



A COMPANION TO THE NIBELUNGENLIED

EDITED BY
WINDER MCCONNELL

*A leaf from manuscript B,
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CAMDEN HOUSE

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Francis G. Gentry

Key Concepts in the *Nibelungenlied*

Key concepts refer, specifically, to those ideas and motifs that inform the fundamental ethical and social structure of the *Nibelungenlied*. Of course, these concepts are not unique to the great epic, but are found in virtually all medieval German epics. This situation is not surprising, given the fact that most narratives that were composed during the classical age of medieval German literature (ca. 1160–1250) were written for patrons and audiences who shared similar aesthetic tastes and expectations. All were members of a court, for example. As such, they would expect that the literature commissioned by and produced for the court would essentially reflect its social and moral perspectives. In some respects, the works do precisely that. Nonetheless, each poet — certainly of the classical period — is not content merely to reflect the court and its practices. By a differently-angled positioning of “key concepts” of the courtly world-view, the poet is able to hold up his creation as a critical mirror for the court to view itself and, by implication, its imperfections. For by taking what seems to be familiar, but shifting the perspective just slightly, the poet forces his audience into a dialectic confrontation with its own ideals and their inadequacies. Wolfram von Eschenbach and Hartmann von Aue have long been recognized as masters of this technique. But, as we shall see, in this respect as in so many others, the anonymous Nibelungen poet is no less gifted than his illustrious contemporaries.

In the following, we shall describe several concepts and conceptual pairs in the *Nibelungenlied* in varying degrees of detail. The final part of the essay will deal extensively with the most significant key concept, *triuwe* (“loyalty”) and its relationship to the concept of *vriunt* (“friend, relative, ally, lord/vassal”). We will see how *triuwe*, both alone and in association with *vriunt*, is so pervasive and so determining that it is no wonder that succeeding generations of modern readers have referred to the great epic as the *Lied von der Treue* (“the song of loyalty”). But we will also note that *triuwe* is not a static concept, but rather an extremely flexible one in the hands of the Nibelungen poet. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that all the concepts which will be highlighted are to be viewed not as isolated phenomena, but rather as acting in concert, and together they constitute the complex ethical foundation of the chivalric Middle Ages. Before attempting to

elucidate the meaning of the more abstract concepts and attributes, let us begin with the concrete individual about whom any heroic epic unfolds, namely, the hero.

Certain designations like *helt* (“hero”), *recke*, *degen* (“warrior”), and the very archaic *wigant* (also denoting “warrior” — occurring only twice in the epic: 61, 4; 1002,4)¹ come down from the Germanic heroic tradition and are encountered more frequently in the *Nibelungenlied* than in the Arthurian romances where the term *ritter* (“knight”) is more common. Nonetheless, they all refer essentially to different facets of the same persona, an armed retainer. In the heroic epic, as would perhaps be expected, the aspect emphasized is that of the fighter, the one skilled in battle. The battles are most often mass scenes of confrontation (and destruction), although the important combats, as is usually the case in heroic epics, are presented as individual confrontations, for the simple reason that such scenes are more suitable for presenting the important lessons to be learned by the community of listeners, i.e., how one should act in a battle, how one should uphold one’s own honor or the honor of one’s lord, one’s clan or family, etc. Of course, the *ritter* in the Arthurian romances is likewise skilled in battle, and his battles, too, are individual encounters. But the objective of a battle scene in a chivalric romance is an infinitely more self-centered one than in a heroic epic. For although it provides an opportunity for the knight to demonstrate his prowess fighting for his lord, a lady, or himself, it is also the arena in which he is forced to confront the moral and ethical implications of his calling as a knight in order to achieve, ultimately, a better insight into his proper place within society and his responsibilities to others. The heroic epic, be it the *Iliad* or the *Nibelungenlied*, is more concerned with the progress and fate of an entire people, while the romance focuses on the development and destiny of the individual knight.

Another significant concept which has come down through the ages from the ancient Germanic warrior societies, and which both epic types share and employ in approximately the same way, is *êre* (“honor”). Unlike its more modern descendant, the medieval and Germanic concept of honor is not so much an abstract, but rather describes concretely the quality of the individual to whom it is ascribed. As in the Germanic period so also in the Middle Ages honor remains primarily a visible attribute of the “outer” person, and, like its Germanic manifestation, is normative for the elite, especially for the

¹ References to the text of the *Nibelungenlied* are based on *Das Nibelungenlied*, ed. Helmut de Boor, 20th ed., Deutsche Klassiker des Mittelalters (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1972).

knight/warrior.² Thus, *êre* most often has the meaning of “pomp” or “splendor” when referring to the external circumstances in which the individual exists. For example, the poet describes Kriemhild living among the grandeur and power of the Burgundian court: “in disen hôhen êren...” (13,1). Conversely, *êre* is used to describe that which has been lost: “diu vil michel êre was dâ gelegen tôt” (2378,1). On occasion honor *apparently* describes an inner quality of the individual as in strophe 2146, when Rüdiger defends his murder of a Hunnish warrior who called the bravery of the Margrave of Bechlarn into question:

Dô sprach der ritter edele: “da beswârt er mir den muot
und hât mir gëitewîzet êre unde guot,
des ich von dînen handen hân sô vil genomen.” (2146,1–3).

While it appears on the surface that Rüdiger is referring to a quality of his character, it is, nonetheless, clear from the context that *êre* is not used to portray an “inner” virtue of Rüdiger, but rather is intricately entangled with the external concepts of prestige, reputation, and status (cf. the discussion of “noble” below).

A ruler, for example, gains much prestige and consequently honor, and enhances his reputation, by being generous to his enemies because, by so doing, he demonstrates his superiority over them. Indeed, *milte* (“generosity”), in general, whether to friend or foe, is an attribute that enables a noble to manifest his honor (687,2). In short, *êre* is a necessary quality of any individual associated with a courtly or warrior culture.

Meaningfully connected with *êre* is the conceptual pair *liebe/leit* (“love/sorrow”) which forms a major leitmotif of the *Nibelungenlied*. It is first encountered at the beginning of the work in the scene between Kriemhild and her mother Ute as the latter interprets Kriemhild’s disturbing dream and prophesies that her daughter will marry a noble man. Kriemhild rejects this prediction and indicates her resolve to remain unmarried. She replies to her mother: “ez ist an manegen wîben vil dicke worden scîn,/wie liebe mit leide ze jungest lônên kan” (17,2–3). Although it is safe to assume that Kriemhild had something else in mind when she uttered this statement, namely that for women in the Middle Ages marriage was rarely an affair of the heart, the tragic events in the *Nibelungenlied* go on to demonstrate the truth of her assertion about the relationship of *liebe/leit*. The result is that *leit* meaning “sorrow” or “grief” is all too frequently encountered in the epic. But the possibility that *leit* can also carry with it the sense of insult or

² Otfrid Ehrismann, *Ehre und Mut, Aventiure und Minne. Höfische Wortgeschichten aus dem Mittelalter* (Munich: Beck, 1995) 65–70.

dishonor and that *leit* in this connotation is as structurally and semantically consequential as sorrow was not generally accepted until Friedrich Maurer convincingly demonstrated this thesis in his famous study from 1949.³ Thus Kriemhild’s relentless plans for revenge are much more understandable when her *leit* is viewed under the rubric of “insult.” For an insult of this deadliness — after all, her husband was murdered and her treasure was stolen — humiliates and dishonors completely the person to whom it has happened. The loss of honor results in a concomitant loss of face and authority, and the dishonored individual is confronted with a shrinking, indeed disappearing power base. The only way for a member of heroic society to reclaim honor is through revenge.⁴ The irony is that Kriemhild’s revenge, while justified, accomplishes just the opposite of what she intended. She is brutally slain and thus *even* more dishonored in the eyes of the poet and the epic’s surviving characters. The message is clear: revenge, no matter how great the provocation, is never acceptable.⁵

The *Nibelungenlied*, like its Arthurian counterparts, also emphasizes other less spectacular concepts than *leid*, which like *êre* serve in the process of self-identification and definition of courtly society. Among these is *zucht* (“manners, good breeding”), a fundamental component of the courtly individual’s character, as strophe 105 makes clear, when Siegfried, who is unknown to Gunther, arrives at Worms. Hagen, however, identifies him correctly as a great hero, dragon slayer, and owner of the Nibelungen treasure and suggests that he be accorded an honorable greeting. Gunther and his retinue follow Hagen’s advice: “Der wirt und sine recken enpfien-gen sô den gast,/daz in an ir zühten vil wênc iht gebrast” (105,1–2).

Another concept is *dien(e)st* (“service”) which occurs frequently and describes the relationship of lords to vassals, men to women, as well as being used in the more general sense of “favor,” as evidenced by strophe 305 when the poet relates that Kriemhild was accompanied to court twelve days in a row by Siegfried, something her brothers had arranged as a friendly gesture toward the hero (“der dienst wart dem recken durch grôze liebe getân”). Unfortunately the rather neutral concept of *dienst* has its dark side too, specifically within the *Nibelungenlied*. For the characters peopling the society depicted in the epic, much like those of the society in which the work came

³ Friedrich Maurer, *Leid: Studien zur Bedeutungs- und Problemgeschichte, besonders in den großen Epen der staufischen Zeit*, 3rd ed. (Berne and Munich: Francke, 1964) 25–33.

⁴ See Francis G. Gentry, *Triuwe und Vriunt in the Nibelungenlied* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1975) and Rainer Zacharias, “Die Blutrache im deutschen Mittelalter,” *ZfñA* 91 (1962): 167–201.

⁵ Gentry 34–43.

into being, are very conscious of their status. Strophe 724 provides a good illustration of this aspect. After many years of marriage to Gunther, Brünhild is distressed that Siegfried and Kriemhild have not appeared at court in all this time since, as far as Brünhild knows, Siegfried is a vassal of Gunther and should, by obligation, appear and attend the king periodically:

nu gedâht' ouch alle zîte daz Guntheres wîp:
 "wie treit et alsô hôhe vrou Kriemhilt den lîp?
 nu ist doch unser eigen Sîfrit ir man:
 er hât uns nu vil lange lützel dienste getân."

This strophe also contains a concept that is of paramount importance in the work: *eigen* ("unfree vassal"). In fact, the whole conceptual complex "free/unfree" assumes an even greater thematic importance in the *Nibelungenlied* than that of *liebe/leit* and acts as the catalyst of the total tragedy of the epic. Although Brünhild's perception of the relationship between Siegfried and Gunther is mistaken, it is a misperception that was fostered both by Gunther and Siegfried himself when the latter accompanied Gunther on the journey to Iceland. In strophes 420–423 Siegfried identifies himself to Brünhild as Gunther's *man* ("vassal"), so that her attention would not be on him but rather on Gunther. In that way Siegfried could employ all his artifices to insure Gunther's victory in the three contests. Because Brünhild had no reason to disbelieve the words from Siegfried's own mouth concerning his status, she held fast to her conviction that he was a vassal. It is for that reason that she wept during her wedding feast when she saw that her sister-in-law, Kriemhild, was to become Siegfried's wife. For Brünhild, a high-born noble, this situation was nothing less than calamitous. The logical conclusion for her to draw was that Kriemhild, herself a high-born noble, was forced into an inferior social status through her marriage to Siegfried, ostensibly just a vassal, and an unfree one at that. Essentially, Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried was socially declassé. This incident, in Brünhild's understanding, had wide-ranging implications, namely, that Gunther had so fallen in honor and prestige that he was forced to give his sister to a wealthy vassal, and as a result she, Brünhild, now Gunther's wife, was compelled to share this dishonor. The situation was not just a fiction devised by the Nibelungen poet, but was an accurate reflection of the social changes going on in Germany in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For around this period, the free aristocracy was either becoming impoverished or unable to reproduce male heirs (generally both conditions prevailed) and saw itself compelled to strike up alliances through marriage with wealthy members of the ministerial class, who, by the time of the *Nibelungenlied*, were among the wealthiest and most powerful nobles in the empire. But since their origins a century or more

previous were unfree,⁶ the conservative nobility viewed any intermarriage with even the wealthiest ministerial as a *mésalliance*. Thus, in spite of his marriage into an aristocratic family, Siegfried, in Brünhild's view, is a vassal and neither his wealth nor his undisputed power exempts him from performing his duties as vassal. She makes her opinion unmistakably clear in an exchange with Gunther as she is trying to persuade him to invite Siegfried and Kriemhild to Worms. In response to Gunther's objection that the distance to Worms would be too great, Brünhild plays her trump card (as she sees it) by saying: "Swie hôhe rîche wære deheines küniges man, /swaz im gebüte sîn here, daz sold' er doch niht lân" (728,1–2). This misunderstanding on Brünhild's part, and the unwillingness on Gunther's to correct it, leads inexorably to the tragic confrontation between the two queens concerning the worth of their respective husbands. Brünhild maintains that Gunther must have priority over Siegfried in the eyes of the court because Gunther is his lord as she, herself, heard Siegfried say. Brünhild then utters the fateful word *eigen* ("unfree") to describe Siegfried's status — and, by implication, Kriemhild's as well. Kriemhild's outraged response is, of course, to be expected. Interesting for the purposes of this essay, however, is the word she uses to describe her own status, *adelvrî* ("free-born aristocracy," 828), one of the very rare if not the only occurrence of this legal term in classical medieval German literature. The scene is set: Brünhild holds fast to her interpretation of Siegfried being *eigen*, and Kriemhild intends to demonstrate that she and Siegfried are *adelvrî*. It is, of course, a dispute that has, indeed can have, no winner, and the scene degenerates into name-calling of the worst sort. Brünhild calls Kriemhild an *eigendiu* ("the woman of an unfree vassal"), Kriemhild retorts that if that is the case then Brünhild is a *mannes kebse* ("concubine of an unfree vassal"). The fact that this entire scene is being played out in public makes the dishonor to and insulting of Brünhild all the greater and cries out for revenge which must and will be taken. In the heroic environment of the *Nibelungenlied*, the only possible outcome is a tragic one.

In spite of the appalling events in the *Nibelungenlied*, the work also includes several concepts that are part and parcel of the courtly litany of positive attributes that are found in all epic works of the classical period. For the most part, they pertain to the smooth functioning of the social structure of the court as well as the interaction of its members. It is no surprise,

⁶ See Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Karl Bosl, *Die Grundlagen der modernen Gesellschaft im Mittelalter: Eine deutsche Gesellschaftsdichtung des Mittelalters*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1972); Karl J. Leyser, *Medieval Germany and Its Neighbors 900–1250* (London: Hambleton, 1982).

therefore, to find terms like *vröude/hôher muot* ("joy/noble attitude"), *hoh(ge)zît* ("festival"), *minne* ("love"), *holt* ("favorably inclined toward"), and *edel* ("noble"), to cite just a few examples. The usage of these expressions in the *Nibelungenlied* conforms in large measure to that in the romances. "Noble," for example, is a designation of status and not necessarily of attitude.⁷ Thus when the Burgundian kings as well as Siegfried, Kriemhild, Brünhild, Rüdiger, et al. are described as being "noble," attention is being drawn more to the circumstance of their birth. Nobles, like Rüdiger, who seems to transcend all attempts at categorization and is repeatedly addressed or referred to as "vil edel Ruedegêr," act nobly simply because this quality is part of their being. But even those who act reprehensibly are also called noble, if the circumstances of birth warrant. One example will suffice. At the end of the *Nibelungenlied*, after Kriemhild has slaughtered the bound Hagen, and after she has been savagely cut down by a berserk Hildebrand, the poet describes the grisly scene somewhat laconically: "ze stücken was gehouwen dô daz edele wip" (2377,2). It is clear that Kriemhild's heinous actions do not reduce her nobility nor prevent her from being recognized as noble. The importance of a noble spirit as opposed to mere happenstance of birth was not seriously treated in literature until a generation later with Rudolf von Ems (*Der guote Gêrhart*) and the gnomic poets like Freidank, who wrote the memorable verse: "swer tugent hât, derst wol geborn:/ân tugent ist adel gar verlorn." Quite possibly, too, the "edele herzen" addressed by Gottfried von Straßburg in *Tristan* point in this new direction.

A necessary attribute for a member of the nobility (assuming that all nobles are *edel* in the *Nibelungenlied*) is a *hôher muot* ("noble attitude") and the concomitant emotion of joy which is engendered by a noble outlook. The main courtly event which fosters the development and maintenance of a noble attitude and joy is a *hohgezît* ("festival"). Thus it is no accident that festivals play an important role in most epic works of the period.⁸ In the Arthurian romances, for example, they are quite often the settings for major turns in the narrative, which will entail a (fortunately only temporary) reversal of the respective hero's good fortune, e.g., in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, when Parzival returns to Arthur after his failed visit to the Grail castle, he is denounced by the Grail messenger, Cundrie, for his failure to ask the key question. This event enables the narrative to split into two strands, the Gawain and the Parzival episodes, with Parzival beginning his long interior journey to the Grail and the meaning of God's love. Similarly, in Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*, Iwein is a guest at Arthur's festival where he is confronted by Lunete who censures him because he did not keep his word

to Laudine to return to her. This causes Iwein to leave Arthur, go mad, and slowly find his way back to himself, his wife Laudine, and finally ferret out the true meaning of "adventure." The *Nibelungenlied*, too, stands firmly in this tradition, although there is no reversal of the misfortune which comes into being. There are, to be sure, several festivals in the *Nibelungenlied* that are more or less occasions of celebration (e.g., Siegfried's knighting, after the Saxon War, on the occasion of Brünhild's arrival in Worms), but the two major celebrations (at the return of Kriemhild and Siegfried to Worms and the journey of the Burgundians to Etzel) are anything but gatherings of openness and joy. On the contrary, these two key festivals are the scenes of secrecy and hidden motives and culminate, ultimately, in unrelieved sorrow with the murder of Siegfried and the annihilation of the Burgundians. Indeed, it is not mere happenstance that the first strophe identifies this paradox as a central theme of the work: "von fröuden, hohgeziten, von weinen und von klagen,/... muget ir nu wunder hoeren sagen" (1,3-4). Although the results of the intrigue and conflict surrounding the festivities are much more drastic in the *Nibelungenlied* than in the Arthurian romances, it is clear that in medieval German literature, at any rate, the *hohgezît* is an ambivalent event and one that often becomes the crucible in which the respective heroes must prove their worth, even if, as in the case of the *Nibelungenlied*, their excellence is revealed only through their death.

The one supreme measure of the excellence of an individual's character and that which distinguishes warriors above all is their loyalty to their lords, to their society, to God, and to their own ideals. The term used to express all these attributes is *triuwe* ("loyalty, faithfulness, love"), arguably the most important concept in medieval German literature of the classical period. Wolfram von Eschenbach, for example, stretched the semantic range of the term the most. In his *Parzival*, *triuwe* not only connotes the spirit of loyalty and constancy that should lie at the base of all human relationships, but also is employed to express the concept of divine love. In the scene between Parzival and the Gray Knight in Book IX, the latter responds to Parzival's assertion that he has renounced service to God, because God was untrue to him, with the astonished statement:

"meint ir got den diu maget gebar?

.....

ez ist hiute der karvrîtac,
des al diu werlt sich vreun mac
und dâ bi mit angest siufzec sîn.
wâ wart ie hôher triuwe schîn,

⁷ Ehrismann 60-64.

⁸ Ehrismann 91-103.

dan die got durch uns begienc,
den man durch uns anz kriuze hienc.”⁹

While the use of *triuwe* in the *Nibelungenlied* remains on a more mundane level, the term itself and all that it implies has long been recognized as the basic structural component of the Nibelungen narrative. It is, without doubt, the most important concept in the work. If the noun *triuwe* embodies the ethical foundation of the characters, its adjectival form *getriuwe* (“loyal”) provides the defining attribute of a relationship or character. It is the most enduring and noble trait that one can have. It is the essential quality of character that nourishes all other virtues, such as steadfastness, honor, good breeding, and noble attitude, without which they would wither. In short, *triuwe/getriuwe* informs and defines every human association in the *Nibelungenlied*, whether within the feudal social structure or the structure of personal relationships.

Within feudal society, *triuwe* is the cement that holds the feudal bond together, the tenor of which is marked by the conceptual pair, *vel auxilium vel consilium* (“both aid and advice”). It is the vassal’s responsibility to offer his lord protective aid and advice whenever the latter requires the one or the other. The lord, for his part, is expected to treat his vassal justly, to reward him for his services, and to protect him. If both parties perform their duties correctly, they are praised as being *getriuwe*. Both aspects of the feudal tie are frequently observed in the *Nibelungenlied*: (a) *ADVICE*: When Gunther is first apprised of the imminent attack of the Saxons and the Danes by a messenger of his enemies, he refuses to make any decision until he has discussed the matter with loyal advisors:

“Nu bîtet eine wîle”, sprach der künec guot,
“unz ich mich baz versinne. ich künd’ iu mînen muot.
hân ich getriuwer iemen, dîne sol ich niht verdagen
disiu starken mære sol ich mînen friwenden klagen.” (147)

In this instance Gunther is doing precisely what would be expected of a wise ruler in the feudal age, seeking the counsel of his “friends,” i.e., advisors, vassals, relatives. (b) *AID*: Engaging in battle on the side of one’s lord dramatically illustrates the concept of *triuwe* as aid. Yet the actual use of the term in the text is found not in descriptions of combat, but rather primarily in important scenes that precede the fighting itself. The best-known illustration of this aspect of *triuwe* is found in the scene between Rüdiger and

⁹ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Albert Leitzmann, zweites Heft: *Parzival Buch VII–XI*, 6th ed., Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 13 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963) 448.2; 7–12.

Kriemhild after Rüdiger has delivered Etzel’s offer of marriage. Kriemhild rejects Etzel’s proposal until Rüdiger swears to serve and protect her in the land of the Huns:

Mit allen sînen mannen swuor ir dô Ruedegêr
mit triuwen immer dienen, unt daz die recken hêr
ir nimmer niht versageten ûz Etzelen lant,
des si êre haben solde, des sichert’ ir Ruedegêres hant. (1258)

Of course, it is this offer of service and protection that brings Rüdiger to grief later at the ill-fated festival at Etzel’s court. He evidently did not understand his pledge to include plans for avenging Siegfried’s death, but Kriemhild did, as she makes clear in the following strophe when she muses: “waz ob noch wirt errochen des mînen lieben mannes lîp?” (1259,4).

The *Nibelungenlied* also offers an illustration of the reciprocal nature of the bond of *triuwe*, namely, the obligations of a lord to his vassal. Before the final battle, and when it is clear that the Burgundians will not be victorious, Kriemhild offers to let all surviving Burgundians go in exchange for the surrender of Hagen. In reply to her offer of amnesty, Giselher gives eloquent expression to the quality of the lord’s obligation to his vassal:

“Wir müesen doch ersterben”, sprach dô Gîselher.
“uns enscheidet niemen von ritterlîcher wer.
swer gerne mit uns vehte, wir sîn et aber hie,
wande ich deheinen mînen friunt an *den* triuwen nie verlic.” (2106)

And just a few stanzas later after the Burgundians have scorned Kriemhild’s demand to surrender Hagen and the final climactic battle in the hall begins, the poet underscores, once more, the importance of this bond between lord and vassal:

Die noch hie ûze stuonden, die tribens’ in den sal
mit slegen unde mit schüzzen, des wart vil grôz der schal.
doch wolden nie gescheiden die fürsten und ir man.
sine konden von ir triuwen an ein ander niht verlân. (2110).

Triuwe is also used to define the character of personal relationships which, as we shall see, will have in some instances in the *Nibelungenlied* more importance than the relationships that are part of the feudal bond. Three groups comprise the spectrum of personal relationships within the *Nibelungenlied*: blood relatives, spouses, and friends. The obligations of *triuwe* imposed on the members of these groups were qualitatively the same as those of the feudal structure, and, indeed, it is often difficult to draw the line between the two groups, as far as the concept is concerned, since

individuals could be members of both groups. Hagen, for example, exists in a formal relationship with the Burgundian kings, but is also a blood relative, something that is mentioned by Kriemhild in strophe 898,2 and by Giselher in 1133,3, as well as being a friend of Rüdiger. Although in the realm of friendship the concept of *triuwe* is more often implied than explicitly expressed to define vertical affinities, it is, nonetheless, the complex bond of friendship that plays the most important role in the *Nibelungenlied*. A glance at the relationship of Rüdiger to the Burgundians will serve to illustrate this point. The ties binding Rüdiger to the Burgundians are several: (1) He gives his daughter in marriage to Giselher, the youngest Burgundian king (strophe 1682); (2) The Burgundians are his guests, and he provides them with an escort to Etzel's palace; (3) He also enjoys a long-standing friendship with Hagen. An important part of the tragic poignancy of the *Nibelungenlied* is that Rüdiger's obligations of friendship come into dramatic conflict with those incurred by his pledge of personal loyalty to Kriemhild, something of which she reminds him when she states:

... "gedenke, Ruedegêr, der grôzen triuwe dîn,
der stæte und ouch der eide, daz du den schaden mîn
immer woldest rechen und elliu mîniu leit." (2151,1-3)

In addition, Etzel recalls Rüdiger's vassal loyalty and demands that the latter render the service that he owes the king. Rüdiger's quandary is surely one of the most gripping episodes not only in the *Nibelungenlied* but also in world literature. Caught between the seemingly diametrically opposed obligations of his loyalty to his lord and to his friends, Rüdiger eventually accedes to the pleas of the royal couple and fulfills his vassal loyalty, knowing that by doing so he is jeopardizing his immortal soul (strophes 2150; 2166), thereby giving dramatic emphasis to the central thematic of the *Nibelungenlied*: the paradox of *triuwe* becoming *untriuwe* ("disloyalty, faithlessness").

In general, *untriuwe* does not merely mean no *triuwe*, but rather an absence of *triuwe* where one would expect to find it. Siegfried's death provides a good illustration of this point. For the hero's death and the events surrounding it mark the first attempt on the part of the poet to indicate clearly the terrible consequences that *untriuwe* could have. On seven occasions, the poet personally intrudes into his text in order to express his outrage at the act. He repeatedly describes Siegfried's killing as one of unparalleled faithlessness (876,1-2; 887,3; 911,4; 915,4; 916,1-2; 971,4; 988,3-4). On one further occasion (1074,1-2), he has Siegmund, Siegfried's father, refer to his son's death as a faithless action. It is obvious that the poet is incensed at Hagen's deed. But it is equally as obvious that Hagen has cause to seek Siegfried's death since, as we have seen above, his lady, Brünhild, has been publicly humiliated by Kriemhild, Siegfried's wife. Another example

would be Rüdiger's quandary. In the previous discussion of *triuwe* within a personal relationship, the crisis that torments Rüdiger in the thirty-seventh adventure was briefly highlighted. Just as Gunther was faced with two possibilities in the episodes leading up to Siegfried's death, i.e., to seek or to forego revenge, so, too, Rüdiger is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Should he honor his pledge of *triuwe* to his liege lord Etzel and his queen and avenge the wrongs done to the royal pair by the Burgundians, or should he honor his many ties of personal *triuwe* to the unwelcome guests? It is a conflict that Rüdiger is unable to resolve other than by agreeing to observe his vassal loyalty, even though he knows that the Burgundians are not at fault. The criticism of the poet is muted in this episode, but Rüdiger, himself, has been an eloquent judge of the wrongness of his action (2150, 2153-2154).

In both scenes the poet has put his characters into situations in which conflicting obligations of feudal and personal *triuwe* are highlighted. In both instances the issue revolves around the taking of apparent justified revenge for an injury or insult done to the king and queen. Both times the protagonists, Hagen and Rüdiger respectively, act with apparent justification, the one case involving an action to restore the honor and, thus, ruling viability of Gunther, and the other to avenge the severe losses incurred by Etzel and Kriemhild, including the slaughter of their young son Ortlieb. Yet neither reason meets with the approbation of the poet. Clearly, he is asking his characters to distinguish among conflicting obligations and not always choose to honor those that appear to be legitimized by custom (vendetta), but rather to look closely at the relationships humanized by the bond of friendship, something Gunther was unable to do with regard to Siegfried and Rüdiger with regard to the Burgundians. The answers that the *Nibelungen* poet offers his audience with regard to the obligations of *triuwe* are definitely not comfortable. He is asking them to make distinctions, to come to decisions that may fly in the face of accepted tradition. The tragedy of the *Nibelungenlied* is that the strict adherence to *triuwe*, the bond of society, actually sunders *Nibelungen* society and ultimately destroys it.

As a concluding observation, it is ironic to note that all the concepts which have been discussed in this essay should have functioned — and were meant to function — as constructive elements of society. But, as we have seen, the opposite is true: an inflexible perception of the meaning and implication of these terms brings about irrevocable destruction. In the final analysis, the *Nibelungenlied*, like the great heroic epics of Classical Antiquity, even Virgil's *Aeneid*, is a tale about loss and sundering. The *Nibelungen* world and its people start out at their most thriving level and progressively lose everything until they, themselves, are lost. Like Virgil's Aeneas, the *Nibelungen* poet's characters discover that riches, power, and status are

meaningless if the cost is one's humanity and, as Rüdiger movingly recognizes, one's soul — acme and nadir occupy the same space. In this respect the *Nibelungenlied* is unique among the works of the German Middle Ages. Unlike the situation in the Arthurian tales, for example, there is no moment of "restoration," no lasting harmony. The constant flirtation with disaster that leads to an unalterable commitment to the indefensible (revenge) and culminates ultimately in irreversible tragedy constitutes the hallmark of the work as well as its great attraction for audiences throughout the centuries.

Will Hasty

From Battlefields to Bedchambers: Conquest in the *Nibelungenlied*

Conquest is inextricable from the oral and literary traditions culminating in the *Nibelungenlied*. It is present at the historical origin of these traditions in the destruction of the Burgundian kingdom on the middle Rhine, when its king, Gundaharius, attempting to expand the sphere of his power to the northwest into Roman Gaul, was defeated by the Roman leader Aëtius and Hunnish troops probably allied with him in 436.¹ It is present in Attila the Hun, the Scourge of God and ravager of most of Europe in the mid-fifth century, and in Theoderic the Great, conqueror of the western Roman empire in the late fifth century, whose deeds and death were celebrated in songs about Atli/Etzel and Dietrich von Bern that eventually became elements in the tales of the Nibelungen composed in the High Middle Ages, and it is present still in the High Middle Ages when conquering élites were invading Palestine, Greece, Andalusia, Ulster, and Prussia.² Conquest might properly be seen as one of the central concerns of the *Nibelungenlied*, the actions of figures such as Siegfried and Hagen being entirely consistent with the brutal, but nonetheless idealized, characteristics of the figure of the historical conqueror as this is depicted by the historian Robert Bartlett: "Vigour, boldness, brutality and greed: this was the Faustian brew that made up the conqueror."³

Composed during an age of conquest, the *Nibelungenlied* is, among other things, a tale of conquest: Siegfried comes to Worms with the aim of taking all the Burgundian kings have by force. The main problem with understanding the *Nibelungenlied* in terms of conquest is that it is also a tale of courtliness: Siegfried comes not with a conquering army (although with

¹ Gundaharius, along with his family and as many as 20,000 of his people died in these unsuccessful battles of conquest. The remainder of the Burgundian peoples were resettled in present-day Savoy, on the upper Rhone and Saône. This kingdom was eventually itself conquered in 534 and integrated into the realm of the Franks. See Joachim Heinzle, *Das Nibelungenlied: Eine Einführung* (Munich: Artemis, 1987) 20.

² See Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 90.

³ Bartlett 90.