

“MIT (UN)LOBELICHEN ÊREN”: AUTHORITY, GENDER, AND THE CAUSE OF
SIEGFRIED’S DEATH IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

by

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“Mit (un)lobelichen êren”: Authority, Gender, and the Cause of Siegfried’s Death in the *Nibelungenlied*

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Although centuries have passed since the *Nibelungenlied* has been written, this text continues to provoke much debate amongst scholars. This thesis dissects the events leading up to the death of Siegfried in order to answer the question: why did Siegfried die? Through the use of medieval gender theory according to Thomas Laqueur and authority models, such as Max Weber’s charismatic and traditional authorities, this thesis shows that these competing views of authority and morality lead to a necessary end for Siegfried. It is further shown that characters within the *Nibelungenlied* are often cast within rigid archetypes, despite their more complex principles. Gunther is not the *rex iniquus* that he is often claimed to be, and Brünhild cannot be reduced down to being a *tíuvéles wîp*. Through these findings (and through sources describing medieval culture and law), a sense moral reception of the *Nibelungenlied* emerges.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH

Brünhild and Gunther are both extremely controversial characters within the study of medieval literature. Some studies take a very black-and-white view of these characters, labeling them as definitive embodiments of certain ideals, giving them no room to grow or deviate from these archetypal roles. Maren Jönsson, Elisabeth Lienert, and Katharina Freche label Gunther as a *rex iniquus*, despite the amount of respect he receives from other characters. Freche focuses on Brünhild's adaptation of male characteristics and how, through this, she is deemed a monster. Brünhild, however, transforms into a courtly (although not ideal) woman after her marriage to Gunther.

Siegfreid and Kriemhild also experience transformations throughout the text—Siegfried begins the *Nibelungenlied* as a cocky and, at times, foolish “hero,” only to learn patience and diplomacy later. Kriemhild, once the courtly ideal that the women of Burgundenland strived towards, morphs into a hateful and vengeance-driven fiend. These characters are very capable of change and deviance from these roles. Despite their embodiments of certain archetypal personas, they have complex moral codes and driving principles. For exactly this reason, one must look at the competing moral codes and the criticism of the deviation from these roles.

In studying these principles, Ingrid Bennewitz utilizes modern feminist theory to argue that the *Nibelungenlied* cannot simply be reduced to a medieval misogynistic piece, arguing that the position of a woman in court is criticized within the piece (45). To highlight this, she explores the medieval woman's view of power through her

husband in the *Nibelungenlied*, and discusses women's lack of agency in medieval society (46). She then examines the male bond (*Männerbund*) within medieval society and the contrasting isolation of women as major themes of the *Nibelungenlied* (46–47), and considers the portrayal of women as both a wish and fear-projection of men (50).

Monika Schausten, in response to some of the above-mentioned studies, provides insightful background on body-politics in medieval times and criticizes many modern researchers for projecting current views of gender and sexuality onto the past (33). She herself focuses on the one-sex theory set forth by Galen and Thomas Aquinas (46–48). In addition, she criticizes researchers for focusing on male characters, even in cases where a female is the main figure in a particular *Âventiure* (39). Schausten's interpretation emphasizes the lie of rank between Gunther and Siegfried, which (according to Schausten) Brünhild immediately takes for an irrevocable truth, therefore leading to the quarrel between the queens, and ultimately Siegfried's death (38–39); however, the main focus of her paper is to discuss body language and the meaning of public imagery throughout the *Nibelungenlied* and the Middle Ages.

This thesis, in response, hopes to analyze gender and power-relations in a more critical light and to compare these to conceptions of morality and authority at the time the *Nibelungenlied* was written, as the goal is to gauge the response of the intended audience. My goal is to show how, given the structure of the court and the competing moralities of the characters, Siegfried's death was a necessary conclusion to the conflict. This is not based upon one single character wishing him dead, whether out of jealousy or anger, but instead results from the eventual collapse of potential conflicts into one victim.

As I will show, examining these potential conflicts from the vantage point of medieval concepts of authority and morality yields a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in the *Nibelungenlied*. The morality and authority models that I use in this thesis project behavioral and physical traits of men and women and [help us to consider](#) how the audience of the *Nibelungenlied* would perceive these traits. Through these, it is possible to postulate how the intended audience would react to gender-related conflicts, so that we might derive the deliberate meaning of interactions between figures. In order to demonstrate this, this thesis will give a close reading of power structures in Manuscript B of the *Nibelungenlied* (in its corrected form by Ursula Schulz), and will relate this close reading to texts such as the Nordic sagas on which the *Nibelungenlied* are based. These texts will substantiate claims of intent and morality behind the characters' actions. I will also use theories of gender, power-structures, and authority models to support the concepts put forth in this thesis.

CHAPTER II

QUESTIONING GUNTHER'S WEAKNESS AND BRÜNHILD'S "MALENESS"

Within this thesis, I will frequently reference Max Weber's conception of authority models. While Weber's analysis of authority is a modern theory, it should be noted that other medievalists use these exact terms, while describe identical forms of authority to those that will be discussed in this thesis. Given, however, that not all medievalists apply a name to the types of authority listed here, and that Weber's theory precedes the other sources listed below, it seems more appropriate to use his terms.

According to Weber, charismatic authority is exercised when "eine aus außeralltäglich geltende Qualität einer Persönlichkeit [...] ausgestattet sein [muss]" (140). For Siegfried, this is symbolized not only by his invulnerability and invincibility in battle (Freche 154), but also by his bravery in battle and the strength he gains from the *Tarnkappe*, making him the ultimate knight and hero. Aron Gurevich discusses a similar form of authority based off Tacitus' *Germania*:

Schon Tacitus berichtete über die Gefolgsmänner bei den alten Germanen: Wenn sie nicht in einen Kriegsfeldzug ziehen, dann verbringen sie die Zeit in Gelagen. Das Erbeutete wurde vor allem konsumiert, wobei man es demonstrative öffentlich auf Gastmählern, wo viele Menschen anwesend waren, für Essen und Trink ausgab. Die Beute war nicht nur eine einfache Quelle der Ernährung der Gefolgsmänner, sondern das wichtigste Mittel, sie zu einem Kollektiv zu vereinigen und die Autorität des Führers zu behaupten. Kriegsheldentaten, die nicht weit und breit bekannt waren, wurden bei den

Barbaren gering bewertet. Sie sollten in den Liedern der Sänger ihrer Gefolge besungen werden und damit den Kriegern und allen Stammesangehörigen in Erinnerung bleiben. Die erbeuteten Reichtümer—Kostbarkeiten, Kleidung, Waffen—verwandeln sich in Zeugnisse eines heldenhaften Lebens und wurden zum wichtigsten Kennzeichen großer Tapferkeit des Führers und seine Gefolgsmänner. Man rühmte sich mit ihnen, indem man sie zur Schau stellte (251-52).

Gurevich states that this form of authority remained throughout the Germanic lands, and was especially visible through the trade of precious metals by the Normans. To them, owning precious metal meant a charismatic leader, and represented valor (254).

Traditional authority, on the other hand, denotes that the legitimacy of a ruler is based on custom. To quote Weber:

Traditional soll eine Herrschaft heißen, wenn ihre Legitimität sich stützt und geglaubt wird auf Grund der Heiligkeit altüberkommener („von jeher bestehender“) Ordnungen und Herrengewalten. Der Herr (oder: die mehreren Herren) sind kraft traditional überkommener Regel bestimmt (130).

This means that, in a patriarchal monarchy such as Burgundenland, the power of the king is dependent upon the position that he inherits from his father, the previous king. This is discussed by Joseph R. Strayer in his book, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*. He writes:

In many feudal principalities, a strong feeling of loyalty to the lord developed, something which had been lacking in both the Later Roman Empire and in many of the Germanic kingdoms. Finally, the feudal lord, like other rulers, had strong

incentives to try to improve his methods of government: the desire for more income and greater security for himself and his heirs (19).

Gurevich also confirms the existence a traditional authority, claiming that, during feudalism (as well as in barbaric times), the status of a man is usually transferred from father to son (205).

The traditional medieval authority was, naturally, very different from ours. Whereas in medieval times, “supreme sacrifices of property and life were made for family, lord, community, or religion,” today one fights for the state or the nation, their sacrifices made for patriotism (Strayer 3). This means that the abstract notion of the state or the anonymous fellow countrymen were not so much important as personal obligations to a specific ruler or family. This same system of loyalties can be categorized under the term *triuwe*, which is discussed more in depth below.

In this chapter, I will argue that Gunther is not a *rex iniquus*, as claimed by many researchers, but is, instead, a man of considerable traditional authority. I will show that his power comes from his court and his lands, and not from his physical strength, as with Siegfried. Although they compete with one another, these two forms of authority cannot be compared directly, and, therefore, some of the previous attempts to theorize on Gunther’s power when compared to Siegfried’s have failed to correctly predict the audience’s intended reaction to Gunther as a king.

GUNTHER'S POWER

Critics such as Jönsson, Lienert, and Freche have, as mentioned above, analyzed Gunther as a *rex iniquus* due to his lack of physical strength and his frequent solicitation of advice from other members of his court. In claiming this, these researchers have tended to rely upon a single model of authority for their definition of strength and power. This reliance on a single model yields overly simplistic interpretations and overlooks the fact that several passages in the *Nibelungenlied* suggest that Gunther is quite a powerful king.

The best way to view Gunther's power is instead by considering factors that include the strength of his court. Gunther's power should not be evaluated on the same basis on which we might evaluate Siegfried's power; whereas Siegfried demonstrates charismatic authority, Gunther's authority is traditional in nature. These two opposing forms of authority mean that they cannot be judged within the terms of the other's power: Gunther cannot be judged as a weak king due to his lack of physical strength simply because Siegfried is strong. Other evidence is necessary to disprove his power through the traditional authority model specifically. Freche, for example, classifies Gunther and his court as bearing traditional authority, but nevertheless considers Gunther to be a weak king due to his lack of action and physical strength (140-41).

Freche and other scholars fail to consider that, although Gunther is weaker in battle compared to some of the men in his court, his strength lies elsewhere. This understanding of power creates tension throughout the *Nibelungenlied* as discrepancies between power ideals clash. The difference is, for example, evident within the language

used to describe the men: Gunther is not described as *starc* as often as Siegfried (although he and Gernot are still considered “*rechen lobelich*” [NL 2, 2]); instead, he is most commonly described as *rîch*, even by Siegfried himself (NL75, 3).¹ Gunther is prized for his *êre* and his decisions as a ruler, not for his personal victories in knightly tournaments. This means that he is considered an effective and fair ruler, not for his achievements against individuals. Because of this, he is shown as a powerful and fair king. A king’s duty is not to defeat knights in tournaments, but to ensure the safety and security of his land, as well as the happiness of his people. This could explain why descriptions of him focus not on his personal strength, but on his court and his vassals.

Gunther’s retort when Siegfried challenges him to a duel to decide who will rule Burgundenland supports Gunther’s association with traditional authority, and his reluctance to be associated with purely physical strength:

“Wie het ich daz verdienet”, sprach Gunther der degen

“des mîn vater lange mit êren hât gepflegen

daz wir daz solden vliesen von iemannes kraft?

Wir liezen ubele schînen, daz wir ouch pflegen riterschaft.” (NL 110)

Gunther approaches Siegfried’s threat not as a knight who would wager his land on a duel, but instead as a calm and honorable king who considers the repercussions of his

¹ *Rîch*, while phonetically close to the New High German word “reich,” has a vastly different connotation. According to Benecke’s *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* (BMZ), *rîch* can be defined as “vornehm, fürstlich, von hohem stande; mächtig, gewaltig. [*sic*] beide bedeutungen ergänzen sich factisch so, dass sie nicht strenge auseinander zu halten sind”

actions before acting out of anger.² By doing this, he proves his patience and understanding as an honorable king who is unwilling to wager the people he has sworn to protect for personal glory. Through this direct contrast with Siegfried, the tension between traditional and charismatic authority is plainly shown: charismatic rulers demand quick action (sometimes before proper reflection), whereas traditional leaders must practice patience and wisdom. Siegfried is, in fact, criticized for this lacking quality within the *Nibelungenlied*. He is accused of both pride (*hóher muot*) and arrogance (*übermuot*) for his actions, especially as a young man (Bostock 203).

Since Gunther does not wield the same kind of authority as Siegfried, his individual qualities cannot each be directly measured against Siegfried's in order to determine power. He must, instead, be evaluated on the basis of the whole of his power. When describing Gunther's court, Siegmund says that he has *vil manegen hôchferten man* (NL 51, 4), meaning that Gunther's power lies not with the king himself, but instead with the men subordinate to him, specifically with the relationships and oaths of *triuwe* that these men have sworn to him. Much of the first *Âventiure*, in fact, is spent describing the grandiosity of Gunther's court and the men that serve him:

*Ze Wormeze bî dem Rîne si wonten mit ir kraft
in diente von ir landen vil stolziu ritterschaft
mit lobelichen êren unz an ir endes zît* (NL 4, 1-3).

The strength of Gunther's men is later expanded upon during the thirteenth *Âventiure*, where the festival in Worms is described during Kriemhild's und Siegfried's

² This is something for which Siegfried is often criticized. He is said to be an imperfect knight, who is missing courtly manners (Freche 157), and is often attributed the quality of *übermuot* throughout the *Nibelungenlied* (Bostock 203)

final visit. Gunther's vassals are portrayed proving themselves in knightly tournaments: *Ûzer Tronege Hagene unt ouch Ortwîn, / daz si gewaldec wæren, daz tâten si wol schîn.* (NL 793, 1-2). The festival is impressive, and people both within and without the castle are included in the feast, which illustrates Gunther's monetary power as well, given that he is able to feed so many people. Gunther's influence in this visit is related during the following stanza:

Dar ûze unt ouch dar inne spîsen man si lie.

jâ wart vremder geste baz gepflegen nie.

alles des si gerten, des was man in bereit.

der kûnec, der was sô rîche, daz dâ Niemen niht wart verseit. (NL 798).

One should note that, despite the fact that Siegfried and Gunther are in this scene together, Gunther is described as *der kûnec, der was sô rîche*, whereas the narrator gives no description of Siegfried.

Gunther's power is further displayed when seats are taken during the feast. Siegfried does not simply take a seat next to Gunther, but instead asks to take his old place at the table with Gunther (*man bat Sîfride sitzen, als er het ê getân* (NL 799, 3)). According to Schausten, "die hierarchische Struktur der höfischen Gesellschaft wurde durch Tischordnungen sichtbar gemacht" (29). The fact that Siegfried here, instead of demanding his place near Gunther, requests to sit where he used to, shows that Siegfried does recognize Gunther's power at least within Gunther's own court. By contrast, on his first arrival in Worms, he had boastfully demanded Gunther's lands.

Gunther's court is reliant upon the medieval *Männerbund*. This bond has been extensively discussed in relation to the *Nibelungenlied* and is an important aspect in all

of the conflicts within the plot (Schausten, Freche, Bennewitz). The *Männerbund* is based upon the concept of *triuwe*. *Triuwe* is one of the most important values not only in the *Nibelungenlied*, but also in medieval culture, and is seen as necessary for society to function and continue to maintain order, given its wide reach to not only interpersonal relationships, but also religious, judicial, and moral practices (Ehrismann 211-16). These bonds are complicated, as they are formed through “strukturelle, kulturelle und religiöse Grenzen,” can be spontaneously formed, and cannot be broken (Bennewitz 46). Bennewitz states only one exception to the indissoluble nature of these bonds: in order to preserve the group as a whole (47). That so many men have spoken oaths of *triuwe* to Gunther means that he is not only a very honorable king, but also a very powerful one, as these men will help him in times of need.

While Gunther is not the *rex iniquus* that he is claimed to be in many sources, he does nevertheless have weaknesses as a king. His most often discussed weakness is his lack of action—his main role, according to Freche, is to receive advice and act based on the advice of his vassals, not purely on his own opinion. He allows Hagen to make power-political decisions with few mentions of his own agency in the decision-making process, and he does not appear have full power to make decisions for Burgundenland (139). Freche does admit that Gunther is tactical (141), and is not merely a “Marionette auf dem Wormser Thron” (140), but she fails to take this fully into account when considering Gunther’s actions and his authority. If one looks at only selected passages, then it may appear that Gunther does not make decisions of his own; however, there are multiple instances throughout the *Nibelungenlied* where Gunther goes against the advice of his closest vassals. For example, Gunther is advised not to ride to Etzel’s court

by both Hagen (NL 1458) and Rumold (NL 1462-66), and is also advised by Hagen to kill Siegfried after his rude arrival in Gunther's court (NL 119). Neither of these times did Gunther follow the advice of his most trusted men, which suggests that Gunther should be able to disagree and defend his own desires regarding the murder of Siegfried.

This question of action is, however, exactly where the charismatic and traditional models clash. Both Siegfried and Gunther are criticized within the *Nibelungenlied* for their relationships with direct action. Siegfried would never wait and consider the consequences of an action before he commits. In thoughtlessly giving Brünhild's belt and band to Kriemhild, he secures his own death. Gunther, on the other hand, is persuaded into allowing Siegfried to be killed. This leads to the downfall of his entire court. Both of these authority models, by intersecting and competing with one another, show the failures and successes of the other model. The *Nibelungenlied* is the epic clash of the wise king and the strong hero and the models that they represent.

Essentially, Gunther's decision to allow Siegfried to be murdered cannot simply be boiled down to Gunther being a *rex iniquus*. The events leading up to the death of Siegfried as a whole are complicated and can be equated to falling dominoes: Every person has his or her own role, based on the structure of his or her own personal legal and moral system, upon which each acts accordingly. To simplify Gunther's own part in the tragedy is to simplify this chain of events that, at its conclusion, necessitate Siegfried's death.

Just as Freche is overly simplistic in her analysis of Gunther's power (dubbing him a *rex iniquus*), so has she reduced Brünhild's extraordinary traits. According to Freche, Brünhild's portrayal of "male" attributes (specifically, her strength in battle), leads her to be seen not as the "wehrfähige Frau" that she is in the sagas, but instead as a monster that must be defeated (122). This is an oversimplification of the truth and cannot be taken out of the context of the other characters and their moral backgrounds. Brünhild is, according to Freche's interpretation, a beautiful and desirable queen who possesses the "male" trait of being strong in battle and of having a large amount of agency, making her a grotesque villain. Both Bennewitz and Lienert, however, take a more nuanced approach to Brünhild's masculine traits, describing her as both a fear and wish projection. This section will outline not only Brünhild's portrayal and reception in Isenstein in contrast to Freche's hypothesis, but also possible reasons for her violent behavior and the systems of power in place in Isenstein.

Isenstein is based off an essentially charismatic authority model, the same type of authority that Siegfried claims hold of, as discussed above. Because of this, Brünhild desires to wed only the charismatically strongest hero, which is why she stipulates that a suitor will be successful only if he defeats her three times in a contest of strength (Lienert 12). This is the reason that Brünhild originally mistakes Siegfried as her suitor, assuming that Gunther is there as a vassal to him, given Siegfried's charismatic authority and Gunther's traditional authority. She correctly assumes that Siegfried is the most powerful husband for her own culture, given his reputation and knightly stature. Gunther, on the other hand, is not immediately recognized as a powerful king,

because the basis of his power derives from a different source: from his people. This type of power is not valid at Isenstein, and is therefore put under heavy scrutiny from Brünhild—she remains skeptical throughout the courtship and even after the marriage.

An important distinction to make before delving deeper into this topic is that Brünhild fights these men to ward off possible suitors not because she is an asexual, independent woman, but because she is instead looking for a husband to whom she will subordinate herself once he proves himself more “powerful” (in this case, stronger) than she is. In doing this, Brünhild does demonstrate more agency than is typically seen in women in medieval literature. This supports Bennewitz’s claim that the *Nibelungenlied* cannot be reduced to a simple misogynistic piece (45). She herself will take only the strongest warrior as her husband, and only she can perform the three contests that deem them worthy. This behavior is deemed as inappropriate, and is therefore not taken as a serious stipulation of the marriage contract. These demands could also be seen as a form of political maneuvering: by marrying the strongest warrior, she is doing what any male figure in Nordic culture would want, raising her own personal power as well as that of her clan.

This behavior is, however, rather normal within the Nordic sagas. Brünhild is considered a Valkyrie in these sagas, not a monster. Although they were fearsome in battle, Valkyries were known to forfeit their supernatural status for a proper (charismatic) hero. In order to choose a husband, these Valkyries defy their father’s wishes to remain a supernatural being, and would instead choose their own husband and surrender their supernatural strength. Once this decision is made, they live the rest

of their lives as a courtly queen. With this background in mind, Brünhild willingly transforming into an acceptable queen is not unthinkable (Quinn 55).

Another claim by Freche maintains that Brünhild's performance of male actions and her claim to authority make her a male figure in a female body, which would automatically be recognized as a monster in the medieval consciousness. Brünhild, however, while described as a strong and battle-ready woman, does not necessarily become "male" simply by having male qualities. Freche's claim imposes a more modern understanding of gender, where gender is considered the epiphenomenon of sex, and the line between male and female is more strictly defined. During the time in which the *Nibelungenlied* was written, however, the one-sex model was widely accepted not only by the public, but also by academics such as Thomas Aquinas and Galen of Pergamon; while Galen did not live during medieval times, he was one of the most influential anatomists on medieval conceptions of gender (Schausten 46). In the one-sex model, any supposed line between male and female was not seen so much as a strict difference, but as a bond between the genders. Men were considered the "Maßstab der Menschheit" and women as "ein Wesen...dem es an Männlichkeit fehle"(Schausten 46). While this is a seemingly small difference in definitions, the definition of the female is to be taken quite literally in this case: women are physically the same as men, but they simply lack male genitalia.

The female genitalia were, at this time, compared to the eyes of a mole: they were regarded as the same as the male genitalia, with the crucial difference that they had simply never "opened" into a penis due to lack of heat in the womb, which was taken as a sign of imperfection. Because of this lack of heat, the womb could not

produce seed, and therefore was unable to produce that which gives life to the fetus. The vagina, essentially, was viewed as an unborn penis, the womb a stunted scrotum. A classic example is the eyes of the mole: they are still eyes, physically, but they do not function. This makes the mole superior to beings without any eyes at all, but inferior to those with functioning eyes. So is the woman: she is superior in that she has human genitalia, but, since hers are considered incomplete, in a sense, she is still inferior to the male sex (Laqueur 28).

Given, however, that the genitalia of females and males were considered to be of the same raw material, just one another turned inside-out, it is very possible in medieval literature to have male and female characters take on traits of the other sex:

There are numerous accounts of men who were said to lactate and pictures of the boy Jesus with breasts. Girls would turn into boys, and men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regress into effeminacy. Culture, in short, suffused and changed the body that to the modern sensibility seems so closed, autarchic, and outside the realm of meaning (Laqueur 7).

The sex of a person, then, is defined through the social understanding of their gender. If the actions or personality of a person are viewed as “too feminine” or “too masculine,” then the physical sex of that person changes to fit this view. As Laqueur states: “sex, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or ‘real’” (8).

Saxo Grammaticus shows a similar, although not entirely identical, attitude in his *History of the Danes*, where he describes female warriors in Denmark:

There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldiers' skills; they did not want the sinews of their valor to lose tautness and be infected by self-indulgence. Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind with toil and endurance, rejecting the fickle pliancy of girls and compelling their womanish spirits to act with a virile ruthlessness. They courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had unsexed themselves. Those especially who had forceful personalities or were tall and elegant, embarked on this way of life. As if they were forgetful of their true selves, they put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm's embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances (212).

These women become "unsexed" through their actions, not through a physical primacy over the gender of the person. Although the women here are described as "unsexed" as opposed to masculine, the point is clear: gender determines the perception of the physical sex.

So, while Brünhild adopts "male" characteristics, the fact that both male and female derive (although not equally) from the same original sex points towards an ability, although highly criticized, to take on male characteristics without necessarily becoming an entirely masculine woman and therefore a monster. Moreover, the fact that Brünhild remains a beautiful and desirable queen, even during her competition of strength with Gunther, means that she is not entirely male. Were she to be as masculine

as Freche claims, then her body would morph to fit her new masculine identity—she would no longer be the radiant queen that is presented throughout the *Nibelungenlied*.

Freche's argument, once the question of sex and gender is removed, is hinged upon the fact that Hagen calls Brünhild *tíuvéles wîp* (171); however, Lienert makes the argument that Hagen is the only person to use inhuman descriptions of both Kriemhild and Brünhild when they adopt what are considered male characteristics (17). Given Hagen's violent and immoral reputation, his associations of the women with the Devil should not be taken as seriously as they would be if they came from another, more honorable knight. Because of the unreliable source of criticism of the women, and given Hagen's own extreme loyalty to Gunther and his personal motives, his declaration of the two women as *tíuvékes wîp* should not necessarily be taken as the opinion of the audience or the author. That does not mean that her behavior is seen as appropriate by the men, however, as her actions are portrayed as a fault to be trained (and even beaten) out of her; however, her attractiveness as a woman remains.

This is highlighted by definitions of femininity and masculinity as put forth by both Freche and Lienert. Freche describes Kriemhild in the first part of the *Nibenlungenlied* as the "ideale höfische Dame," and lists some of the attributes associated with such an ideal woman: passiveness, a life in seclusion from men, beauty, and the arrival of suitors at court who wish to both see and woo her (130), arrivals which would surely bring more honor to any court. While some of these attributes obviously do not apply to Brünhild, my point is not to argue that Brünhild is an ideal courtly woman. Instead, my point is that Brünhild is still seen as a woman throughout

the *Nibelungenlied*, because two of the attributes of an ideal woman still apply to her even before she is married.

The two attributes that apply to Brünhild are that she is beautiful and that suitors visit her court in order to marry her (although the consequences for these men are much more strict, should they fail). Shortly after her marriage, Brünhild becomes passive, meaning that she then possesses three traits of the ideal woman. She is now a proper wife for Gunther, no longer the barbarian she seemed to be before. She, then, seems to show conformity once she is “subdued” by Gunther and he proves his authority. Representation through men is also shown later in the *Nibelungenlied*, when she does not revenge herself upon Siegfried herself, but instead turns to Hagen and Gunther for help.

Lienert argues that beauty is the most important attribute of femininity, along with conformity and representation (“ohne oder mit nur vom Ehemann abgeleiteter Macht”) (5). Brünhild’s beauty is described many times throughout the arrival in Isenstein, and is used to represent her femininity during her competition with the men. The fact that Brünhild is violent and strong does not necessarily reduce her beauty; instead, the desire for Brünhild is increased through her attempts to resist subordination to the men, insofar as each man wishes to be the one who successfully subdues her, just as Siegfried subdued the dragon (Lienert 8). This follows Bennewitz’s claim that the women in the *Nibelungenlied* portray both a wish and fear projection of men (50): the warrior woman as a conquest is alluring, so that men can prove their superiority even over the most powerful of women.

Although Brünhild does appropriate male qualities before her ultimate defeat at the hands of Siegfried, this does not make her completely male, and therefore does not make her a monster that must be defeated. Other characters describe her beauty and feminine qualities as they travel to Isenstein to seek Brünhild's hand, and she is eventually subdued into a docile feminine figure, fit for courtly life in Burgundenland. The fact that Brünhild is able to be converted into a courtly woman strengthens the theory that she was not a monster to begin with, but a woman who needed to be tamed from the point of view of the medieval audience, because, if she was indeed a monster, she would need to be imprisoned or killed, not simply tamed. To tame Brünhild, however, requires multiple acts of deception by Siegfried and Gunther especially, which, upon their discovery, lead to the murder of Siegfried.

CHAPTER III

THE DECEPTION OF BRÜNHILD

Although Brünhild was deceived into marrying and later subjecting herself to Gunther, and although Siegfried may or may not (depending on the scholar) have raped her on her wedding night, Siegfried's death is not required as a result any of these specific actions. Instead, Siegfried's death is a consequence of the deceit against Brünhild regarding the physical strength of her own spouse, and Brünhild's moral requirement to marry the most "powerful" knight or king. Brünhild cannot reconcile the difference between the charismatic power of Isenstein and the traditional power of the Burgundenhof. In what follows, I explore the different moments of deception and how they relate to the discourse of courtly rank and power in the *Nibelungenlied*, specifically to power and authority in regard to Brünhild's marriage. Especially important in this section will be the theory regarding the importance of courtly gestures, which is here summarized by Schausten:

Insbesondere in literatur- und geschichtswissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen ist in den letzten Jahren darauf aufmerksam gemacht worden, dass in solche charismatischen Kulturen wichtige politische Entscheidungen und Veränderungen dadurch abgesichert und sichtbar gemacht wurden, daß man die Körper der Mächtigen effektiv in der Öffentlichkeit präsentierte. Die Körper von Königen und Königinnen übernahmen so die Funktion eines Textes im öffentlichen Leben. Ein Kuß, zum Beispiel, den mittelalterliche Herrscher in der

Öffentlichkeit austauschten, deutete auf einvernehmliche politische Beziehungen hin. (29)

Immediately upon their arrival in Isenstein, Gunther and Siegfried start winding a deceptive web in order to force Brünhild into becoming a submissive, courtly wife to Gunther, despite her dangerous reputation as a warrior queen (something which, if Freche was correct about Brünhild's status as a masculine woman and therefore a monster, would make her completely undesirable to any man, especially to a king as powerful as Gunther). Siegfried leads Gunther's horse from the boat under the watchful eye of Brünhild, an act that Schausten states is a deed done only by a vassal (37). The fact that Brünhild then greets the men by saying *ist er dîn herre, / unt bistu sîn man* and that she also repeats this sentiment throughout the *Nibelungenlied* in arguments of Siegfried's rank in comparison to Gunther's, or rather her own power in comparison to Siegfried (or, more specifically, Kriemhild), means that she takes this as a political reality which cannot be reversed (NL 421, 1; Schausten 38–39). He has essentially erased his status as a prince in Brünhild's eyes. Once stated that Siegfried is a vassal of Gunther, any actions to the contrary of this are taken as a slight to not only her husband's honor, but also to her own honor through that of her husband, since she has now been subdued.

Gunther portrays himself as neither equal to nor lesser than Siegfried and feigns his defeat of Brünhild in the competition to gain her hand in marriage. If he truly were as physically strong as he represents himself here, then this means that he would genuinely be the most powerful man, and would therefore be worthy of being her husband, according to the rules of authority in Isenstein. Here is the main conflict

between charismatic and traditional authority in the *Nibelungenlied*: given that Gunther's strength in battle and authority through charismatic means is seemingly the main condition for Brünhild's hand in marriage, if this were ever to be proven wrong, Gunther would harm the honor of both himself and Brünhild. Brünhild's honor would be damaged due to the medieval conception of a married woman's identity, where the entire identity of a woman is derived from the honor of her husband. Should the husband's honor be in any way damaged, the honor of the wife is automatically damaged as well (Bennewitz 46). The fact that she allows herself to be deceived also speaks towards a loss of honor for Brünhild. Gunther, on the other hand, would lose honor through the lack of strength that the revelation of his deception would prove: he is unable to defeat his wife and had to feign strength in order to win her hand, proving that his wife, a woman, is physically stronger than him. While his power is traditional, being physically weaker than his wife would prove a grievous wound to his honor, making him no serious king, but a joke, instead.

BRÜNHILD IN THE SAGAS

The *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðrekssaga* play an incredibly important role in understanding just how Brünhild's honor is damaged by this deception from both Siegfried and Gunther. These sagas also paint a very clear picture of the interaction and strain between traditional and charismatic authority, as well as the importance of specific authority models for different clans. The ancestry of a potential spouse plays a very large role in the Nordic tradition, although the reasons behind this importance

vary between sagas and sources, at least from the perspective of the bride. In the *Völsunga saga*, the moment a woman marries a man, her own identity is seen through the husband's power (Freche 186). While the wife's power is no longer bound to that of her own family, the family can gain this influence via a new powerful male in the family. So, both Gudrun³ and Brynhild wish to marry Sigurd⁴ in the *Völsunga saga* in order to increase their own family's power (Freche 153).

In *Þiðrekssaga*, the power of a woman is not automatically calculated through the influence of the husband. Instead, that of the family or clan is much more important, and both women and men must act within the best interests of the family, as a poor choice in spouse will decrease the power of the clan as a whole. This means that their personal influence plays a small role when choosing a husband, and that their choice of husband should be calculated directly against the power of their clan. This computation does not appear to be as important in this case as when the bride sees her power through her husband. Should a man marry a woman from a powerful clan, however, then the bride and her family are considered to be an addition to the husband's own family, meaning that the power of his clan will increase with the marriage of a woman from a powerful clan. This is why Sigurd originally wishes to marry Brynhild, given the high status of her family, as opposed to Brynhild pursuing Sigurd (Freche 122).

Freche observes that power struggles play an important role in all of the sagas of the Nibelungen tradition, especially including *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðrekssaga*. Power in

³ Gudrun is the name of Kriemhild in the Nordic Nibelungen tradition, and her mother is named Grimhild.

⁴ Siegfried

these sagas is based, however, off different models of authority between Brynhild and Gudrun. Gudrun must marry a rich and powerful king (traditional authority), and Brynhild must marry the man that carried out the most heroic deeds, meaning the man that slayed the dragon Fafnir (charismatic authority) (176). Both of these apply heavily to Sigurd in the sagas, as his character is made to be the flawless Arthurian hero, and therefore less balanced. In the *Völsunga saga*, Sigurd slaying the dragon is given great importance: “*Sigurdr væ æt Fafnne, ok er þat meira vert enn allt riki Gunnars konungs,*” which is translated by Freche as, “Sigurd tötete Fafnir, und das ist mehr wert als das ganze Reich König Gunnars” (177). This means that, no matter how rich a king is, if he has not completed heroic deeds, he is not worthy of Brynhild. This could potentially be translated into the *Nibelungenlied*, although it would then mean that Gunther will never be compatible with Brünhild and her submission after Siegfried’s death would not be a logical conclusion.

After Brynhild is deceived into thinking that Gunnar is brave enough to walk through the flames surrounding her (despite the fact that this is Sigurd in Gunnar’s shape), she agrees to marry him, only because she is convinced of his abilities. When she discovers the truth about the Gjukungen⁵, her entire family’s honor is damaged by her marriage, because, “Brynhilds Familie [ist] trotz der großen Reputation der Gjukungen noch mächtiger und ehrenvoller” (Freche 176). The decrease of Brynhild’s family’s power is, then, the reason why she decides on revenge against the Gjukungen. She must restore the honor that was lost to her family through the deception by

⁵ Gunnar’s family

revengeing herself on those that caused her dishonor. This utter denial of the Gjukungen family shows Brünhild's condemnation of traditional authority even in the sagas.

The question is often asked whether, given the basis of the main parties' (Siegfried, Gunther, Brünhild, and Kriemhild) authority and their ideals of what creates a powerful ruler, Siegfried should not, instead, marry Brünhild. Would the eventual murder of Siegfried have been entirely avoidable had he married her? Freche claims that, since the hero wins his wife through *minne* and the courtly king wins his wife through *Zweikampf*, a large potential for conflict builds throughout the first portion of the *Nibelungenlied*, eventually ending in Siegfried's death (173). In contrast to Freche, I believe that this question is best answered with reference to the sagas.

If Siegfried were to have married Brünhild, this would not necessarily have led to the "happy ending" we see many other tales of the time, in which, despite a conflict in the middle of the story, the two lovers eventually end up reconciling and living happily ever after. As Freche notes, if one looks at the *Grípisspá* in the *Edda*, the "Konfliktpotential—Frauen sind durch ihre Taten schlecht für Männer [wird] auf die Negativkommentierung in bezug auf den Helden [reduziert], angesprochen: Brynhild bringt dem Helden Schaden" (Freche 118). On the basis of the assumption that Brynhild will always lead to negative consequences for the hero, even if the proper pairing were to happen and Sigurd married Brynhild, Sigurd and the Gjukungen would still have to die.

This theoretical pairing between Brünhild and Siegfried does, although very briefly, exist in the *Völsunga saga*. Sigurd swears Brynhild an oath after falling in love with her and the two essentially becoming engaged; however, their promise is broken

through the interference of Grimhild, who uses a magic potion to force Sigurd to forget Brynhild. Her deception, and the revenge of Brynhild, then causes the eventual downfall of her own clan and of Sigurd, because Brynhild must win back the honor that was lost from her clan. Given these two examples, it seems that the lives of Siegfried and the Burgunden will end in tragedy, no matter whom they marry or how they interact.

If one returns to the *Nibelungenlied* with this knowledge of the sagas, it is clear that the power-deception against Brünhild is a serious offense and harm to her family's honor and is not something that Brünhild can easily mend. There is no happy ending in this tale. Therefore, it is necessary for Brünhild not only to exact revenge against the man who caused her family to lose honor, but also to restore her honor by making her husband the strongest man, therefore legitimizing their marriage and balancing the relationships at the court. By taking away his ability to make rational and wise decisions, Brünhild is essentially confirming Gunther to the charismatic ideal.

THE WEDDING NIGHT

The wedding night between Gunther and Brünhild does not go as planned for either party. Brünhild expects her new husband to be able to prove himself once more as the strongest warrior, and Gunther wishes to consummate the marriage between himself and his wife. Because of the original deception during his courtship of Brünhild, however, this task is not possible without further complicating the web of lies

surrounding his marriage to his wife, and thus Gunther must bring in outside help to complete the task ahead of him.

Schausten writes that Brünhild's violent refusal to consummate her marriage with Gunther is not necessarily another test due to the possible lie of power (both political and physical, given his agreement with Siegfried), but a political protest. She is protesting Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried on the same day as her own wedding, due to Siegfried's much lower position to Kriemhild as a mere vassal to Gunther. Brünhild views this as an insult to her honor (42). While I agree with Schausten that Brünhild's tears may represent a political act, I question whether this is because Siegfried is marrying on the same day as Brünhild, or whether it is because Siegfried is marrying Kriemhild. At this point, Kriemhild and Brünhild are considered to be dear friends to one another: *Di vrouwen sich beviengen mit armen dicke hie / sô minneclich enpfâhen gehôrte man noch nie* (NL 586, 1-2). Brünhild is, then, protesting on the behalf of Kriemhild, whom she believes is worthy of a much more powerful man than she believes Siegfried to be, as can be seen through her actions at the church:

Der kunic was gesezzen unt Brünhild diu meit.

dô sach si Kriemhilde, done wart [ir] nie sô leit,

bî Sîfride sitzen. weinen si began.

ir vielen heize trehene uber liehtiu wange dan.

[...]

“Ich mac wol balde weinen”, sprach diu schoëniu meit.

“umb dîne swester ist mir von herzen leit.

di sihe ich nâhen sitzen dem eigenholden dîn.

daz muoz ich imer weinen, sol si also verderbet sîn."

[...]

Si sprach: "mich jâmert immer ir schœne unt ouch ir zuht.

wess ich, war ich mohte, ich hete gerne fluht,

daz ich iu nimmer wolde geligen nâhen bî,

irn saget mir, wâ von Kriemhilt diu Sifrides wine sî." (NL 615, 617, 619)

Brünhild considers rank to be so important in a marriage that she protests for Kriemhild and cries within the church. This is a politically advantageous marriage for the Burgundenhof; however, Brünhild cannot reconcile this with her understanding of Siegfried as a vassal. This creates a certain tension within the atmosphere of the marriage, partially leading to her later threats to Gunther. Whether her threat to not share a bed with Gunther stems from her suspicions of a secret pact between the men, or from her friendship with Kriemhild is a relatively difficult question, as it is never made clear within the context; however, it would appear that her protestation is a mixture between the two. She is wary that she has been deceived. If she has not been deceived, however, then she is in any case upset that Gunther's sister has been forced into such a dishonorable marriage. As the representative of the "ideale höfliche Dame," Kriemhild must marry a king of similar status.

Due to Brünhild's requirement for the strongest hero, which is explained and justified in the above section, it is necessary for her to test her husband once more as an affirmation of his physical strength, especially given any suspicions after witnessing Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried. This is not just a protest against Kriemhild's marriage, but another test to see if Gunther has been telling her the truth. Gunther

should be able to easily subdue her and prove that he is the proper husband for her, if he is as strong and powerful as he originally portrays himself, but Kriemhild's marriage seems to have made Brünhild uneasy. And although Brünhild has seen the might of Gunther's court, she still doubts his power according to the people of Isenstein. Here, there is no tension between the two models of power; instead, there is a direct denial of the other. Therefore, Brünhild must test this in a similar fashion to the competition for her hand—through a contest of physical strength.

Schausten's reasoning for Brünhild's embarrassment of Gunther as she ties him up and leaves him for the night, however, is again too one-dimensional. According to this reasoning, given Brünhild's pigeon-holed status as a bad wife and the instigator of Siegfried's murder, she wants to embarrass Gunther as revenge for his deception against her and also to deny him his role as her husband. To say this, however, leaves her as the stereotypical villain: she acts only to punish, embarrass, and inflict pain on those around her. Instead, I believe that Brünhild resists Gunther in a violent fashion not because she wants to hurt him, but instead because she wants him to defeat her. Given Brünhild's eddic status as a Valkyrie, this is an expected reaction to possible deception. Once she is fairly defeated by her husband, she will become a mortal (and courtly) queen.

Lienert writes that Brünhild's defeat of Gunther on their wedding night is not just embarrassing for Gunther, but for Brünhild as well (9). Brünhild is already married to Gunther, and, should her suspicions be true that Gunther is not, in fact, the strongest hero, then her own power is reduced. The fact that she can defeat and embarrass her husband, therefore portraying him as not just physically weak, but also, according to

the charismatic authority model of Isenstein, as weak in terms of power, is a deep wound to her own honor and to the honor of her family. This means that, just as in the saga, she has been tricked into marrying the weaker man through magical means, and has reduced the honor of her clan. Gunther himself confirms this in the following stanzas:

*“Nu sagt mir, her Gunther, ist iu daz iht leit,
ob iuch gebunden fünden,” sprach diu schoene meit,
“di iuwer kamerære von einer vrouwen hant?”
dô sprach der ritter edele: “daz würd iu übele bewant
Ouch het ich es wênic êre”, sprach der snelle man.
“durch iuwer selber tugende nu lât mich zuo iu gân.
sît daz iu mine mine sint alsô starke leit,
ich sol mit mînen henden nimmer rüeren iuwer kleit.”
Dô lôsete si in balde. unt dô si in üf verlie,
wider daz bette er zuo dar vrouwen gie.
er leite sich sô verre, daz er ir schoene wât
dar nâch vil selten ruorte. des wold ouch si dô haben râ. (NL 637-39).*

That Brünhild does, in fact, let Gunther down from the hook from which she hung him shows that she accepts Gunther’s claim that her honor will also be reduced once he is found, therefore deciding to allow Gunther to sleep in the same bed with her. To her, it is not about Gunther’s honor being reduced through his humiliation upon being discovered, but her realization that her honor will be damaged as well. That she can easily defeat her husband would be a scandal for her entire clan—they will not

recognize Gunther's authority, as it is not valid within their own model. For her, then, the goal is now to attempt to make their marriage acceptable in the eyes of both herself and her clan. She tries to salvage what honor she can. Gunther's goal is to consummate their marriage and thus subdue Brünhild into passivity so that he can be certain that the secret of his deception does not become public and humiliate him and his family alike.

Gunther, then, must employ Siegfried to prove to Brünhild that he is, in fact, a charismatically powerful man and is worthy of her as a wife. Gunther once must again fake his authority, adding to the pent up conflict that will erupt when the farce is made public. This deceit of authority shows again that he is physically incapable of calming his own wife, making Siegfried the more powerful man within this specific scene. There are multiple theories as to why Siegfried helps Gunther without protestation, as his overpowering of Brünhild is no longer a condition of his marriage to Kriemhild: they are already married at this point. Lienert suggests that Siegfried does this due to Gunther's "vorgetäuschte Macht über Siegfried" (8); however, when seen through the belief in *triuwe*, this scene makes more sense within the greater context of the *Nibelungenlied*. *Triuwe* is not a monetary system, where one gives out *triuwe* and expects certain benefits in return in a completely balanced manner, as the theory of "vorgetäuschte Macht" would suggest, but is instead a deep bond between men, where not only their oaths, but also their honor, bind them. If the *Männerbund* is as deep as Bennewitz claims, Siegfried will do anything within his power to help defend the honor of Gunther.

Gunther does not directly ask Siegfried to aid him with Brünhild, but he invokes *vriuntschaft* as a request for Siegfried's help: once done telling Siegfried of the previous night's events, he states: *daz sol dir vriuntliche ûf genâde⁶ sîn gekleit* (NL 647, 3). He does not, at any point, directly ask Siegfried to overpower Brünhild and force her into submission, but instead requests that he helps him, as a friend would. When Siegfried decides what he should do, he includes *unt læazestu iz âne nît* (NL 648, 1) within his plan, seeking Gunther's permission to proceed with this particular strategy. Because of Siegfried's willingness to help Gunther without a direct request as a superior, but instead as a *vriunt*, this deed cannot be seen as Gunther imposing fake power upon Siegfried, but should add to the case for Gunther's power being derived from his vassals and relationships to other powerful knights.

THE FIGHT BETWEEN THE QUEENS

The fight between Kriemhild and Brünhild is a coming to head of the potential conflicts in the first part of the *Nibelungenlied*: the feigned rank configuration between Gunther and Siegfried, the mismatched authority models of the married pairs, and the multiple deceptions against Brünhild are all brought to light and made public. The fight itself starts as a misunderstanding of rank within the court: Brünhild and Kriemhild both consider themselves to be married to the most powerful man, and neither is willing to admit that she is equal to or lesser than the other queen.

⁶ BMZ defines *ûf genâde* as: "im vertrauen auf das vorhandensein von wohlwollen, günstiger, milder, gnädiger gesinnung, im vertrauen auf die gewährung einer hoffnung."

Up until this point, the argument seems to be about one thing: the power or rank of their husbands and their own power through that of their husbands (Lienert 13; Bennewitz 46). Once, however, Kriemhild claims that Brünhild was actually first with Siegfried and not Gunther in her bedchamber, the fight becomes a much more debated subject. Is the fight about the sexual honor of Brünhild, about the general power of both women, about the women trying to be the least insulted by the argument, or about which woman has the most overall power through her husband?

Freche suggests that the fight stems from an accusation of infidelity, which was, for a woman in the Middle Ages, a very grave accusation (182 – 183). J. K. Bostock holds that this, instead, is an argument of pride between the two women: Kriemhild's boasting antagonizes Brünhild, who in turn insults Kriemhild through boasting about her power (208). Bennewitz claims that the women both attempt to prove that they are the least affected by the betrayal of the two men, given that, not only is Brünhild accused of sleeping with Siegfried, but Siegfried is also accused of sleeping with Brünhild. This may have raised jealousy within Kriemhild, who now knows that her husband slept with another woman shortly after their marriage (4).

While these arguments do hold true with regard to the disagreement between Brünhild and Kriemhild, I do not believe that any of them get to the core reason as to why Siegfried was destined to die in the *Nibelungenlied*. In what follows, I argue that the quarrel between the two queens instead acts as proof for Brünhild that she is married to the weaker of the two men (according to the charismatic model of authority and Siegfried's feigned vassal position), and that therefore the oath sworn between Siegfried and Gunther, while legally absolving Siegfried of all crimes, does not, for

Brünhild, serve to mend the loss to her honor. This means that she must dispose of the most powerful king (if we assume that Gunther is the second most powerful) in order to make her marriage a proper and well thought-out political decision from the eyes of her clan back in Isenstein.

The fight originates when Brünhild continues to view Siegfried as Gunther's vassal, given their lie in Isenstein in order to convince her to marry Gunther. After Kriemhild's boasting, Brünhild states: *dâ jach des selbe Sîfrit, er wære sküneges man. / des hân ich in für eigen, sît ich es in hôrte jehen* (NL 818, 2). It is clear that Brünhild, despite her reservations upon her wedding night, now believes Gunther to be the most powerful man at the court. Even when she describes, in the same paragraph, how Gunther wooed her, she does not use the term *minneclich*, but instead says: *unt dâ er mine minne sô ritterlich gewan* (NL 818, 1). This further showcases her belief that Gunther is physically stronger, as he did not gain her hand through romance, but strength and power, as befits the queen of Isenstein, since he did not so much court her in the *minneclich* sense, but instead won her hand through violence.

This dispute, given a medieval woman's understanding of her own power through her husband, quickly turns into an argument over the women's own standing within the court in Worms (Freche 179). Brünhild automatically assumes that she is in a position of power over Kriemhild, which promptly results in a counterattack from Kriemhild, who assumes exactly the opposite (Freche 180). Both women are trying to prove that they are the most powerful of the two, in order to secure their standing in the court. Once the women turn this into an argument over their own power, then the analysis and research must be changed to consider a female perspective. It is thus

important first to look at the ways in which women prove their power. According to Freche, women are defined through “Erscheinungsmerkmale,” whereas men are viewed through “Actio” (180). Tilo Renz furthers this hypothesis by adding: “Schönheit ist hier unmittelbar verknüpft mit dem vornehmen Stand und mit der Tugendhaftigkeit” (40), and later attributes beauty as a sign of emotional integrity, which is then strengthened through marriage (42). The connection between masculine and feminine views of power is now portrayed in tandem: beauty vs. virility and/or wisdom. With this in mind, it is made obvious through the text that Kriemhild is already portrayed as having a higher rank at the court in Worms. Kriemhild’s position in the court is especially conspicuous when her entrance into the church after the initial fight is described as following:

*Swaz kleider ie getruogen edeler ritter kint,
wider ir gesinde daz was gar ein wint.
sie was sô rich des guotes, daz drîzec künige wîp,
ez mohten niht erziugen, daz tæte Kriemhilde lîp.
Ob iemen wûnschen solde, der kunde niht gesagen,
daz man sô rîchiu kleider gesæhe ie mêre tragen,
alsô dâ ze stunden truogen ir meide wolgetân.
wan ze leide Brünhilde, ez hete Krimhilt verlân. (NL 833-34)*

Given that Kriemhild’s beauty and riches are not only described as unattainable by any other queen, but are also detailed in two entire stanzas (in comparison to the lack of any description of Brünhild’s appearance), it is quite clear that Kriemhild has, in the eyes of the public, succeeded in proving herself more powerful than Brünhild, therefore

making Siegfried the more powerful of the two men. Burgundenland is very clearly run by a traditional model of authority, meaning that Brünhild's voice, once so powerful in Isenstein, is no longer heeded here. For Brünhild, however, her own lack of power combined with Siegfried's status as a vassal make this demotion irreconcilable with the public power configuration.

Of course, this is not where the quarrel between the two queens ends, as Kriemhild and Brünhild mean to irrevocably prove which of the two queens is dominant. Brünhild insults Kriemhild further, and Kriemhild responds, *kundestu noch geswîgen, daz wære dir guot. du hâst geschendet selbe den dînen schœnen lîp.* (NL 836, 2-3). This implies that Brünhild herself is the guilty party for Kriemhild's ensuing transgression of revealing the belt and band which Siegfried took from Brünhild at her wedding bed. She brought this transgression upon herself and must now suffer the consequences. If she had remained silent (which is, in fact, what both women should have done, according to the rules of chivalry), then the fight would likely never have happened. Since Kriemhild refuses to take this advice herself, this statement quite ironically portrays the exact transgression of both of the women in the court. This transgression of voicing agency (especially in public) is deemed inappropriate by the men, and is therefore the quarrel is not taken as a genuine threat. Instead, the women must be punished, which Siegfried specifically promises to carry out to Gunther.

Kriemhild accuses Brünhild of being Siegfried's *kebse* (NL 836, 4), and proves her accusation by producing Brünhild's band and belt, telling her that Siegfried gave them both to her. This is the point where many researchers disagree. While Freche states that Brünhild wants Gunther to absolve her of the charge of cheating, if taken in

the context of the rest of the *Nibelungenlied*, it seems clear that Brünhild wishes Gunther to absolve himself and Siegfried of the accusation of deception. She has been attempting to prove throughout her entire appearance within the *Nibelungenlied* whether Gunther is the most powerful man in the court, and this is just another plea for evidence. Brünhild fought passionately against Gunther until she thought she was certain he was the strongest king, but now it is confirmed that Gunther and Siegfried have both lied to her, and she is, indeed, the weaker of the two queens (through her marriage to the charismatically weaker of two kings). Especially in conjunction with the Nordic tales, being married to the weaker king means that her own personal honor and the honor of her family is weakened, and is therefore something she must repair in any way possible. The Gjukungen had to die for exactly this offense within the sagas. In this scene, the illegitimacy of traditional authority to the people of Isenstein is made very clear. Brünhild herself confirms that this is a matter of honor when she states: *Von allen mînen êren mich diu schwester dîn / gerne wolde scheiden.* (NL 852, 1-2).

Siegfried then swears an oath to Gunther, and the accusations against both Brünhild and Siegfried are, legally, absolved: *mir ist sô wol bekant / iuwer grôz unschulde, ich wil iu ledic lân, / des iuch mîn swester zîhet, daz ir des niene habt getân.* (NL 857, 2-4): According to Ursula Mahlendorf, most medieval court proceedings were solved with such an oath:

If there was disagreement concerning facts; if, for example, the defendant denied that he had committed the criminal acts with which the plaintiff had charged him, then the urteiler decided what “proof” must be offered and by whom. This proof consisted usually in denying or affirming the charges with an oath, either a

simple oath or with the help of others. Less commonly courts resorted to combat or ordeal. If the proof was correctly given, the party who delivered it was judged the winner of (227)

Since Siegfried is publicly cleared of any accusations against Brünhild, her revenge is neither legal nor moral from the view of a medieval audience. Schausten, however, maintains that the conversation is a farce, and that neither of the men truly intends his own words, given that they did, in fact, deceive Brünhild, and that Siegfried broke the original oath between them, where he agreed to keep the act forever a secret (44).

CONCLUSION

THE MURDER OF SIEGFRIED

While Siegfried's murder seems to be the only logical conclusion from Hagen and Brünhild's perspectives, it is much more difficult to prove the necessity of Siegfried's death from Gunther's perspective. He has sworn a legal bond of *triuwe* to Siegfried, and murdering him would therefore be against moral code, a truly evil act. Gunther, however, is stuck: his wife must be with the most powerful king and will likely rebel if this situation is not rectified, ultimately bringing shame to him and his family by publicizing his weakness. On the other hand, he and Siegfried swore oaths of *triuwe*, and he married his own sister to Siegfried. Should Kriemhild catch him, he knows that he will lose her love forever (which he ultimately does). What is a king without his queen, however? Gunther has already lost respect through the fight between the queens and his deal with Siegfried being made public. Gunther must also find a way to restore this lost honor, while still keeping his wife. For this, as in many matters, he turns to his men.

Hagen, arguably the epitome of *triuwe* throughout the *Nibelungenlied*, does not care about Siegfried's life when it comes to the reputation of both his queen and his king. His immediate reaction is that Siegfried must be punished: *er lobt ir sâ zehant, / daz ez erarnen muse der Kriemhilde man, / oder er wolde nimmer dar umbe vrôlich gestân* (NL 861, 2-4). His own happiness is seen through the lens of his rulers and their power, so the insult to Brünhild (and through that, to Gunther) is enough to have

Siegfried murdered (Schausten 44). Simply seen through the insult alone, Siegfried's actions are considered a crime against the throne and must, therefore, be punished:

Even then he would not be warned, but in crazy exaltation carried away the symbols of the queen's virginity and conjugal fidelity, thus forfeiting the last chance to arrest by his own prudence the consequences of his original fault of disregarding his father, and, as if that were not enough, he gave them to his own wife, thus causing the intolerable insult to the queen, which could be washed out only with blood. (Bostock 206).

However, Hagen must also take the respect of the court into consideration, and therefore his actions must not simply punish Siegfried, but also secure Gunther's power and honor.

According to Lienert, Hagen's actions are exactly how power between men is proven in medieval texts: through violence (4). Since Siegfried now holds a more powerful position than Gunther (since he allegedly bedded the queen), Hagen must do everything within his ability to raise the power of the Burgundenhof again. In fact, it has been theorized that Hagen is not evil (as most modern audiences would read him), but is instead misguided in his attempts to gain honor and fame for Burgundenland. Every morally questionable action that Hagen undertakes can be attributed to a desire to help his king and his court to gain respect and influence (Bostock 207). So, Hagen's desire to murder Siegfried can be seen as a power play instead of bloodlust. In fact, even the Huns remark on Hagen's murdering of Siegfried as a heroic deed (Lienert 6), the honor of which would transfer to Gunther, since Hagen is his sworn vassal.

The question still remains how Gunther is persuaded to go through with the murder by Hagen, even though he is bound by *triuwe* to Siegfried. According to Bostock, the reason for Siegfried's death is actually *triuwe* itself. Siegfried, by telling Kriemhild about what happened between him and Brünhild, has broken the bond between him and Gunther and proven himself a false friend of sorts. Since the *Männerbund* is broken between him and Gunther, it is now acceptable for Gunther to kill him, as it is comparable to Siegfried demanding Gunther's lands at the beginning of the story. Bostock essentially claims that the murder of Siegfried is a quid pro quo exchange. This is especially strengthened by Hagen's reminder to Gunther that he will gain many lands through Siegfried's death, directly mirroring Siegfried's original threats to the Burgundenhof (204):

*Sîn gevolgete Niemen, niuwan daz Hagene
geriet in allen zîten Gunther dem degene,
ob Sîfrit niht enlebte, sô würde im undertân
vil der kûnege lande. Der helt des trûren began. (NL 867).*

If *triuwe* were no longer valid, however, the murder of Siegfried would never be described as *ungetriuwen* (NL 985, 4), and his agreement to follow Hagen's idea would not be described in the sentence: *Der kûnic gevolgete übele Hagenen, sînem man. (NL 873, 1).* Bostock maintains that the reader is meant to be sympathetic with Siegfried, but not mourn his death, due to his "sins" (206); however, this is obviously not true due to the language surrounding his murder. Furthermore, Siegfried is meant to be the immortal Arthurian hero: "Lanzelot, Parzival und andere ihnen ähnliche Personen sind Wesen ohne Alter und Biographie, die immer jung und tapfer, stândig zu einer

Heldentat bereit bleiben" (Gurevich 162). The fact that he is murdered, instead of living his life as is expected in many tales of the time, is a tragic loss for his family and countrymen.

I am instead of the opinion that Siegfried's death is Gunther's folly—he was forced to decide between his wife and his superficial power on the one hand and his *triuwe* and his closest friend and brother-in-law on the other. He did not play the part of the strongest man by allowing Siegfried to be murdered, but did instead what he thought would be best for him. By feigning charismatic authority and maintaining the lie of his rank for so long, he has allowed the tension between his traditional and Brünhild's charismatic models to build into an unstoppable wave. Instead of acting as a supposed charismatic hero would (performing a heroic deed to save the innocent), he allows Siegfried to be murdered to try to salvage some semblance of normalcy and control of his life. For this, he is obviously judged and scorned not only by Kriemhild, but also by the narrator. He has secured his place with his wife, who now remains (seemingly) submissive, but he has lost the trust and love of his sister and also most likely that of the reader.

As this thesis has shown, the *Nibelungenlied* provides a unique window into the moral code of medieval Germanic peoples, allowing modern researchers to apply different current theories on medieval moral codes to the text and analyze why the text concludes the way it does, in order to keep with the moral code of the time. The goal of analyzing gender roles and morality in the *Nibelungenlied* is to produce a probable moral code in order to discover how the audience would have reacted to different parts and different characters. Would medieval audiences have viewed Brünhild as a hated

character throughout the *Nibelungenlied*, or would they have sympathized in part with her? Was Gunther a *rex iniquus*? Would Siegfried's death have been expected? To what extent did Kriemhild overstep female gender boundaries in the second part of the *Nibelungenlied*?

In this thesis, I have argued that Gunther should be viewed as a strong king in his own right. As mentioned above, much of the literature on gender in the *Nibelungenlied* focuses on Gunther's shortcomings as an inactive and non-violent king, preferring to use diplomacy in place of tournaments. This, however, does not necessarily add up when taken within the context of the entire *Nibelungenlied*. Why would such a weak king have so many vassals sworn a bond of *triuwe* to him? Why would Siegfried want to marry Kriemhild if Gunther is so weak? Although it is true that Gunther's weaknesses include at times allowing himself to be talked into poor decisions, first and foremost the murder of Siegfried, he is vocal in his disagreement with other characters' wishes in other parts of the *Nibelungenlied*. Gunther's authority, or lack thereof, is more nuanced than existing secondary literature has acknowledged. If, however, Gunther is not a *rex iniquus*, this opens many questions about the text—most importantly, why Siegfried is murdered anyway. The easiest theory to approach is that of why Brünhild wants Siegfried dead: he alone stands in her way of being the mightiest queen. Once he is dead, she can return to believing that she is the most powerful queen.

More difficult to theorize is how and why Siegfried is murdered by the men. Hagen wants Siegfried dead for the honor of his king and queen, an obvious choice given his strong bonds with the leaders of Burgundenland and the fact that his power is bound to theirs. Gunther, on the other hand, chooses to murder Siegfried out of a

dishonorable and selfish desire to keep not only his wife (whom he acquired through deception), but also possibly to gain lands and to raise his superficial power (at least to Brünhild). By lying about being a charismatic ruler, Gunther must correct any inconsistencies between his feigned “authority” and his true power. Throughout the rest of the narrative, he is judged by the narrator and by Kriemhild, which suggests that, although he, despite his actions, is seen as honorable and powerful by the public in the *Nibelungenlied*, those that know the truth regard what he did as a sin and know that he must be punished.

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