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NOTES

The Hagen Figure in the *Nibelungenlied*: Know Him by His Lies



Holger Homann

It has always been realized that the poet's delineation of the Hagen figure in the *Nibelungenlied* is far from unambiguous. The earlier parts of the work tell of Hagen's scheming and plotting that lead to Siegfried's murder and the taking of the Nibelungen treasure from Kriemhild. These are told in such a way that the reader cannot help but loathe and despise this man. In the later part of the epic, however, Hagen's strength, forcefulness, and courage in the face of certain doom bespeak a greatness of character worthy of our admiration. Our impressions of Hagen are shared by the poet: The murder of Siegfried fills him with abhorrence, and nowhere in the epic does he take back his early censure *sô grôze missewende ein helt nu nimmer mêr begât* (981.4).¹ On the other hand he cannot suppress his admiration of Hagen's conduct at Etzelnburc and eulogizes him as *den kûenesten rechen der ie swert getruoc* (2353.3).² The modern critic confronted with these sharply contrasting sides of the protagonist as well as the poet's changing attitudes can do one of two things. He can accept the poet's view, acknowledge that the Hagen of the first part of the *Nibelungenlied* differs from that of part II as night from day, and then try to explain how these differences came about and how they bear on the interpretation of the epic.

The basic ideas of this essay were originally outlined in a paper read at the SAMLA convention in Atlanta, Georgia, November 1980.

¹ All quotations from the *Nibelungenlied* are taken from Karl Bartsch/Helmut de Boor, *Das Nibelungenlied*, 14th ed. (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1957).

² This is the poet speaking. A similar statement by Etzel (2374):

“wie ist nu tôt gelegen
von eines wîbes handen der aller beste degen,
der ie kom ze sturme oder ie schilt getruoc!”

as a whole. Or he can attempt to prove that these contrasts are only apparent and that careful study can discern an underlying element that is present in all of Hagen's deeds, guides all his actions, and allows us to perceive Hagen as a unified character after all.

Earlier scholarship,³ concerned mostly with the genesis of the epic, the origin and the gradual amalgamation of the plot elements, tends to stress discrepancies because they help identify the various strata. The inconsistencies in the character of Hagen thus are ascribed to the heterogeneity of the material the poet incorporated into his epic and are used to buttress the contention that the *personae* enter the epic as preformed characters and do not undergo any psychological development. De Boor's statement about Kriemhild, which can be thought of as the prevailing opinion, can also be applied to Hagen:

Unvoreingenommene Betrachtung wird es unterlassen, in der Kriemhild des ersten und des zweiten Teiles eine folgerichtige psychologische Entwicklung zu suchen, . . . Die eine Kriemhild ist so menschlich wahr und ergreifend wie die andere. Jedoch einen psychologischen Entwicklungsroman zu suchen, hieße . . . die Fragestellung unerlaubt modernisieren. Dem Dichter ist Kriemhild jeweils die Gestalt, die sie aus den Voraussetzungen des Stoffes und seines Ethos sein mußte; sie ist hier wie dort exemplarisch. Aber sie *ist* es; der Dichter fragt nicht danach, wie sie es wurde.⁴

However, Gottfried Weber did look for a psychological constant in both the "bad" and the "good" Hagen. He finds it in Hagen's affinity to that dark and sinister force Weber calls *dämonisch-untergründig*:

Es ist entscheidend für die Wesenserkenntnis Hagens . . . , daß er, der durchaus auch 'gute', ethisch positive Züge in sich birgt, durch die schicksalhaften Ereignisse, die ihm begeben und in die er hineingezogen wird [i.e., especially Gernot's and Giselher's attack on his courage (1462 f.) and the encounter with the *merwîp*], vom Dämon, der in ihm bereit liegt, überwältigt wird—ein Bild, dessen großartige dunkle Gewalt den Dichter erschauern läßt, dessen heroische Größe im Dämonischen er fraglos bewundert, freilich schauernd bewundert.⁵

Thus Weber, while presenting an element that might conceivably underlie all of Hagen's actions, still maintains the dichotomy of the character. Not so some more recent attempts to harmonize the two Hagens. Efforts in this direction will always be greatly influenced by whichever of the two parts of the *Nibelungenlied* most impressed the critic. If he attaches greater weight to the events in Worms and lets this influence his understanding of the later

³ Since anyone working with the *Nibelungenlied* has to come to terms with the figure of Hagen, critical comments and opinions abound. The following survey of scholarly opinion can only be a sample. For reviews of Hagen scholarship see the articles by Mahlendorf/Tobin (note 6) and Dickerson (note 8).

⁴ Helmut de Boor, *Die höfische Literatur*, Vol. III of *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, ed. Helmut de Boor/Richard Newald, 3rd ed. (München: Beck, 1957), p. 158.

⁵ Gottfried Weber, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1963), p. 56.

âventiuren, then Hagen will emerge a much more sinister and evil person than if the critic's perception of the character proceeds from the events narrated in the second part of the epic.⁶ Neither approach, however, can avoid distorting the story. Let me cite three examples to support this statement.

In an attempt to exonerate Hagen and show him as "a politically oriented vassal of great human intelligence" who uses "all means at [his] disposal [for] success or even mere survival in the political order," Ursula R. Mahlendorf and Frank Tobin present—*inter alia*—Hagen's perhaps vilest deed, namely tricking the unsuspecting Kriemhild into revealing Siegfried's sole vulnerable spot and thus involving her in her husband's death, as nothing more than proof of his "ability to predict people's reactions" (p. 128). At the other end of the spectrum we have critics such as J. Stout and Harold D. Dickerson, Jr. Stout decries Hagen's noblest gesture, namely his request for Rüdiger's shield, a gesture that allows this most troubled man to show once more and for all to see his unchanged feelings of friendship towards the Burgundians, as the act of a vulture (*Aasgeier*), scoundrel (*Bösewicht*), and hypocrite (*heuchelt*) trying to exact one more present from the man *von des milte verre wart geseit* (1691.3).⁷ And Dickerson, attempting to portray Hagen as a "destroyer of values, a creator of voids," must strip him of any and all qualities that might be perceived with favor: his "much vaunted courage is nothing less than perverted urge to destroy," and Hagen's well known statement to Kriemhild that he came to Etzelnburc because his lords were going there and he was their *man* (1788) is for Dickerson "only empty talk, the utterance of a supremely cynical mind."⁸ Clearly, bias colors these interpretations just as it did in those nationalistic commentaries of a bygone era.⁹

Proceeding from the premises that the *Nibelungenlied* is the work of one author and should be considered (until proven otherwise) to be consistent within its own framework and that the author should be taken literally both in his condemnation and his admiration of Hagen, I shall in this essay advance and attempt to support the thesis that the murderous Hagen of

⁶ Similarly Ursula R. Mahlendorf/Frank L. Tobin, "Hagen: A Reappraisal," *Monatshefte*, 63 (1971), p. 127.

⁷ J[acob] Stout, *und ouch Hagene* (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1963), p. 440.—In this view, Stout is quite alone; not even his soulmate Dickerson (see next note) can follow him here and, instead, avoids the issue. However much the various interpretations of the "Schildepisode" differ in their evaluation of the Rüdiger character, Hagen's part in the episode is viewed with general approbation, even by Hugo Bekker, who otherwise presents Hagen most alliteratively "as a figure of few redeeming features." (*The Nibelungenlied: A Literary Analysis*, [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971], p. 147).

⁸ Harold D. Dickerson, Jr., "Hagen: A Negative View," *Semasia*, 2 (1975), p. 50.

⁹ Helmut Brackert, "Nibelungenlied und Nationalgedanke: Zur Geschichte einer deutschen Ideologie," in *Mediaevalia litteraria: Festschrift für Helmut de Boor zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Ursula Hennig and Herbert Kolb (München: Beck, 1971), pp. 343-64.

the first part has experienced a metamorphosis, that this metamorphosis can be demonstrated from textual elements, and that acceptance of this idea of change allows a more precise understanding of the text. The starting point for this endeavor is neither Hagen's murder of Siegfried nor his heroism at Etzelnburc, but rather the events surrounding the crossing of the Danube, i.e., the events at the seam of the two parts of the epic. The arguments will concentrate on four relatively short scenes, of which three have not yet found their commentators and one still raises unanswered questions.

When on the morning of their twelfth day out the Burgundians reach the Danube river, they discover that it has swollen above its banks and is—in the absence of boats—extremely hazardous to ford. Hagen, sent by Gunther to find some means of safe crossing, comes across two bathing nixies and extorts from them not only information about the sole available ferryman but also knowledge of the future for him and his party. Following the advice of the *merwîp*, Hagen finds and kills the ferryman, takes his boat to where the others are waiting, singlehandedly transports the whole company across the river, and after having unsuccessfully attempted to drown the chaplain destroys the boat.

This synopsis of the events connected with the river crossing omits one very short scene of less than three stanzas which is seemingly of no import for the future course of events, but just might provide a starting point for an interpretation of the Hagen figure. When Hagen returns with the boat the Burgundians notice the bloodstains on it and bombard him with questions. It is especially Gunther who recognizes their significance and wants to know what befell the ferryman. Hagen replies that he has not seen any ferryman and that no one has suffered any harm from him:

Dô sprach er lougenlîche: "da ich daz schif dâ vant,
bî einer wilden widen, dâ lôstez mîn hant.
ich hân deheinen vergen hiute hie gesehen;
ez ist ouch niemen leide von minen schulden hie geschehen." (1568)

This is so blatant that the poet's comment that Hagen spoke *lougenlîche* seems quite superfluous; by making it, however, he does draw special attention to the lie and encourages the question: why does Hagen lie? Since the text does not provide an explicit answer we must deduce the probable reason. To do so convincingly, we must also consider Hagen's other lies. Honesty and straightforward behavior are not values per se for Hagen since he makes frequent use of untruths and of his knack for manipulating, making people believe things that are not so and leading them to act deceitfully themselves.

When Gunther unwisely but also quite intractably has made up his mind that only Brünhild will serve as his bride, it is Hagen who advises enlisting Siegfried's assistance. To be sure, he does not mention Siegfried's

Tarnkappe, the cloak that makes its wearer invisible and that will be the very means by which Brünhild is to be deceived and overcome, and his actual words are, at least on the surface, innocuous enough: *ir bittet Sîvrîde mit iu ze tragene die vil starken swaere* (331.2-3). But they have their suggestive effect: in the narrative summary of the consultation, interposed between dialogue scenes, we read the simple statement: *Sîvrît der muose fûeren die kappen mit im dan* (336.1).

When Brünhild inquires of Siegfried why he was not present at the competition, it is Hagen who saves the situation with the ready lie that the thought of [Gunther's competing with] her had depressed them all so much that Siegfried had withdrawn to the ship (472-473).

After Kriemhild has publicly humiliated Brünhild, Hagen convinces the kings with rather dubious and inflammatory arguments¹⁰ that the scandal can only be rectified by killing Siegfried and immediately presents the treacherous plan of a fictitious declaration of war (874-875).

Before leaving for the not-to-be war, Hagen visits Kriemhild, ostensibly to take his leave, in reality to induce her to reveal Siegfried's vulnerable spot. Note how double-edged his response is to her worry that Siegfried may be made to pay for her indiscretion towards Brünhild: *ir [=Kriemhild and Brünhild] wert versüenet wol nâch disen tagen*, which Kriemhild must take as reassurance, not knowing that the already established price for this reconciliation is to be Siegfried's life (891.3-905).

When the ferryman does not pay any attention to Hagen's shouts and promises of gold, he remembers the nixies' advice and claims to be Amelrich, a vassal of the ferryman's own overlord Else. The discovery of this deceit leads to the fight in which Hagen kills the ferryman (1552-1562).

And later when the Burgundians, now in Etzelburc, set out for church fully armed and Etzel voices his surprise at this untoward behavior, Hagen prevents any further discussion with the quickly invented explanation that it is the custom of his lords *daz si gewâfent gân z'allen hôhgezîten ze vollen drîen tagen* (1863).

All these instances of lying occur at crucial points of the plot either where the action takes a new turn or when events threaten to stop a course of action already embarked upon. Without recourse to deceit Gunther would never have overcome and wed Brünhild; had Kriemhild not been made afraid for Siegfried's life through the false declaration of war, she would never have divulged Siegfried's weak point; only the impersonation of Amelrich brought the ferryman across the Danube river and allowed the continuation of a journey that might have come to its end right then and there; and finally, had Etzel been told the true state of affairs he might

¹⁰ D. G. Mowatt/Hugh Sacker, *The Nibelungenlied: An Interpretative Commentary* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 86 f.

have tried and succeeded in preventing the blood bath. A pattern becomes visible.¹¹ The kings, especially Gunther, set their minds on some difficult undertaking, then find that they are incapable of carrying it out themselves and expect their chief advisor to make it possible for them. When Gunther in his hubris decides to woo Brünhild and cannot be deterred from this by any warnings, then a good vassal cannot but assist to the best of his ability his lord in this undertaking. And if the royal wish can be brought to fruition only through deceit, then deceit is the way to go. This is true for the expedition to Isenstein, for the murder plot, and for the river crossing. And Hagen, whose stated goal in life is to be the best of vassals, applies his considerable intelligence and cunning and accomplishes what seemed impossible. When necessary, he does not hesitate to lie, deceive, and dissemble in the service of his king, and his loyalty justifies his actions.¹²

Does this rationale also apply to his assertion that he has seen no ferryman and done harm to no one? To be sure, the deed itself was done while carrying out his king's command, but at this point Hagen has already obtained the boat and his lie does not contribute to his success in this task. Also, Hagen does not lie *for* his lords (as in the previous instances) but rather *to* them. For whom and to what purpose then the lie? For himself perhaps, because he wants to avoid the responsibility for the killing and the sure-to-follow troubles with the Bavarian counts Else and Gelphrat, who are bent on avenging their man's death? Hardly, for Hagen has never been the sort to deny his deeds,¹³ and he will admit this one once the Burgundians are safely on the other side of the river. And this is the key: Hagen's lie serves one purpose and one purpose only, namely to ensure that the journey be continued. To this end he keeps from his kings entirely what he learned from the nixies, hides behind a highly ambiguous statement the reason for destroying the boat, and lies in the matter of the ferryman's death. Knowledge of any of these events may have induced the Burgundian kings to return to Worms, taken all together almost certainly so. By withholding the truth Hagen deprives his lords of the opportunity to reconsider; he decides for them—manipulates them. When he finally tells the whole truth in order to forewarn them—and tell he must as it is his duty as a vassal—he confronts them with a *fait accompli*: there is no way back.

¹¹ Excluding Hagen's lie to Etzel which occurs after the Danube crossing.

¹² This view, shared with Mahlendorf and Tobin, will find little favor with Bekker, Dickerson, Stout. There is however very little textual evidence for any suggestion that Hagen is pursuing selfish ends with his lies.

¹³ It needs to be pointed out that it was not Hagen but rather *die herren* who invented the feeble explanation that Siegfried was slain by robbers; and it was Gunther who advanced it and whose authority was to lend it credence (999-1000; 1045.3-4). What vassal may publicly expose his lord to be a liar? What reason is there to doubt Hagen's statement that it makes no difference to him whether or not Kriemhild learns how Siegfried met his death? (1001)

Hagen manipulating his lords is, at this point of the story, nothing really new. He has always done it, e.g., when he indirectly furthered the Kriemhild-Siegfried match (331, 346, 532), when he convinced the kings of the necessity of Siegfried's death (867-876), and when he plotted to deprive Kriemhild of the Nibelung treasure (1128-1134). But all these previous instances differ from the present one in that the final decision lay then with Gunther and his brothers, since they had the choice at least either to follow Hagen's advice or to reject it (as they to their misfortune did when they welcomed Etzel's suit for Kriemhild or when they accepted his later invitation). As Mahlendorf/Tobin have shown, in all his scheming and manipulating, Hagen is always looking out for his lords' advantage, security, and position in the world. But not here. Here he holds from them their last chance to determine their fate themselves and destines them to doom in the land of the Huns. Why does he do it? Weber traces the change in Hagen's behavior back to the council scene where Etzel's invitation to Etzelnburc was discussed. Hagen's forceful advice against this venture (he calls Kriemhild *lan craeche* and predicts *ir muget dâ wol verliesen die êre und ouch den lîp* [1461.3-4]) is silenced¹⁴ by Giselher's sally (1463.2-3):

sît ir iuch schuldec wizzet, friunt Hagene,
 sô sult ir hie beliben unt iuch wol bewarn,
 und lâzet, die getürren, zuo mîner swester mit uns varn.

The implication that fear for his life may be the biased reason for his advice is not lost on Hagen; angrily he asserts that there is no better man to accompany them on this journey and that he shall prove it. It is quite conceivable that Gernot's and Giselher's words still rankle Hagen in this later episode and that he is resolved to avoid doing anything that might be construed as a renewed attempt at saving himself. Although deeply hurt, he has remained the loyal vassal who will employ all his resources of knowledge and cunning *so mag* [sic] *nîht gewerren der argen Kriemhilde muot* (1472.4): he induces Gunther to proclaim a general mobilization (1472), selects personally the thousand best men from the more than 3000 that followed Gunther's call to arms, delays repeatedly the departure of Etzel's messengers to allow Kriemhild as little time as possible to plan her revenge, and finally assumes himself the role of leader and guide (*dar leite si dô Hagene, dem waz* [the countryside] *wol bekant* [1524.3], and *Dô reit von Tronege Hagen z'aller vorderôst* [1526.1]). All his actions bespeak Hagen's foremost concern: the safety and well-being of his lords. And this is not affected in the slightest way by Gernot's and Giselher's insulting remarks.

The key scene for the changes in Hagen's motivation must be his

¹⁴ Giselher's words are preceded by a similar statement by his brother Gernot in 1462. That the brothers' remarks had this effect on Hagen is underscored in stanza 1512: when Hagen defends the planned journey against Uote, who had frightening dreams, the poet comments: "Er hetez widerrâten, wan daz Gêrnôt mit unfuoge im alsô missebôt."

encounter with the nixies. G. Weber has made a good case for Hagen's affinity to the demonic world, from his *rabenswarzer varwe* (402.3) to his almost superhuman knowledge of men and the world. But only when the nixies share with him their knowledge of the future—knowledge not meant for men—does he become a part, however small, of the demonic realm. This, his first personal encounter with forces beyond human capabilities, expands Hagen's existence. Henceforth,¹⁵ Hagen will live and act on two levels, with twofold responsibilities and loyalties. He will continue to protect his lords against all dangers (by informing them of the nixies' prophecy, by personally leading the rear guard action against the Bavarian counts, and by foiling Kriemhild's moves). But this loyalty is no longer absolute, for it is now subordinate to a greater purpose; namely to see the predicted future come about. He has accepted the nixies' prediction and feels himself to be an agent of destiny.

Hagen's twofold responsibilities to the future and his lords, the former being the more important, can be shown in a number of scenes.

He informs his lords of the true events surrounding the crossing of the Danube after, and only after, he has made sure that the journey can no longer be broken off.

Immediately after the successful river crossing Hagen loses his position as guide and leader, a position for which he is eminently qualified and which was accorded to him as a matter of course, see stanzas 1419.4 and 1756.

Dô si nu wâren alle kômen ûf den sant,
 der kûnec begonde vrâgen: "wer sol uns durch daz lant
 die rehten wege wîsen, daz wir niht irre varn?"
 Dô sprach der starke Volkêr: "daz sol ich eine bewarn." (1586)

This is quite an extraordinary event, so important apparently that the poet reports it twice (the second time in 1594). Hagen accepts this development without demur. We may assume that he approves of it, that he willingly surrenders his responsibility as the company's guide to his successor Volker. He is freed of an obligation, without losing any of his influence. He no longer leads the way to a local destination, but rather to a destiny of death and destruction.

Scholars have variously noted how slowly the events in Etzelburc gain momentum, how Kriemhild and Hagen must again and again provide new

¹⁵ And not only after the unsuccessful attempt to drown the chaplain. To be sure, this attempt is a test of the reliability of the prophecy, but Hagen's less than truthful statements about the ferryman's death and why he destroyed the boat show that he has no serious doubts.—There is one additional aspect to the chaplain episode: the loss of the chaplain deprives the Burgundians of their spiritual leader, a role Hagen will assume later, i.e. in the scene, frequently felt to be out of character, where he admonishes the Burgundians to make their peace with God (1856). See also Mowatt/Sacker, *Nibelungenlied*, p. 127.

impetus to move the action forward until finally, together, they bring about the inevitable tragedy. On the side of the Huns, it is only Kriemhild who desires the confrontation with the visitors. Her prospects for success would be small indeed were it not for Hagen, who alone of the Burgundians also seeks conflict; the Burgundian kings do not believe almost to the end that Kriemhild intends to do them harm. Why should I beware? is Gunther's response to Dietrich's warning (1727.1). On the other side, Etzel is determined to be the perfect host and seems to be prepared to accept the most outrageous behavior from his guests. When Volker wantonly kills the Hunnish dandy and in doing so almost precipitates general battle, Etzel intervenes and declares the death to have been accidental, not intentional (1896). No doubt, should Etzel learn of his queen's evil intentions he would find a way to put paid to her plans.¹⁶ And here fits the brief scene in which Hagen lies to Etzel.

After Hagen and Volker thwart the attempted night attack of the Huns, the Burgundians the next morning go to church fully armed. When Etzel inquires after the reason for this they are given the perfect opportunity to explain to him what really is going on. But Hagen, who recommended the full armor and thus fulfilled his responsibility to the kings, again forestalls any chance to avoid the catastrophe with his easy lie that it is the custom of the Burgundians to go armed for three full days at all high festivities (1863). Kriemhild, who is present and knows better, must keep her silence lest her plans be upset. For once the archenemies cooperate in the macabre game of treachery and deceit: his life and her silence will bring about what Kriemhild would call revenge, Hagen the fulfillment of destiny.

The last scene I want to discuss in this context does not involve a lie by Hagen; however, it is important for my argument that Hagen has become the agent of a superhuman, otherworldly force. Upon Kriemhild's instigation, the Burgundian squires are slain in their quarters while the nobles are at the banquet in the royal hall. Only Dancwart, Hagen's brother, survives the battle. Covered with blood he storms into the banquet hall and announces the news of the slaughter.

Dô sluoc daz kint Ortlieben Hagen der helt guot,
 daz im gegen der hende ame swerte vlôz daz bluot
 und daz der küneginne daz houbet spranc in die schôz.

(1961)

The motivation is apparent: Hagen slays Ortlieb in revenge for the deaths of the squires. At the same time this is the one deed Etzel can not let go unavenged; now he can no longer retain his detachment, just as the attack

¹⁶ See 1865:

Swie grimme und swie starke si in vient waere,
 het iemen gesaget Etzeln diu rehten maere,
 er het' wol understanden daz doch sit dâ geschach.

on the squires has involved the Burgundians. The fight has become unavoidable. But there seems to be something more to the scene.

The poet tells us that at the banquet Kriemhild cannot forget what has been done to her. When the strife cannot be provoked in any other way, Kriemhild has Etzel's son Ortlieb brought into the hall (1912.1-3). We do not know exactly what is in Kriemhild's mind, but the introductory when-clause and the poet's comment *wie kunde ein wîp durch râche immer vreislicher tuon* lend Kriemhild's order, so normal in other circumstances, an ominous air. Four of Etzel's men go straight away and carry Ortlieb to the royal table. Four men serving as a personal guard for a prince we can understand. But why do they carry him? We know from earlier references¹⁷ that Ortlieb must be six or seven years old, old enough to walk by himself. Nor are we told of any physical handicap he may have. On the contrary, Etzel is extremely proud of him and has high hopes for him (1914-1917). Then again, why is he carried into the hall?¹⁸ Perhaps we may see this as a ceremonial entrance, an entrance which the person does not actively perform but rather has to endure passively. And then there are Hagen's words with which he accompanies his sword blow that severs Ortlieb's head so that it falls into Kriemhild's lap:

nu trinken wir die minne und gelten's kuneges wîn.
der junge vogt der Hiunen, der muoz der aller erste sîn.

(1960.3-4)

De Boor comments on these lines that they are reminiscent of "ursprünglich germanische[m] Brauch" and ascribes to them "feierlich-sakrale[n] Klang"; Weber echoes when he speaks of "Worte uralten germanisch-sakralen Brauchtums" (p. 50). Both are alluding to the ritualistic "Minnetrunk", the ceremonial conclusion of a sacred meal in

¹⁷ 1387.1-3:

Mit vil grôzen êren, daz ist alwâr
wonten si mit ein ander unz an daz *sibende* jâr,
die zit diu kûneginne eines suns was genesen.

1390:

Den vremden unt den kunden was si [=Kriemhild] vil wol bekant.
die jâhen daz nie vrouwe besaeze ein kûneges lant
bezzet unde milter, daz heten si für wâr.
daz lop si tuoc zen Hiunen unz an daz *driuzehende* jâr.

¹⁸ I want to disregard the possibility of an unreliable narrator who envisioned, when crafting this scene, Ortlieb as an infant, forgetting his earlier statements about intervals of time. Once opened this Pandora's box would be difficult to close.— Interestingly enough, the redactor of C seems to have done just this: when he repeats the motif of Ortlieb being carried (in the additional stanza C 2004) he refers to Ortlieb as *das kindelîn*. See Ursula Hennig, ed., *Das Nibelungenlied nach der Handschrift C*, Altdutsche Textbibliothek, 85 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977).

honor of and a sacrifice to the gods and the dead. If we see this together with Hagen's reply to Etzel's expression of fatherly pride, namely that to him the boy looks *veiclich getân* 'destined for death' (1918.3, before Dancwart brings the news of the squires' death), then Ortlieb's death takes on aspects of a ceremonial sacrifice: the young innocent prince, chosen by fate, must be sacrificed so that the battle may begin, just as Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia so that the Greeks could carry war into the land of the Trojans. And Hagen is the one who speaks the ritual words and delivers the death blow, who assumes the role of the priest and makes the horror possible.—Is this to make a mountain out of a molehill? Perhaps, but the fact remains that by eliminating the motif of Ortlieb slapping Hagen (if indeed it ever was part of the story) the poet also did away with a pat, superficial motivation and created a much starker scene with a decidedly atavistic quality.

Taking my clues from Hagen's lies and the changes in their motivation, I have tried to demonstrate that there is no need to bend the textual evidence in an effort to show us an "all good" or "all bad" Hagen. The frequently noted dichotomy of the character does indeed exist, but it is a dichotomy brought about by the events narrated in the epic. After the encounter with the *merwîp*, where Hagen learns what the future holds for him and his party if they should continue the journey, he functions on two levels: on one he remains the vassal obligated to protect and further the interests of his lords; on the other, and this takes precedence, he perceives himself as an agent of fate and leads the Burgundians to their destined end. It is on this second level that the Hagen figure acquires an almost demonic dimension that transcends concerns for reputation, influence, and power and inspires his uncompromising heroism.

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