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The Downfall of a Hero: Siegfried's Self-Destruction and the End of Heroism in the *Nibelungenlied*

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Murderous blood shedding, individual sacrifice, suicide bombing, the attack on the World Trade Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, but also exorbitant numbers of so-called acts of heroism in the countless wars from the Middle Ages to the present lead us to the sobering realization that the traditional worship of the hero easily borders on ideological manipulation both through literature and the arts, both through opera and through sculpture which has profoundly affected Western, but also Eastern culture.¹ This manipulation operates by way of heroizing individuals in order to hide the true tragedy of their violent and destructive actions against society and their environment in the name of their god, ideology, or belief system. This mythologizing strategy has had a powerful impact on people's mentality throughout times as these alleged heroes have fought for specific causes irrespective of the consequences of their actions for human life.² This is not to say that heroism as such is a negative phenomenon to be condemned globally by us postmoderns, but we are also called upon to reconsider the underlying meaning of heroic acts and heroic behavior which stand out so much in everyday life and seem either incomprehensible, sinister, awe-inspiring, or simply ideal, but certainly irrational and often very problematic.

There are many possibilities to characterize a hero, depending on the historical, political, and religious context and the literary genre,³ but Joseph Campbell offers a highly useful definition:

The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolic deficiency.⁴

The hero who rescues a victim from a fire or a whole people from its demise, a person who sacrifices him/herself for the survival of others can certainly be identified as a positive hero with whom we would happily identify. But what is the difference between heroism and berserk behavior, for instance, during which the protagonist strikes out against friend and foe or waits too long to receive help and then, foolishly, has to fight all by himself, which posterity falsely glorifies as heroism?⁵ For some people a person appears as a mass murderer, for others s/he is a hero because s/he defends her or his ideals, her or his people, or her or his social system. But sometimes an acclaimed hero might turn out to be a threat to the very fabric of society from which s/he had emerged. In many cases the decision as to who is to be admired for his/her heroic acts, and who is to be dreaded for almost the same actions which, however, tend to go overboard and backfire, leading to vast bloodshed, depends on the individual perspective and social and political context.⁶ To explore this issue in greater detail, here I will focus on the anonymous *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) and discuss the character, behavior, and self-concept of its protagonists, above all Siegfried.

Are there similarities between heroes such as Roland, El Cid, and Siegfried in their respective medieval epics, and the suicide bombers in Palestine in 2001 and 2002 who, in their youthful fanaticism, aspire for heroic martyrdom? Many groups in the Arab world admire them indeed for their bravery, whereas most Israelis and many people in the West consider them simply as terrorists. By the same token, does medieval heroic poetry plainly idealize its figures without any concern for social realities and individual conflicts, or can we identify various voices, both positive and negative, that contradict some of our modern perspectives regarding heroism, heroic epics, and the literary hero?⁷ Margery Hourihan rightly alerts us to the ideologizing effects of heroic role models: "But the image of reality these stories construct denies the actual complexities of society, and the closure insists that ultimately everything is understandable and all problems are soluble. . . . Likewise the stories deny the paradoxes and ambiguities of human character and motivation."⁸ On the other hand, as Dean A. Miller emphasizes, reflecting upon the Icelandic sagas and their heroes: "Death is not merely death for these Icelandic warriors: it is always an opportunity as well."⁹ It is presently no longer possible to naively accept these incredible characters as heroes, as we have to ask ourselves, as the medieval audiences probably did likewise, whether the bloody outcome truly justified the means. A close reading of many of these epics suggest that the protagonists display, through their heroic acts, also some form of monstrous behavior which severely undermines the whole notion of heroism.¹⁰

The depiction of Roland in Priest Konrad's *Rolandslid* (ca. 1170) carries surprisingly negative undertones, as he waits too long with calling back Charlemagne for help in the battle of Roncevalles out of purely selfish and arrogant reasons and thus brings certain death upon himself and the few remaining warriors. Olivier, for

instance, openly criticizes his friend for having delayed this action, and bemoans the death of many worthy men:

lieber hergeselle.
 hêtestûz enzît getân,
 sô hêtestu manigen hêrlîchen man
 dem rîche behalten. (6008-11)¹¹

Although Olivier despairs, he still proves his bravery in face of his unchangeable destiny, which partially compensates for Roland's failure. Nevertheless, at this moment he unmistakably identifies Roland as the one responsible for all of their downfall: "daz hâstu allez aine getân. / Karl muoz uns iemer mêre clagen" (6025f.). Almost too quickly the narrator diverts our attention as he wants us to disregard this slight element of negativity to preserve the hagiographical element of his text, and has Bishop Turpîn appeal to Roland to use his horn after all and to put the conflict with Olivier behind him: "nu tuot ir ez durch mînen trechtîn, / zûrnet nicht mêre. / weget der armen sêle" (6034-36). At a closer look, however, the catastrophe could, at least in part, have been avoided if Roland had not waited too long and had requested Charlemagne's help, instead of exclusively relying on his own strength when faced with an overwhelming enemy army. He had been warned by Olivier: "ôwi, geselle Ruolant, / wan blâsestu noch dîn horn? / dîn neve mächte uns ze helve kom, / daz wir frêlîchen scaiden hinnen" (3864-67). Olivier did not express cowardice, and he will subsequently fully demonstrate his heroic mind and valor, but he is also characterized by a sense of realism and empathy for his own people: "nu tuoz durch mîner swester Alden willen, / gefriste dîne hêrlîche man" (3868f.). Scholarship has not perceived this poignant criticism and instead has accepted the idealized viewpoint insinuated by the endless and heroic battles. In Karl Bertau's words: "Roland als himmlischer Lehnsman, Roland als irdischer Lehnsman, Roland als vorbildlicher Gotteskrieger und Märtyrer."¹² But if we pay close attention to Roland's words, we realize that he regards all heathens as unworthy of his own heroism and believes that God will secure the Christians' victory anyway: "die haiden sint vor gote vertailt" (3879). His actions, however, result in the death of his men, his friends, and himself, although the defeat could have been prevented.

If we widen our investigative net and include Old Norse epic poems, such as the *Þrymskviða*, we can quickly realize that even the gods are not always simply glorified and idealized, but occasionally portrayed as individuals who sometimes desperately struggle to maintain their power base and to compensate for major failures on their part.¹³ Whereas the Old English *Beowulf* and the Old Spanish *El Poema de Mio Cid* do not seem to reveal such ambivalence in the narrative presentation of their heroes and uniformly characterize them in an idealizing fashion,¹⁴ later epics such as the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun* deserve to be analyzed much more closely with regard to the actual evaluation of the hero figure, as here

we discover concrete elements of criticism directed against heroism as such.¹⁵ This is not an attempt to identify narrative inconsistencies or contradictions within the epic account, which can be found in fairly large numbers anyway and do not shed any significant light on the literary quality of the texts, instead find their explanation in the framework of the texts' oral performance.¹⁶ Rather, the question aims at the critical moments where the narrative account by itself deconstructs the protagonist and severely criticizes him for antisocial, grotesque, outrageous, or dangerous behavior.¹⁷

Curiously, even most recent *Nibelungenlied* scholarship has not paid much attention to the downside of heroism. Jan-Dirk Müller's extensive study *Spielregeln für den Untergang* covers many aspects of this epic, and carefully outlines the tragic consequences of the heroic acts, but there are hardly any comments on Siegfried's responsibility. Reflecting upon the subsequent text to the *Nibelungenlied*, *Diu Klage*, in which the few survivors take stock of the tragic Armageddon, Müller observes that "[d]ie 'Klage' ist Zeugnis einer Irritation, eines Trauma, das unablässig neues Reden produziert,"¹⁸ sensitizing us to the problematic nature of all heroic narratives as they threaten to result in catastrophes. But why did this catastrophe occur, who was responsible, and what could have been done to avoid it? Apparently *Diu Klage* contains powerful elements of criticism underneath the seemingly endless grieving and lament. It is not enough to state, as Müller does, "Die leere Zeit nach dem absoluten Ende ist zu füllen, mit wortreichen Klagereden — wo Kriemhilt einfach schweg — , mit ausufernden Begräbniszeremonien — wo das Epos die Figuren im Schmerz erstarren ließ — , mit banalen Fortsetzungen durch Figuren des zweiten Glieds — wo es keine Fortsetzung gibt, nachdem die Helden tot sind."¹⁹ With regard to Siegfried, Müller also offers the following comment: "Siegfried wird immer beides sein: Heros und höfischer Ritter, und aus diesem Widerspruch wird schließlich sogar seine Ermordung durch die Wormser abgeleitet werden."²⁰ In order to fully grasp the message contained in the *Nibelungenlied* we need to spend some thoughts on the heroes' responsibilities and faults, and the consequences of their action.

Another surprising example for how modern scholarship reads crucial passages in the *Nibelungenlied* is again provided by Jan-Dirk Müller who examines Siegfried's youthful adventures involving the Nibelungen treasure, the dwarf king Alberich, and the Nibelung kingdom. The outcome of the conflict is well known, both to Hagen and the rest of the world: "Die Situation 'ist' konfliktrichtig, und so artet sie folgerichtig in Gewalt aus; der Kampf ist im Gange, ohne dass gesagt werden muss, dass er anfang."²¹ Müller's analysis is focused on the causality of the events, on the consistency of the described actions, and the structure of the epic tale, and he certainly offers valuable interpretations with regard to the narrative techniques, the doubling of events, and the function of orality within the written account.

What does it all mean, however, with respect to the actual role played by Siegfried? We are faced, after all, by a tragedy, by an Armageddon, and there are causes to be identified, responsibilities to be assigned to individual heroes. Intriguingly, this reckoning with the past is not a matter of modern scholarship alone, but was begun already in the Middle Ages, as the testimony of *Diu Klage* demonstrates.²² But the *Nibelungenlied* author also integrated subtle comments about Siegfried and the other protagonists which modern scholarship has not fully grasped, blinded by such idealized notions as *triuwe* and heroism, apart from the noteworthy discussion of *übermuot* as an excessive expression of manly power.²³ According to Edward Haymes and Susann Samples, the heroic protagonist is “an extraordinary individual, the hero, who stands above his contemporaries in physical and moral strength,” and they add the noteworthy comment: “Heroic behavior can lead to disaster as well as success, and much heroic narrative is tragic in its tone and outcome.”²⁴ Their emphasis, however, rests on “tragic” and the sad consequences of fatal circumstances, such as Beowulf’s death in his battle against the dragon, or Sigurd in the *[[idreks saga*.²⁵

Surprisingly, most critical studies on heroes and heroism accept the same premise, the ideal image of the hero. In his extensive monograph on the epic hero, Dean A. Miller states, for instance:

In fact, fame may or may not end or celebrate the heroic parabolic life, in its furious pace and action, its stylized confrontations, and its ideal brevity, but the hero, in another of the paradoxes linked to him or contained within him, does not really care. To him the past means little, the future not much more—or even less. The present, the instant, is all.²⁶

Undoubtedly, suffering and struggle intimately belong to the hero’s major experiences, and his status is measured by how much he is able to meet these challenges and overcome them in an admirable manner.²⁷ In this sense both Beowulf and the Campeador El Cid easily come to mind as ideal representatives of true heroism as they selflessly help entire people and struggle against extreme dangers without regard for their own life. But what about Siegfried and his curious relationship with the Burgundians? Decades of research have almost silently passed over one of the most obvious questions which even a feudal society, constantly exposed to military threats, would not have overlooked.

Hagen certainly does not cause us as much trouble as Siegfried does, as all of his actions reflect a consistent course of action, and a meaningful approach to his role and functions within his society. Whether we like Hagen or not, whether we condemn his treatment of Siegfried, Kriemhilt, the water nixes, the poor chaplain, the Huns, and finally his last opponents in the battle for survival at Gran, or not, Hagen always pursues a single path of actions, to protect his lord, to fight for the well-being of the Burgundian royal house, and to safeguard his own honor in face

of many different challenges. Neither religious nor ethical, neither material nor moral criteria have any significant influence upon him, as he follows his own value system and lives according to social criteria that move him outside of the normal bounds of human society, without quite elevating him to the status of a god. Edward Haymes has rightly identified him as a liminal character, but only with regard to his superhuman strength, whereas Siegfried “is explicitly tied to magic in the form of the *tarnkappe*.”²⁸

Generations of readers have idolized, mythologized, and heroized Siegfried, as his characterization has always provided material for many different ideologies throughout times.²⁹ This *opinio communis* finds its best expression in Otfried Ehrismann’s monograph on the *Nibelungenlied* where he states: “Siegfried ist der personifizierte Schwebezustand zwischen Gegenwart und Vorzeit... Ein Drahtseilakt des Erzählers: den Helden zu binden und ihn ungebunden zu lassen.”³⁰ Winder McConnell, on the other hand, expresses great misgivings about this hero: “Siegfried is not simply Burgundy’s ‘problem.’ He poses a threat to the stability of the rest of the ‘epic’ world, specifically because of his incapacity to adhere to the norms of the latter, his spontaneity, and his apparent ignoring of the ‘rules’ according to which that world functions.”³¹ To counter this opinion one could offer the argument that Siegfried hails from a world of quasi-gods and naturally does not fit into the world of the Burgundians. In this sense he could be regarded as a catalyst who exposes the inherent weaknesses and failures at Gunther’s court.³² McConnell also suggests that the *Nibelungenlied* author might have been “a cynic, even a nihilist, who was highly influenced by the tragic lays of the past.”³³ There are, however, significant differences between a cynic and a critic, as cynicism would be the result of despair that things ever will get better, whereas the critic voices his/her concern so as to achieve a change to the better.

Granted, the thirteenth-century audiences would not have had as a good chance to analyze the texts as thoroughly as we modern readers can do, but the *Nibelungenlied* was obviously enjoyed by many educated readers, as is well documented by a large number of splendid manuscripts, as the epic quickly experienced its transformation into a literary document that invited a thorough reading or listening already at such an early time.³⁴

Key epithets used for the portrayal of Siegfried strongly insinuate that we are at first supposed to admire this hero, as he is called “der snelle degen guot” (21, 1), described as a young man with “ellenthafte muot” (21, 2) who excels through his physical beauty (22, 3) and his strength and virtue (23, 2). His public performance contributes to his country’s honor (23, 3). His parents take great care to raise him according to his noble status, and provide him with good school teachers, a fact that is normally not mentioned in the context of heroic poetry: “sîn pflâgen ouch die wîsen, den êre was bekant” (25, 3). Nevertheless, Siegfried’s goals are to conquer the world, to fight with physical force, and to crush any enemy who might stand in his way: “doch wold’er wesen herre für allen den gewalt / des in den landen vorhte

der degen küen' unde balt" (43, 3f.). Not surprisingly, his appearance at the court in Worms causes severe conflicts as it proves to be radically different from the social and ethical norms espoused by the Burgundians. When he arrives in Worms, he has no idea of courtly manners, diplomatic exchanges, or political rules of public behavior, and can only be appeased by means of pretended submission under his command: "allez daz wir hân, / geruochet irs nâch êren, daz sî iu undertân, / und sî mit iu geteilet lîp unde guot" (127, 1-3).³⁵ Scholars such as Günter Eifler have read this passage as an expression of an implied battle in which Siegfried's absolute physical dominance is quickly realized by his opponents who almost hysterically attempt to appease the stranger and give him a sense of being welcome among them, of being a friend, and an equal partner: "Der König hatte ihn freundlich am Hof aufgenommen, seine herrschaftliche Gleichberechtigung uneingeschränkt in der symbolischen Teilung von *lîp unde guot* anerkannt."³⁶ Undoubtedly, we can agree with the result of this analysis, but a deeper reading also seems possible. Hagen points out that Siegfried's appearance represents "niuwe mære" (87, 1), and then he recounts the tales about the strange warrior's youth because he feels coerced to advise his king: "sîn lîp der ist sô küene, man sol in holden hân" (101, 3). There is something uncanny about Siegfried, but it is not simply his absolute physical superiority, as scholarship has normally assumed.³⁷ There is no real need for him to threaten the Burgundians, to insult and humiliate them, and to demonstrate to them that they have no power available against him: "jane dôrften mich dîn zwelve mit strîte nimmer bestân" (118, 4), as he would be able to take whatever he wants at any rate, as the Burgundians' meek and insecure behavior demonstrates. But as soon as Siegfried feels that they have satisfactorily accepted him as their equal, if not as their superior, he succumbs to the courtly rules and puts aside his previous arrogance and hubris. As we will see, although Siegfried operates as an equal among the Burgundian kings, he is fully manipulated by them and proves to be almost a puppet in their hands. Siegfried's appearance represents a painful and unnecessary provocation which reveals the author's unease with which he portrayed this young hero.

According to Hagen, the hero once encountered Schilbunc and Nibelunc who asked him to divide the Nibelungen treasure for them. As a reward they gave him the famous Nibelungen sword Balmunc, but somehow he failed to do justice, inciting their wrath. Instead of retreating peacefully, Siegfried slew them, along with 700 other knights under their command, making himself the owner of the treasure against whom even the dwarf king Alberich cannot accomplish anything. Siegfried is a usurper, a violent warrior who does not care about justice and fairness, and takes whatever he can grab by means of his physical power. Hagen comments: "dô was des hordes herre Sîvrit der vreisliche man" (97, 4), expressing respect and admiration, but also fear and criticism.

Whereas before he had been a powerful leader, a mighty and independent warrior fully in charge of his own life and a true hero in the traditional sense of the

word, if we think of Beowulf, Roland, El Cid, or [I]drek, now this protagonist has lost most of his independence and has, ignorant of the fascinating intrigue and manipulation, factually been transformed into a vassal on his own volition, though nominally he remains a king of his own right. Beowulf and El Cid, for instance, had traveled far distances to help a people in need or to defend the Christians from attacks by the heathens. Siegfried, on the other hand, is purely concerned with his own self-interests and therefore cuts a rather poor figure, as the later developments demonstrate. When Gunther has decided to win Brünhild as his wife, Siegfried advises him to put away this thought as “diu küneginne [hât] sô vreisliche sit” (330, 2). But Hagen immediately intervenes and suggests Siegfried as the leader in the wooing expedition (331, 2f.), and as Gunther pledges to let Siegfried marry his sister Kriemhild once he has won Brünhild as his bride (334, 2f.). The narrator, however, includes a number of warning signals suggesting that Gunther’s marriage with Brünhild might lead to a catastrophe: “dest wart ir arebeiten verre deste mêr” (335), “sît in grôzen sorgen sîn” (335, 4), and “sus gewan er Prünhilde, dâ von im leide gescach” (338, 4). Nevertheless, Siegfried acquiesces and accepts Gunther’s offer, knowing too well that this man would never be a match for Brünhild as he openly tells him: “Swie vil wir volkes fûeren, . . . die müesen doch ersterben von ir übermuot” (340, 1-3). Consequently he presents an alternative plan which does not even rely on his own physical power, or the military strength of the Burgundians, but on the magical effects of his *tarnkappe* (337-38). Siegfried wins all three tournaments against Brünhild, but only by means of his artificial equipment. Surprisingly, in the later bedroom scene, the Icelandic queen almost would have killed him, despite the help of his *tarnkappe*, and then only his strong feeling of humiliation and shame instills in him additional strength which then allows him to subdue mighty Brünhild (674). The more we examine the various operations at the Burgundian court and Siegfried’s involvement, the more we have to realize how much this alleged hero has become a tool in the skillful hands of the manipulative Hagen and Gunther’s brothers. Gunther Eifler’s rightly observes: “Der Weg zur Werbung, seinem eigentlichen Ziel, war frei. . . . Der *manheit*, die sich im Kampf gegen Sachsen und Dänen nochmals auf einem Höhepunkt zeigen wird, winkt deshalb auch das Glück der *minne*.”³⁸ But Siegfried does not gain our admiration and seems to be more a *Minnesklave* (cf. stanza 258) who is used by the Burgundian kings for their own purposes than a true hero altruistically fighting for a people in need.

The only remarkable exception seems to be the battle against the Saxons and Danes where Siegfried gains full stature as a warrior because his only skill rests in his military abilities which he had freely offered to Gunther: “swaz si striten nâch êren, daz ist gar ein wint / unz eine an Sivrîden, des künec Sigmundes kint” (228). Primarily, this is a warrior who seeks out adventure and simply responds to any challenge in the only way that he is capable of: to fight. But when the situation becomes more complex, such as in the alleged second war against the Saxons, he

quickly proves to be a nonthinking person who easily gets caught in the trap set by Hagen and is used for quite different purposes. Most important, Siegfried does not realize to what extent Gunther and Hagen make him into an accomplice in a whole series of criminal activities, as they incite Siegfried to cheat Brünhild in her competition, to lie to her and her entire court about his actual social standing under Gunther, and to force Brünhild to marry an unfit man—in essence a highly disturbing perversion of heroic ideals and traditions. In Werner Fechter's words, "[e]r missbraucht seine Kenntnisse, und er missbraucht seine Fähigkeiten."³⁹ Moreover, Siegfried agrees to subjugate Brünhild and to force her to accept Gunther as her husband, which is tantamount to rape, especially as Siegfried takes her belt and her ring as symbols of his victory over this powerful woman (679-80). Grotesquely, as soon as he has left Brünhild, he gives both to his wife (680, 3) and obviously tells her where he got them from, as Kriemhilt can later confront Brünhild with the bitter truth about the man who first broke her resistance and took her maidenhood, as she interprets the mysterious event in Gunther's second wedding night: "jane was ez niht mîn bruoder, der dir den magetuoem an gewan" (840, 4). As Kriemhilt is able to produce the ring and the belt (847, 849), the truth is revealed, and both Gunther's miserable character and Siegfried's deceptiveness are open for all to see. Although in the long run these two women will become the prime victims of their own words and their fight in public, they also trigger the collapse of the public esteem that these two heroes had enjoyed. Certainly, heroism in a very limited sense continues to hold sway, as the subsequent battles demonstrate, especially the brutal Armageddon in Gran, but on a personal level the shining glory of Siegfried and Gunther has been destroyed, curiously in both cases because of their hypertrophic self-centeredness and arrogance, their "übermuot."⁴⁰ The narrator does not hold back his criticism against both characters, as he underscores the deadly dangers that Gunther would have to expect if he decided to woo Brünhild: "der wande sîne sinne an daz scoene wîp. / dar umbe muosen heledē sît verliesen den lîp" (328, 3f.). Interestingly, even Siegfried advises against this enterprise (330, 1-2) as the queen almost seems to be too much of a challenge even for this hero: "swer umb' ir minne wirbet, daz ez im hôhe stât" (330, 3). But these men never listen to anybody and proceed with their plans as initially conceived, pretending to be heroes, but revealing rather weak personality traits as they do not have any foresight, cannot plan their actions in advance, and do not pay heed to any comments about their intentions.

Both men initially achieve their goals, as both win a wife and secure the continuity of their kingdom through an heir. Nevertheless, their triumphs are only short-lived, and soon prove to be the cause of their own doom. Siegfried will be murdered by Hagen, the defender of Gunther's honor, who thus secures the elimination of the dangerous challenger to his lord's position and who takes revenge against the public shame brought upon Brünhild through Siegfried via Kriemhilt, not to forget the revenge for Hagen's own humiliation by Siegfried at

their first encounter (122). Significantly, Gunther, as we will see later, basically will experience the same destiny.

In many cases of heroic literature, the protagonist experiences envy and jealousy, but his heroism is confirmed even in his noble handling of such hostile emotions. Siegfried, on the other hand, does not even know, as it seems, what he has done to Hagen's pride and the Burgundians' honor. Consequently, this hero does not die a worthy death in battle or in a fight against a monster, instead he is simply murdered from behind, whereas Beowulf succumbs to the dragon and Roland to the Saracens in the respective epics. A close reading of the text demonstrates that the victim also bears some guilt insofar as his aggressive appearance at the Burgundian court, his hostile and highly arrogant behavior, his lack of any moral or ethical conscience, and, at the same time, his inability to maintain his superiority within the courtly world, submitting himself under King Gunther and his brothers because of his desire to win Kriemhilt as his wife, trigger so much hostility that it was just a matter of time until he would meet his death. This is best illustrated, and carefully developed by the *Nibelungenlied* poet in the final hunting scene before Siegfried's death.

First he kills so many animals that the hunters ask him to slow down and not to empty their forest of all animals, which Siegfried accepts with a curious smile ("smielen," 940, 4). Then he decides to demonstrate his absolute superiority over all other members of the court in a playful, but also mocking manner. He calls it a "kurzewîle" (947, 1), but in reality it quickly turns out to be an excessive display of his own hunting skills and his physical prowess, implicitly shaming all other members of the court.⁴¹ Having caught a bear alive, metonymically representing the protagonist, Siegfried takes the animal to their camp in the middle of which he releases the wild animal. The bear, fearful and confused, rages through the kitchen area and causes a great uproar. But nobody can catch or kill him, until Siegfried enters the action again, pursues the bear and finishes him off: "im kunde niht gevolgen wan Kriemhilde man" (962, 2). Once again, the hero has accomplished his true goal, winning general praise and deep respect: "Dô sprâchen die daz sâhen, er wære ein kreftec man" (963, 1). Curiously, though, none of the royal hunters seems to participate in these tumultuous events, and we hear Hagen and Gunther raise their voices again only after the dinner has begun and Siegfried has noticed the lack of wine (967). Now we observe, as the narrator comments, that the entire hunt had been set up to deceive and eventually kill the protagonist: "der künic von sînem tische sprach in valsche dar" (966, 2). Could it be that the Burgundian nobles abstained from the hunt and let Siegfried tire himself out, while they watched the events from the distance? One indication that this was the case can be discovered at the moment when Siegfried arrives with the bear and is greeted by Gunther's men: "si liefen im engegene und enpfiengen im daz marc" (957, 3).⁴² Then the wine is missing, and Gunther deceptively blames Hagen for his lack of attention to such matters (966, 4), who in turn excuses himself and explains that he had erroneously

sent the wine elsewhere in the forest (967, 3f.). Siegfried, however, does not seem to understand anything of the machinations and accepts the situation as is without perceiving the deadly plan, although the narrator repeatedly points out the evil intentions by Hagen and the other Burgundians: “der rât wart manigem degene ze grôzen sorgen getan” (969, 4). Not surprisingly, when Hagen challenges Siegfried, testing the speed with which he can run, the latter immediately responds as expected and eagerly enters a competition to prove, once again, that he indeed is the best of them all in every physical respect (973). Siegfried is so assured of his victory that he gives Hagen several advantages, and makes his own victory then look even more impressive: “Den prîs an allen dingen truoc er vor manigem man” (977, 1). In reality, however, Siegfried becomes more and more guilty of aggravated pride and haughtiness, even though in this situation Hagen and Gunther welcome the particularities of Siegfried’s display of his strength, speed, and physical dominance: “dô er daz gehôrte, wi lieb ez Gunthere was!” (974, 4).⁴³

Consequently, Siegfried dies, murdered by Hagen, whereas Gunther meets his death at Gran after the final battle, which causes the *Klage* poet to comment on the guilt of all the warriors who did not know how to behave according to their own social and ethical norms, and were caught in a mortal struggle for self-aggrandizement and public glory at the expense of all other men at the court in Worms (3434-38). Nothing is right in their behavior, as they act courtly when heroic defense and circumspect behavior would have been called for, and act heroically when diplomacy and courtly manner would have been the norm. For instance, Siegfried tries to demonstrate his courtliness when he lets Hagen drink from the fountain first. The narrator sarcastically comments: “Die Sîfrides tugende wâren harte grôz” (978, 1), whereas only shortly before he had made him feel incompetent and weak both during the hunt and in the final scene with the bear whom Siegfried had let lose in the camp. Not surprisingly, we also hear the poet state: “Do engalt er sîner zûhte” (980, 1), whereas soon after Siegfried himself expresses profound misunderstanding and ignorance of what has happened to him: “waz helfent mîniu dienest, daz ir mich habet erslagen?” (989, 2).

Whereas the royal brothers, together with the crowd of the hunting party, lament Siegfried’s death, seemingly filled with grief, Hagen openly states the truth of the matter: “ez hât nu allez ende unser sorge unt unser leit” (993, 2). Neither heroism nor courtly norms support the public display of mourning, and Kriemhilt quickly sees through their pretense: “Wær iu dar umbe leide, so’n wær es niht geschehen” (1042, 1). The narrator himself emphasizes the dangerous consequences of the Burgundians’ miserable deed: “jâ muosen sîn engelten vil guote wîgande sint” (1002, 4), but he also has Gêrnôt and Gîselher continue with the deceptive game as they try to console their sister and promise her to compensate her for the loss: “wir wellen dichs ergetzen die wîle wir geleben” (1049, 3). S/he who wants to compensate a victim publicly acknowledges her or his guilt. Although Gunther had insisted that murderers unknown to them had committed the crime, Kriemhilt is

fully aware of her brothers' and Hagen's guilt: "'Mir sint die schâchære', sprach si, 'vil wol bekant'" (1046, 1).⁴⁴

Disregarding the subsequent events at Gran, we can summarize the analysis of the first part of the *Nibelungenlied* with the conclusion that the alleged heroism of both Siegfried and the Burgundians has utterly failed. Although they all command enormous political powers and physical strength, practically all of their actions have proven to be self-destructive and egoistical. Siegfried's murder could have been anticipated from the very first moment of his appearance at the Burgundian court, and all his further actions only added food to the fire of Hagen's and Gunther's envy, hatred, and fear. They utilize him to the utmost of their abilities, but not because they trust and admire him, but because they need him. As soon as this need is no longer there, and an opportunity has arisen to eliminate him, Hagen takes action on behalf of the royal brothers and murders Siegfried. Although some of them at first protest and try to defend Siegfried as a loyal and trustworthy companion and ally, Hagen and Ortwin dominate the discussion and coerce the others to become more or less willing accessories to the murderous plot. None of them proves to be truly heroic in the traditional sense of the word as they do not face any serious challenges to their existence, do not prove their superhuman strength in a fight for survival, and do not demonstrate extraordinary intelligence or foresightedness. Quite on the contrary, they utterly fail to meet Siegfried's challenge, they display a surprising lack in ethics and morality, and acquiesce to their opponent's elimination.

Tragically, the same also applies to Siegfried who dies, we might say, because of his misconceived notion of heroism, as he utilizes both his extraordinary strength and his *tarnkappe* to realize ulterior, that is, self-centered motives. Ultimately, his murder is not the result of envy against a hero, but instead the result of his own arrogance and hubris.⁴⁵ Although his own people and Kriemhilt profoundly mourn his death, the narrative itself does not insinuate that the death of a hero has to be lamented. Siegfried had misused the sword Balmunc to kill the two gift-givers; he had humiliated the Burgundian society in order to gain Kriemhilt's hand, but immediately succumbed to their norms when Gunther pretended to acknowledge him as an equal. Siegfried had lied to Brünhild, cheated her in her own tournament, and later raped her on behalf of Gunther back in Worms, and he humiliated her by revealing the truth about the ring and the belt to his wife Kriemhilt. Finally, as the hunting scene illustrates, even in this leisurely sport he arrogantly displayed his absolute superiority and ridiculed all other hunters, including Gunther and Hagen, naturally arousing their ire, envy, and jealousy even further. In light of all these negative elements and characteristics, Siegfried can hardly be called a true hero, as he betrayed the fundamental values of heroism perhaps best represented by Beowulf in the Old English eponymous epic in many different ways, without ever fully understanding the consequences of his words and deeds.

This, however, is not simply the result of a (post)modern reading of the *Nibelungenlied*, but rather can also be determined as the anonymous author's fundamental criticism implied by his comments and the development of the events leading up to Siegfried's death.⁴⁶ The Burgundians' doom is not the working of destiny or their fate, but rather the result of very specific political machinations, murderous strategies, and powerful manipulations. Certainly, in the final battle in Gran the Burgundians demonstrate a heroic character and bravely fight until all of them, except Gunther and Hagen, have met their death. At that point, however, their efforts to live up to heroic ideals come too late, as they have already crossed the Danube, the metaphoric river of doom, significantly indicated by Hagen's destruction of the ferry boat (1581). In fact, heroism becomes noticeable only once the Burgundians face their own death, whereas before they were victims of their own courtly culture and its debilitating influences.⁴⁷

Not surprisingly, Gunther's attempt to win Brünhild's hand would have ended in a total fiasco if Siegfried had not provided secret support and had given Gunther extra strength. As Bishop Pilgrim clearly states in *Diu Klage*, commenting on the cause of the Burgundians' downfall: "der Nibelunge golt rôt, / hêten si daz vermiten, / sô möhten si wol sîn geriten / zir swester mit ir hulden. / von irer selber schulden / und von ir starken übermuot / sô haben wir die recken guot / verlorn al gelêche" (3430-37).⁴⁸ Even when we consider the final scene after the battle has come to an end and only Hagen has survived, the narrator voices unmistakable criticism against the heroes. Undoubtedly, Hagen was Siegfried's murderer, and the fight in Gran erupted because Kriemhilt wanted her revenge against him. In this situation, finally, the Burgundians demonstrated extraordinary power and strength, but eventually they all were killed. When Kriemhilt asks Hagen for the Nibelungen treasure, a metonym for Siegfried and hence for her marital bliss and personal happiness, Hagen derogatorily mocks her again abandoning all his hope for survival: "den schaz den weiz nu niemen wan got unde mîn: / der sol dich, vâlandinne, immer wol verholn sîn" (2371, 3f.).

Adding insult to injury, this hero once again reveals his deep-seated hatred and contempt of Kriemhilt, Siegfried, and any other forces that could outshine him in heroic terms. In fact, Hagen is consumed by negativity and xenophobia, as he has anxiously defended himself and his liege lord Gunther throughout his life against any challenges from outside. He knows what he has done wrong and accepts his destiny, which surprisingly elevates him in this situation to new heights in our evaluation of his character and performance: "und ist ouch rehte ergangen als ich mir hete gedaht" (2370, 4). If anybody at all, then we could identify Hagen as a hero, considering his unfailing steadfastness, loyalty to the Burgundian kings, and superior fighting abilities, and his unswerving willingness to accept even deadly dangers when necessary. Nevertheless, defying Kriemhilt in this desperate situation means that he deconstructs himself as he continues with his entirely heroic approach to life, fully aware of the fatal consequences.

Over all, with Hagen the last representative of an ill-guided heroic society has been killed who has always displayed utter disregard for morality, ethics, and the virtues of courtly society, and instead had pursued nothing but the goal of supporting his lord and defending his own honor in traditionally feudal terms. Revealingly, Kriemhilt, while pulling out Siegfried's sword from the sheath at Hagen's side, reminds herself of her murdered husband and her lifelong sorrows: "an dem mir herzeleide von iuwern schulden geschach" (2372, 4), and then kills Hagen. In return Hildebrand decapitates her and thus ends the heroic epic in which heroism plays a rather awkward role, curiously clashing with courtly love and communication, and undermining the essential structure of human society.⁴⁹ Despite the awe-inspiring nature of the *Nibelungenlied* many of the heroic acts and heroic characters do not withstand a critical analysis and betray a highly disturbing underside which even the medieval author already had pointed out through coy allusions and curt comments.⁵⁰

Surprisingly, Hagen dies the same death as Siegfried, both are murdered, and so neither dies the honorable death to which unblemished heroes such as Beowulf or Roland — here disregarding the latter's own shortcoming — have succumbed to.⁵¹ Jan-Dirk Müller observes a process of deconstruction at work and identifies the mutual slaughter of Burgundians and Etzel's vassals as the result of an epidemic of violence realized by a frenzied "Meute."⁵² But he does not fully come to terms with the causes for the deconstruction and limits himself to the observation that the *Nibelungenlied* is characterized by irreconcilable contradictions in politics, ethics, morality, idealism, and power.⁵³ Indeed, the *Nibelungenlied* poet composed an epic of deconstruction, but not of a historical/mythical world represented by Siegfried, Gunther, and Hagen. Rather, the deconstruction is aimed at heroism itself and the outdated model of heroes whose behavior has lost its sense of purpose and turns against itself. Whereas the heroes in the older heroic epics mostly fought for the preservation of a society, a religion, and individuals,⁵⁴ neither Siegfried nor the Burgundians have any other goal but to outdo each other, leading to murder and blood feud. Significantly, the *Klage* poet clearly defends Kriemhilt against the accusations raised against her in the *Nibelungenlied*, but the criticism against the warriors and their arrogance, hubris, and disregard for fellow beings, against their crude and antisocial treatment of women,⁵⁵ of foreigners such as the Huns,⁵⁶ and their murderous and vicious treatment of each other prove to be the hallmark of this monumental text. Whereas the *Nibelungenlied* outlines the origin, development, and decline of the heroic *modus operandi*, the *Klage* comments on the heroes' behavior and voices serious criticism of this ideology by way of profound lamentations and grieving.⁵⁷

Undoubtedly, in the literary world none of the alleged heroes is without guilt, first of all Siegfried because of his boisterous, inconsiderate, and arrogant behavior, his deception and lies; then Hagen, the scheming and murderous figure in the shadow of the Burgundian kings; and finally the latter who prove to be conniving,

manipulative, and criminal in their treatment of Siegfried, Kriemhilt, and Brünhild. Surprisingly, despite all these almost monstrous figures, the *Nibelungenlied* maintains its timeless fascination, as great literature has paradoxically always been intimately connected with the most evil sides of human existence. The epic poem does not present evil heroes in the modern sense of the word, but the alleged heroism of Siegfried, Gunther, and even Hagen proves to be highly ambivalent and intensively questionable because of its mostly self-serving intentions. Undoubtedly, the *Nibelungenlied* poet himself intended this criticism and indirectly appealed to his audience to steer the very opposite course in their life.

¹ Eric Bentley, *A Century of Hero-Worship: a Study of the Idea of Heroism in Carlyle and Nietzsche, with Notes on Wagner, Spengler, Stefan George, and D. H. Lawrence*. Beacon Contemporary Affairs Series. 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1957; orig. 1944); Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), deals with the broad issue of heroism within the savage soul and the early modern conception thereof. For a broad overview, see W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance. Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York: Dover, 1957; orig. London 1896); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series, 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968; orig. 1949); Werner Hoffmann, *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldendichtung*. Grundlagen der Germanistik, 14 (Berlin: Schmidt, 1974); Felix J. Oinas, ed., *Heroic Epic and Saga: an Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

² Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero. Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 14: "In Western culture the hero story has come to seem simply a reflection of the way things are. The perception of those who are different as actual or potential enemies who must be opposed has assumed the status of self-evident truth." She refers, among others, to Roland Barthes's path-breaking theoretical study on mythology, *Mythologies* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1957), and Edward Said's highly influential investigation of the mechanisms of orientalism as a Western paradigm, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

³ Katalina Horn, "Held, Heldin," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), cols. 721-45; from a philosophical-historical perspective, see O. F. Best, "Held, Heros," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe, 1974), cols. 1043-50.

⁴ Campbell, *The Hero*, 38.

⁵ Peter Wunderli, "Rolandus epilepticus," *Das Ritterbild in Mittelalter und Renaissance*. Studia humaniora, 1 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1985), 105-30.

⁶ See the fruitful discussion of the same issue, though from a very optimistic perspective, by Louise Cowan, "The Necessity of the Classics," *The Intercollegiate Review* 37, 1 (2001): 3-11. The danger of her and many similar approaches to heroism rests in the overly positive evaluation of the hero who is, according to her opinion, "too large to be contained by the civic order; he is excessive, must go beyond codes. . . . The basis of the Greek heroic paradox

is that human beings must aspire to divinity and yet because of their mortality fail to achieve it" (9).

⁷ For the idealizing school of thought, see, for instance, Robert E. Kaske, "The Governing Theme of *Beowulf*," *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958): 423-57; for the critical school of thought, see, for instance, Bernard F. Huppé, *The Hero in the Earthly City: A Reading of Beowulf* (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1984).

⁸ M. Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*, 94.

⁹ Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 324.

¹⁰ S. L. Dragland, "Monster-Man in *Beowulf*," *Neophilologus* 61 (1977): 606-18; Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Condemnation of Heroism in the Tragedy of Beowulf. A Study in the Characterization of the Epic*. *Studies in Epic and Romance Literature*, 2 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 180f.

¹¹ *Das Rolandlied des Pfaffen Konrad*. *Mittelhochdeutsch / Neuhochdeutsch*. Ed., trans., and commented by Dieter Kartschoke (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1993); surprisingly, Kartschoke does not consider this curious passage which sheds a rather negative light on the heroic performance.

¹² Karl Bertau, *Deutsche Literatur im europäischen Mittelalter*. Vol. I: 800-1197 (Munich: Beck, 1972), 468.

¹³ Margaret Clunies Ross, "Reading [Ἰ]rmyskvíða," *The Poetic Edda. Essays on Old Norse Mythology*. Ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington. *Routledge Medieval Casebooks* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 177-94.

¹⁴ Alois Wolf, *Heldensage und Epos. Zur Konstituierung einer mittelalterlichen volkssprachlichen Gattung im Spannungsfeld von Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit*. *ScriptOralia*, 68 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1995), offers a comprehensive overview of the various heroic epics; for a critical view of heroism in *Beowulf*, see Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Condemnation of Heroism in the Tragedy of Beowulf*, 1989.

¹⁵ Here I will exclude *Kudrun* in order to concentrate on one literary example, the *Nibelungenlied*, but my theoretical thrust deserves to be applied to this epic poem as well. *Kudrun*. Nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch hg. von Karl Stackmann. Rpt. of the 1980 ed. *Altdeutsche Textbibliothek*, 115 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000); see Winder McConnell, *The Epic of Kudrun. A Critical Commentary*. *Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik*, 463 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988), 92-96. Would it be true, however, to characterize the typical heroic poem as a tragedy that deals with "hatred, power, vitality, combat" (92), or would it not be necessary to add other elements, such as heroic dedication to a cause, selflessness, and fight against an evil destiny?

¹⁶ James A. Schultz, "The Coherence of Middle High German Narratives," *Medieval German Literature. Proceedings from the 23rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 5-8, 1988*, ed. Albrecht Classen. *Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik*, 507 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1989), 75-86.

¹⁷ I have developed similar ideas in: "Das heroische Element im *Nibelungenlied* — Ideal oder Fluch?," *Ir sult sprechen willekomen. Grenzenlose Mediävistik. Festschrift für Helmut Birkhan zum 60. Geburtstag*. Ed. Christa Tuczay, Ulrike Hirhager, and Karin Lichtblau (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), 673-92.

¹⁸ Jan-Dirk Müller, *Spielregeln für den Untergang. Die Welt des Nibelungenliedes* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998), 118.

¹⁹ Müller, *Spielregeln*, 118.

²⁰ Jan-Dirk Müller, *Das Nibelungenlied*. Klassiker Lektüren, 5 (Berlin: Schmidt, 2002), 73f.

²¹ Müller, *Spielregeln*, 133.

²² Albrecht Classen, "Diu Klage — a Modern Text from the Middle Ages?," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* XCVI, 3 (1995): 315-29; *ibid.*, "Medieval Manuscript Evidence Versus Modern (Mis)Interpretation: Diu Klage," *The International Fiction Review* 24, 1 & 2 (1997): 1-11; see also the commentary in my *Diu Klage, mittelhochdeutsche—neuhochdeutsch*. Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar und Anmerkungen. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 647 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1997); Elisabeth Lienert, *Die Nibelungenklage*. Mittelhochdeutscher Text nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch. Einführung, neuhochdeutsche Übersetzung und Kommentar. Schöningsh mediävistische Editionen, 5 (Paderborn: Schöningsh, 2000).

²³ See Müller, *Spielregeln*, 237-42, but he concludes with the observation that "[e]ine eindeutige Trennung zwischen (eher negativem) *übermuot* und (positivem) *höher muot* lässt sich nicht aufrechterhalten" (242). How much of negative criticism can we identify in the *Nibelungenlied*? Does the text really remain on such an ambivalent level of meaning?

²⁴ Edward R. Haymes, Susann T. Samples, *Heroic Legends of the North. An Introduction to the Nibelung and Dietrich Cycles*. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1403 (New York: Garland, 1996), 7.

²⁵ Theodore M. Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 169-85.

²⁶ Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero*, 2000, 132.

²⁷ Norman Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens. An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 100-4.

²⁸ Edward R. Haymes, "Preface," *The Dark Figure in Medieval German and Germanic Literature*, ed. by Edward R. Haymes and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 448 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1986), iv.

²⁹ Otfrid Ehrismann, *Nibelungenlied. Epoche — Werk — Wirkung*. Arbeitsbücher zur Literaturgeschichte (Munich: Beck, 1987), 55-58, for older research literature on Siegfried, see 67f.

³⁰ Ehrismann, 113.

³¹ Winder McConnell, "The *Nibelungenlied*: A Psychological Approach," *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*. Ed. by Winder McConnell. Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1998), 172-205; here 189.

³² Werner Hoffmann, *Das Nibelungenlied*. 6., überarbeitete und erweiterte Aufl. des Bandes *Nibelungenlied* von Gottfried Weber und Werner Hoffmann. Sammlung Metzler, 7 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), 72-90.

³³ McConnell, "The *Nibelungenlied*," 205.

³⁴ Joachim Bumke, *Die vier Fassungen der 'Nibelungenklage'. Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte und Textkritik der höfischen Epik im 13. Jahrhundert*. Quellen und Forschungen zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte, 8 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 592, speaks of a "Nibelungenwerkstatt" where a "Großmeister" and his many collaborators produced many parallel versions of the text and probably interacted with each other closely.

³⁵ As Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1997), has demonstrated, the political rituals had

developed to a highly complex level already by the early Middle Ages, so Siegfried's behavior appears as doubly shocking and outrageous.

³⁶ Günter Eifler, "Siegfried zwischen Xanten und Worms," *Sprache, Literatur, Kultur. Studien zu ihrer Geschichte im deutschen Süden und Westen. Wolfgang Kleiber zu seinem 60. Geburtstag gewidmet*. Ed. Albrecht Greule and Uwe Ruberg (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989), 277-90; here 290.

³⁷ Peter Göhler, *Das Nibelungenlied. Erzählweise, Figuren, Weltanschauung, Literaturgeschichtliches Umfeld*. Literatur und Gesellschaft (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989), 80-82, talks of a "märchenhafter Zug" in Siegfried's personality, but never observes any negative aspects, instead defends him against the modern critics and mostly blames the Burgundians, especially Gunther, for the disaster. Hilde E. Hansen, "Das ist Hartnäckigkeit in einer verwerflichen Sache; sie selbst nennen es Treue." *Literatursoziologische Untersuchungen zum Nibelungenlied*. Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe I: Deutsche Sprache und Literatur, 1195 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), argues that Siegfried had received a courtly education, but never suppresses his "'übermütig-draufgängerische Verhaltensweise'," 107; see also Karl Heinz Ihlenburg, *Das Nibelungenlied. Problem und Gehalt* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969), 55.

³⁸ Eifler, "Siegfried zwischen Xanten und Worms," 290.

³⁹ Werner Fechter, *Siegfrieds Schuld und das Weltbild des Nibelungenliedes* (Hamburg: J. P. Toth, 1948), 31.

⁴⁰ J. Knight Bostock, "The Message of the Nibelungenlied," *Modern Language Review* 55 (1960): 200-12; critically opposed to him K. C. King, "The Message of the Nibelungenlied — a Reply," *Modern Language Review* 57 (1962): 541-50. For an overview of the range of scholarly opinions regarding Siegfried, see Werner Hoffmann, *Das Siegfriedbild in der Forschung*. Erträge der Forschung, 127 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 88-117.

⁴¹ We gain an understanding of this shame only through the narrative structure, not through the narrator's comment which does not address "shame" in this context. See David N. Yeandle, 'schame' in *Alt- und Mittelhochdeutschen bis um 1210. Eine sprach- und literaturgeschichtliche Untersuchung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Herausbildung einer ethischen Bedeutung*. Beiträge zur älteren Literaturgeschichte (Heidelberg: Winter, 2001), 131-36.

⁴² The stanza does not explain enough to provide solid evidence, as the people greeting him could well be just squires and other servants. However, we are dealing with a hunting camp, and there is not much room to maneuver or to separate the kings from the crowd.

⁴³ Marten Brandt, *Gesellschaftsthematik und ihre Darstellung im Nibelungenlied und seinen hochmittelalterlichen Adaptionen*. Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe I: Deutsche Sprache und Literatur, 1643 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 187f.

⁴⁴ Ian [R.] Campbell, "Gunther's Role in the Murder Plot: *Das Nibelungenlied*, 14. Äventiure," Kerry Dunne, Ian R. Campbell, eds., *Unravelling the Labyrinth. Decoding Text and Language. Festschrift for Eric Lowson Marson* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 121-36, convincingly demonstrates that Gunther is deeply implicated in Siegfried's murder and only pretends to oppose it for political reasons, as he needs to preserve the pretense of his own innocence.

⁴⁵ Albrecht Classen, "Das heroische Element im *Nibelungenlied*," 1998, 673-92.

⁴⁶ Hartmut Kokott, "Nibelungenlied-Lektüren," 4. *Pöchlerner Heldenliedgespräch. Heldendichtung in Österreich – Österreich in der Heldendichtung*. Ed. Klaus Zatloukal. *Philologica Germanica*, 20 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 1997), 89-102, examines various recent interpretations of the *Nibelungenlied*, and points out constructive ways to combine traditional with (post)modern interpretations. In his criticism of various previous approaches, however, he fails to do justice to individual concepts and summarily rejects most of them without going into any details.

⁴⁷ C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939-1210*. The Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 190-93, identifies this criticism of courtliness in the *Nibelungenlied*, but does not yet gain the insight that this criticism also is directed against a distorted image of heroism.

⁴⁸ See the commentary in my translation, 223, no. 231, and Elisabeth Lienert's comment in her translation, 440.

⁴⁹ Albrecht Classen, "The Bloody Battle Poem as Negative Example: The Argument Against Blood Feud and Images of Peaceful Political Negotiations in German Heroic Poetry," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 53 (2000): 123-43; cf. also Werner Schröder, "Zum Problem der Hortfrage im Nibelungenlied," Werner Schröder, *Nibelungenlied-Studien* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1968), 157-84.

⁵⁰ The same can be observed with regard to tragic drama, see Leonard Moss, *The Excess of Heroism in Tragic Drama* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 11-13.

⁵¹ Walter Haug, "Die Grausamkeit der Heldensage. Neue gattungstheoretische Überlegungen zur heroischen Dichtung," Walter Haug, *Brechungen auf dem Weg zur Individualität. Kleine Schriften zur Literatur des Mittelalters* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995 [orig. 1994]), 72-90, formulates an observation that mystifies heroic literature once again, 90: "es ist die Erfahrung (of the hero) jener Stunde, aus der der Typus geboren worden ist: die prekäre Erfahrung des Eintritts in die Geschichte."

⁵² Jan-Dirk Müller, *Spielregeln*, 440-50.

⁵³ Jan-Dirk Müller, *Spielregeln*, 453f. He goes on to say (454): "Heroischer Behauptungswille zerreit das Geflecht von Heimtcke und Intrige, doch uert er sich in blutiger Vernichtung." This is certainly true insofar as Kriemhilt can finally get her revenge, but it does not clear up the intricate evaluation of heroism in the first place, the cause of the tragedy depicted in this epic poem.

⁵⁴ See the various definitions of heroism by Katalina Horn, "Held, Heldin," 1990; and O. F. Best, "Held, Heros," 1974.

⁵⁵ This, at least, would be the major point of Jerold C. Frakes' monograph, *Brides and Doom. Gender, Property, and Power in Medieval German Women's Epic*. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); for reviews see Albrecht Classen, in: *Zeitschrift fr deutsche Philologie* 117, 1 (1998): 112-15; Winder McConnell, in: *The Medieval Review* March 17, 1998: (<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=tmr&view=text&rgn=main&idno=baj9928.9803.003&sid=a5a2eb762a81371d81dfb88d516b2>).

⁵⁶ Alexander Sager, "Hungarians as *vremde* in Medieval Germany," *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27-44.

⁵⁷ Elisabeth Lienert, "Intertextualitt in der Heldendichtung. Zu Nibelungenlied und 'Klage'," *Wolfram-Studien XV. Neue Wege der Mittelalter-Philologie. Landshuter*

Kolloquium 1996 (Berlin: Schmidt, 1998), 276-98; here 292-94; Albrecht Classen, "Bereavement in the Middle Ages: With an Emphasis on Middle High German Literature," "Pur remembrance." *Mélanges en mémoire de Wolfgang A. Spiewok*, éd. par Anne Berthelot. Wodan, 79 (Greifswald: Reinke, 2001), 89-118.