

The Nibelungenlied

At the court of Burgundy, Kriemhild, the virginal sister of King Gunther and his brothers Gernot and Giselher, has a dream of a falcon that is killed by two eagles. Her mother interprets this to mean that Kriemhild's future husband will die a violent death, and Kriemhild consequently resolves to remain unmarried.

Siegfried is the crown prince of Xanten. In an introductory narrative, he slays a dragon and bathes in its blood, rendering his skin sword-proof, save one small spot which the dragon's blood didn't cover; he also obtains a large treasure, after killing two brothers who had drawn him into the struggle over how to divide the wealth between themselves. Siegfried arrives in Worms with the hopes of wooing Kriemhild. Upon his arrival, Hagen tells Gunther about Siegfried's youthful exploits that involved winning a treasure and lands from a pair of brothers, Nibelung and Schilbung, whom Siegfried had killed when he was unable to divide the treasure between them and, almost incidentally, the killing of a dragon. After killing the dragon, he had bathed in its blood rendering him invulnerable. Unfortunately for Siegfried a leaf fell onto his back from a linden tree as he was bathing and the tiny patch of skin that it covered did not come into contact with the dragon's blood, so that Siegfried remains vulnerable in that one spot. In spite of Hagen's threatening stories about his youth, the Burgundians welcome him, but do not allow him to meet the princess. Disappointed, he nonetheless remains in Worms and helps Gunther defeat the invading Saxons. Siegfried finally meets Kriemhild, and is allowed to marry her after he helps Gunther to defeat Brünhild, the queen of Iceland, with his heroic strength and the aid of a cloak which lets him become invisible. On a visit to Iceland, Siegfried had posed as a vassal of Gunther's, and Brünhild thinks King Gunther, not Siegfried, defeated her. She is persuaded to marry Gunther by this trickery.

But on their wedding night, Brünhild's great strength and unwillingness are too much for Gunther, who overcomes her only with the aid of an invisible Siegfried, who then takes her ring and belt as presents for his own wife Kriemhild.

Years later, Siegfried and Kriemhild are on visit to Worms. Brünhild is still under the impression that Gunther married off his sister to a low-ranking vassal, while Gunther and Siegfried are in reality of equal rank. Before entering the Worms Cathedral, Kriemhild and Brünhild argue who should have precedence, according to their husbands' ranks. To Brünhild it is obvious that she should go first. Kriemhild, unaware of the deception involved in Brünhild's wooing, insists that

they are of equal rank, and as the dispute escalates, she shows Brünhild the belt which Siegfried took from Brünhild on her wedding night.

The argument between the queens is both a risk for the marriage of Gunther and Brünhild and a possible cause for a rivalry between Gunther and Siegfried. Hagen von Tronje, the dark, cruel and faithful vassal of Gunther, decides to kill Siegfried to protect the honor and reign of his king. Although it is Hagen who does the deed, Gunther and his brothers know of the plan and quietly assent. Hagen persuades Kriemhild to mark Siegfried's vulnerable spot with a cross so he can protect Siegfried in battle. Hagen then uses the cross as a target, killing Siegfried with a spear as he is drinking from a brook during a hunt. Hagen also steals the hoard from Kriemhild and throws it into the Rhine, to prevent Kriemhild from using it to establish an army of her own.

Kriemhild swears to take revenge for the murder of her husband and the theft of her treasure. Many years later, King Etzel of the Huns (Attila the Hun) proposes to Kriemhild, she journeys to the land of the Huns, and they are married. For the baptism of their son, she invites her brothers, the Burgundians, to a feast at Etzel's castle in Hungary. Hagen does not want to go, but is taunted until he does: he realizes that it is a trick of Kriemhild in order to take revenge and kill them all. As the Burgundians cross the Danube, this fate is confirmed by Nixes, who predict that all but one monk will die. Hagen tries to drown the monk in order to render the prophecy futile, but he survives.

The Burgundians arrive at Etzel's castle and are welcomed by Kriemhild "with lying smiles and graces". But the lord Dietrich of Bern, an ally of Etzel's, advises the Burgundians to keep their weapons with them at all times, which is normally not allowed. The tragedy unfolds. Kriemhild comes before Hagen, reproaches him for her husband Siegfried's death, and demands the return of her Nibelungen treasure. Hagen answers her boldly, admitting that he killed Siegfried and sank the Nibelungen treasure into the Rhine, but blames these acts on Kriemhild's own behavior.

King Etzel then welcomes his wife's brothers warmly. But outside a tense feast in the great hall, a fight breaks out between Huns and Burgundians, and soon there is general mayhem. When word of the fight arrives at the feast, Hagen decapitates Kriemhild's and Etzel's little son before his parents' eyes. The Burgundians take control of the hall, which is besieged by Etzel's warriors. Kriemhild offers her brothers their lives if they hand over Hagen, but they refuse. The battle lasts all day, until the queen orders the hall to be burned with the Burgundians inside.

All of the Burgundians are killed except for Hagen and Gunther, who are bound and held prisoner by Dietrich of Bern. Kriemhild has the men brought before her and orders her brother Gunther to be killed. Even after seeing Gunther's head, Hagen refuses to tell the queen what he has done with the Nibelungen treasure. Furious, Kriemhild herself cuts off Hagen's head. Old Hildebrand, the mentor of Dietrich of Bern, is infuriated by the shameful deaths of the Burgundian guests. He hews Kriemhild to pieces with his sword. In a fifteenth century manuscript, he is said to strike Kriemhild a single clean blow to the waist; she feels no pain, however, and declares that his sword is useless. Hildebrand then drops a ring and commands Kriemhild to pick it up. As she bends down, her body falls into pieces. Dietrich and Etzel and all the people of the court lament the deaths of so many heroes.

Historical Background

This story is a mixture of fact and fiction. A possible archetype for the dragon-slayer Siegfried might have been the historical figure of Arminius, who defeated the Roman imperial legions (clad in scale armour) at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD.

The saga's historical nucleus is in events of the Germanic Migration Period, in particular the defeat of the Burgundians by Flavius Aëtius with the aid of Hunnic mercenaries near Worms in AD 436. Other possible influences are the feud between the 6th century Merovingian queens Brunhilda and Fredegunde, as well as the marriage of Attila with the Burgundian princess Ildikó in AD 453.

These events became conflated with common Germanic mythological material concerning Niflheim and the Nibelungs, originally likely a race of dwarfs guarding treasure, but from the evidence of Waltharius also a name for a Frankish or Burgundian dynasty. The Nibelungenlied combines a first mythological part dealing with the Gunther's wooing of Brünhild, with a second political part taking place in specific locations like Worms, the capital of Burgundy, describing the journey of the Nibelungs east across the Danube to Etzelburg, the residence of Attila the Hun (Etzel), the location of the catastrophe.

The Nibelungenlied arranges these traditional materials in a composition aiming at a High Medieval audience that was familiar with the epics Matter of Britain and Matter of France, casting the inherited Germanic theme in his contemporary terms of courtly Christian chivalry. Consequently, Siegfried changes from a dragon killer

to a courting man who will express his love to Kriemhild explicitly only after he has won the friendship of the Burgundian king Gunther and his brothers, Gernot and Giselher. Some situations, which exaggerate the conflict between the Germanic migrations and the chivalrous ethics (such as Gunther's embarrassing wedding night with Brunhild), may be interpreted as irony. The notoriously bloody end that leaves no hope for reconciliation is far removed from the happy ending of typical courtly epics. In any case, the narrative displays an uneasy mixture of pagan and Christian, of ancient Norse polytheism and ethical monotheism. The characters act in ways that are neither consistently bloodthirsty, nor consistently Christian. The narrator's voice displays a similar internal tension or heterogeneity. This is because some stages of narrative's composition took place at a time when Europe was in transition: the old pre-Christian culture, which valued human life very little and which emphasized the "warrior cult," was on its way out; the new faith was moving in, emphasizing virtues like peace and forgiveness, and seeing dignity in each human life.