid-twelfth century, which recounts in detail the fall of the Burgundians, but only summarises by way of an introduction the murder of Sivrit preceding it. While the existence of this prior work seems doomed to remain conjectural, it would presumably have contained, perhaps for the first time, another character who serves almost more than any other to give dramatic tension to the second half: the entirely fictional Margrave Ruedeger von Pöchlarn. Ruedeger's appearance in the *Thidrekssaga* justifies the claim that he is not the invention of our poet. In his figure no immediate relationship to the themes I have already discussed can be discerned. Nonetheless, he too is truly a twelfth century one. I perceive this not so much in his conflict of loyalties (in the final conflict he is bound to both sides) as in his own view of his predicament: he sees the potential breach of the feudal bonds as an act against God, necessitating forfeiture of the soul. For him, vassalage is a divine ordinance; but so, and no less, is the obligation imparted by hospitality. One may wonder in what way this problem is resolved for him by seeking death in battle with the Burgundians, though his ending does make one of the most poignantly tragic moments of the entire work.¹⁹ No-one, I think, has ever made the claim of formal perfection for the *Nibelungenlied*; rather its structural flaws are outweighed by its great moments.

If one may characterise the *Nibelungenlied* as a work born out of its time, then one must agree that it has adapted itself tolerably well to its new setting. Epic and romance were surely never as diametrically opposed as W.P.Ker suggested (he was, truth to tell, no lover of romance). It is a simple truism that the romance owes a lot to the epic, indeed that it emerges from it. Generations of German scholarship have wrestled to come to terms with the nature of the *Nibelungenlied*, a work perched on the cusp that separates the two categories.²⁰ Behind these efforts one suspects sometimes a die-hard conviction that works of literature must, like plants and animals, always exist according both to species and individuality. *Gattung* is crucial. Thus we have seen the work termed a *höfisches Epos*,²¹ a *Ritterepos*,²² a *höfischer Heldenroman*,²³ and so on

¹⁸ A. Heusler, *Nibelungensage und Nibelungennot*, (Dortmund, 1965), p.37f.

¹⁹ The issue is discussed by A. Haas, *Todesbilder im Mittelalter. Fakten und Hinweise in der deutschen Literatur*, (Darmstadt 1989), p.138f.

²⁰ C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, (London 1952), p.547, describes it as standing "right on the border between the heroic poetry and romance". Cf. also Nelly Dürrenmatt, *Das Nibelungenlied im Kreis der höfischen Dichtung*, (Bern 1945), and W. Haug, "Höfische Idealität und heroische Tradition im Nibelungenlied" in: *Colloquio italo-germanico sull tema il nibelunghi*, (Roma 1974), 35 - 50.

²¹ Hans Naumann, "Stand der Nibelungenforschung" *ZfdK* 41(1927) 1-17.

²² Bodo Mergell, "Nibelungenlied und höfischer Roman" *Euphorion* 45(1950) 305-336.

²³ Helmut de Boor, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, II, (Munich 1953), p.156.

— there is hardly a change that has not been rung on the half-dozen words.²⁴

But in its uniqueness the work does not simply blend terms like this. Epic and romance elements are played off one against the other in such a manner as to generate fine dramatic tension. The general tenor of the work is heroic, and its *Ästhetik* also is that of the epic. But these elements are employed by the poet in a new, essentially non-heroic age to suggest the dangerous forces which still had power to overthrow that civilised order Europe had gained in the preceding centuries. If they dominate in the work, and make a tragic ending, this is due to the poet's pessimism in the matter.

Much that is new, interesting and exciting about the eleventh and twelfth centuries seems designed to tame that wild spirit of an earlier, more barbaric age of heroism. The most significant of these innovations - the Cluniac order, the dominating church, the conventions of chivalry, a feudal structure underpinned by law, the crusades and the love-cult - reach an apogee just at the time the *Nibelungenlied* is born, before they ossify and finally decline into the disorder of the fourteenth century. But if the atmosphere of Europe did indeed by the twelfth century grow more gentle and Christian, more feminine, it cannot always have seemed that way to contemporaries. The literature gives a distorted picture: the female hand was surely less in evidence on the real jousting-field and in the arena of German dynastic politics than in the direction of literary taste at the courts of France.

Part of the *Nibelungenlied's* uniqueness is thus its pessimism. With a healthy note of scepticism it refrains from the indomitable near-euphoria of the romances, with their metaphorical tale of the redemption of man through the servile virtues of chivalry. Yet the poet does not simply equate the old with the bad and the new with the good. After all, it is not heroic pride which drives the disaster, but rather love, the new force, evident in the heedless cruel passion of Kriemhild. And arguably the poem's most heroic moments are fought out by Hagen in staunch defence of the king and state of Burgundy. Nor is the pessimism necessarily absolute. The poet is extremely reticent about just what he does think, untypically for his age. There is plenty of deploring the treachery and the bloodshed, plenty of simple formulaic assurances how sorrow must always follow joy. It is also true that only two characters survive who have earned our respect: Dietrich and Hildebrand.

But the pessimism is tempered by what the poet does not say, by

²⁴ Cf. W. Hoffmann, "Das *Nibelungenlied* — Epos oder Roman? Positionen und Perspektiven der Forschung" in *Nibelungenlied und Klage. Sage und Geschichte, Struktur und Gattung. Passauer Nibelungengespräche 1985*, (ed.) F.P. Knapp, (Heidelberg, 1986), pp 124- 151.

what he leaves out of account. Above all this is the Christian spirit of forgiveness and peace which so much dominated Europe in the new age. Its general absence from this work, composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, seems to me so conspicuous as to cry out aloud from its very silence. In the battle of proud wills between Hagen and Kriemhild, the spirit of understanding, humility and pardon is never given a fair go, as the poet surely means us to see. He gives a number of hints: perhaps the most prominent is the celebrated argument of the two queens held at the door of Worms cathedral. Between its two parts, a mass is interposed. And we are expressly told that Brünnhilde paid little heed to what was sung there, incensed as she was at the previous demeaning words of her rival and her injured pride. Later it often seems that if Attila himself had only intervened with a hint of forbearance, the disaster might yet have been avoided. When Dietrich finally delivers the two heroes bound to Kriemhild he expressly bids her show them mercy - in vain of course, for she is far beyond any Christian forgiveness. The view is by no means unreasonable that the anonymous poet was a cleric.²⁵

The *Nibelungenlied* is thus both epic and romance. It combines the two to give a new definition to epic, one more applicable to the High Middle Ages. We should beware of constraining it with the definitions proper to another age, for every age has the right, surely, to refashion its epic matter, as the work of Richard Wagner showed best of all.

²⁵ On the anonymity of the work in general see K. Von See, *Germanische Heldensage. Stoffe, Probleme, Methoden*, (Frankfurt 1971), p.108f.