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“Hagene, der vil ungetriuwe man”?  
Courtly Rivalry, Loyalty Conflict, and the Figure of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*

A Thesis Presented

by

KATHERINE ROSE DEVANE BROWN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2014

German and Scandinavian Studies

“Hagene, der vil ungetriuwe man”?  
Courtly Rivalry, Loyalty Conflict, and the Figure of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*

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ABSTRACT

“HAGENE, DER VIL UNGETRIUWE MAN”?

COURTLY RIVALRY, LOYALTY CONFLICT, AND THE FIGURE OF HAGEN IN

THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

MAY 2014

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The variety of scholarly approaches to the Middle High German poem *Das Nibelungenlied* has generated a wide range of conflicting analyses of the character of Hagen, a figure who plays a key role in both the plot and the interpretation of the work. This thesis proposes that viewing Hagen’s relationship with Siegfried in relation to the poem’s central theme of loyalty (*triuwe*) allows for an analysis that integrates both the positive and negative aspects of Hagen’s character. By examining the depiction of courtly rivalry in four contemporary Middle High German works (*Herzog Ernst B*, *Wolfdietrich A*, *Tristan*, and *Parzival*), I outline the basic features of this common medieval narrative structure and then apply the same framework to a close reading of the relationship between Hagen and Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied*. I also argue that the incorporation of the courtly rivalry motif as a unifying theme of the text allows the poet to take a stance on the broader issue of loyalty conflict, a topic which appears frequently in contemporary literature and had particular relevance within the political climate of medieval Germany. My reading of the character of Hagen can thus hopefully shed new light on the thematic structure of the

*Nibelungenlied* as well as on the relationship between the poem and the literary and historical context in which it was written.

Keywords: *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen, loyalty conflict, *triuwe*, courtly rivalry, paradigmatic narration, Middle High German, feudalism

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CHAPTER 1  
CRITICAL DEBATES IN *NIBELUNGENLIED* SCHOLARSHIP

The difficulty of providing a unified analysis of the complex characters and themes in the Middle High German poem *Das Nibelungenlied* has made it one of the most debated medieval works. The variety of scholarly approaches to the poem has generated an especially wide range of conflicting analyses of the figure of Hagen, a character who plays a key role in both the plot and the interpretation of the work. In this thesis, I will propose that viewing Hagen's interpersonal relationships through the framework of courtly rivalry allows for an analysis that integrates both the positive and negative aspects of Hagen's character and reveals the *Nibelungenlied* poet's stance on the poem's central theme of loyalty conflict.

In order to establish the necessary background for this argument, the first chapter will provide a brief history of scholarly approaches to the poem. In this section, I will review the most influential theories about the transmission of Germanic legends and their influence on modern scholarship. I will then compare the figure of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied* with his portrayal in other related works, an approach which can help to identify the poet's artistic intentions and the organizing principles which govern his retelling of the legend.<sup>1</sup> I will conclude by presenting my own theoretical approach to the poem within the context of recent scholarly debates on the interpretation and interpretability of the poem. In Chapter 2, an examination of four episodes of courtly rivalry drawn from the contemporary Middle High German poems *Herzog Ernst B*,

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<sup>1</sup>Reference is made to the anonymous poet of the *Nibelungenlied* in the masculine singular for the sake of clarity only and is not intended to imply a particular stance on the author's gender.

*Wolfdietrich A*, *Tristan*, and *Parzival* will allow me to outline the basic features of this common medieval narrative structure. I will then apply the same analytical framework to a close reading of Hagen's relationship with Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* in Chapter 3. The following chapter will discuss the poet's motivation for including the courtly rivalry motif and link this literary device to the broader theme of loyalty which is emphasized throughout the poem as well as in other contemporary works. The final chapter will provide a historical context for the representations of loyalty conflict and courtly rivalry found in the *Nibelungenlied* by examining contemporary examples of social and political conflicts of loyalty. In this way, I hope that my reading of the character of Hagen will help to shed new light on the thematic structure of the *Nibelungenlied* as well as on the relationship between the poem and the wider literary and societal context in which it was written.

In the first half of the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen is introduced as the vassal, relative, and chief councilor of the three Burgundian kings, the brothers Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher. The main conflict begins when Prince Siegfried arrives at the Burgundian court at Worms, ostensibly to woo the princess Kriemhild. In spite of an initial confrontation, Siegfried quickly becomes the Burgundians' ally and confidante. In order to marry Kriemhild, he agrees to help Gunther win the Icelandic princess Brünhild by besting her in several contests of strength at her palace, feats which require deception and the use of Siegfried's magical *Tarnkappe*, a cloak of invisibility. After ten years have passed, Brünhild is still suspicious of the strange events surrounding her marriage to Gunther. She invites Kriemhild and Siegfried to Worms in order to discover the truth, which comes to light during a contest of rank between the two queens. Gunther is incapable of defending Siegfried without revealing his own complicity in the deception and finally allows Hagen

to kill Siegfried on a hunting trip. Kriemhild, although aware of Hagen's role in the murder, is forced to temporarily reconcile with her brothers. The second half of the work details Kriemhild's carefully plotted revenge. She invites her brothers to a feast at the court of her second husband, the noble king Etzel (the historic Attila the Hun), and provokes both sides until the Burgundians and most of Etzel's men are killed in a catastrophic battle.

### A. Medieval Reception of the Work

The *Nibelungenlied* is one of the best-attested Middle High German works, and the 35 surviving manuscript copies and fragments from four different centuries speak to its continued popularity with medieval audiences.<sup>2</sup> Based on a comparative paleographic study of a number of medieval German manuscripts, Karin Schneider has concluded that the two earliest complete manuscripts of the text, the B and C manuscripts, were both copied close to the same point in time during the second quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (133-145). Most scholars today agree that the version of the poem contained in the B manuscript is the oldest preserved text of the *Nibelungenlied* and that the C manuscript contains a later revision, which, although not necessarily based directly on B, can still be productively compared with it.<sup>3</sup> Although Karl Bartsch's edition of the B manuscript from 1875 still provides the basis for most of the editions commonly used today, the C version of the *Nibelungenlied* is also an extremely valuable source for modern scholars because it allows us to infer a remarkable amount of information about the work's contemporary reception. The C text contains a number of additional strophes and smaller wording changes when

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<sup>2</sup>A useful chart summarizing the manuscript evidence can be found in Göhler 67.

<sup>3</sup>This suggestion was first made by Karl Bartsch in his 1865 book *Untersuchungen über das Nibelungenlied*; see also Hoffmann 111.

compared with the B text. Although some of the more minor changes seem intended to correct inconsistencies in the text or to improve the poetic meter, other modifications dramatically and consistently reshape the message of the work. Where the author of the B text is more ambiguous in his judgments of the characters, the editor of the C version clearly justifies Kriemhild's breach of faith with her family on the basis of her great love for Siegfried, shifting the blame onto Hagen in the process.<sup>4</sup> My analysis will focus on the text of the B manuscript, both because it is generally considered to be the closest to the now-lost original and because it provides the most nuanced and interesting portrayal of Hagen. I will, however, also provide citations from the C version whenever there is a relevant difference between the two texts.<sup>5</sup>

Even more interestingly, the *Nibelungenlied* is followed in all but one of the complete surviving manuscripts by a closely related work, *Diu Klage* (The Lament), which has unfortunately received relatively little scholarly attention due to its perceived lack of literary quality. This text, which summarizes the story of the *Nibelungenlied* and continues the narrative by describing the tragic consequences and intense mourning that follow the downfall of the Burgundians, functions as both an independent retelling of the events of the *Nibelungenlied* as well as an interpretative commentary on the preceding work. The B and C manuscripts of the *Nibelungenlied* contain slightly different versions of the *Klage*, which are correspondingly labeled as the B and C versions. Although some scholars have questioned whether the *Klage* was truly written as a response to the *Nibelungenlied*, the

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<sup>4</sup>For a much more detailed discussion of these editorial changes and the poet's intent to show Hagen in a worse light, see Hoffman 121-129.

<sup>5</sup>The version of the *Nibelungenlied* being cited (B or C) precedes the strophe numbers given parenthetically in the text. Citations from the B manuscript refer to the edition by Bartsch, de Boor, and Wisniewski. Citations from the C manuscript refer to the edition by Hennig.

fact that the work focuses primarily on new material not already told in the *Nibelungenlied* rather than recounting the events that make up the core of the well-known legend suggests that the author was at least familiar with a relatively stable retelling of the Germanic Nibelungen story similar to the *Nibelungenlied*, whether that source was in written or oral form (Schulze, *Nibelungenlied* 266-7). In any case, the consistent transmission of the two works as a single literary unit suggests that medieval audiences would have interpreted them in relation to each other.

Like the C manuscript of the *Nibelungenlied*, *Diu Klage* exonerates Kriemhild while vilifying Hagen. Kriemhild is said to be innocent because she acted in accordance with her *triuwe* to Siegfried, a fact which has also earned her a place in heaven after her death (B 157, 569-577).<sup>6</sup> This shift in interpretive stance is accompanied by a moralizing emphasis on sins of pride. For example, Siegfried is said in the B version of the *Klage* to have died because of his own pride (“von sîner übermuot”; B 39), and the C version shifts the blame from Kriemhild and her husband even further by changing this line to read “von ander übermuot” (“because of the pride of others”; C 49).<sup>7</sup> Hagen is condemned by various characters for the great destruction and loss of life because he was the one who actually committed the murder of Siegfried (B 3417, 3782, 3811), and the pride of the Burgundians in general and of Hagen in particular is cited repeatedly as the primary motivating factor (B 230, 3435, 4029-30). Where the B text of the *Nibelungenlied* encourages the audience to question Hagen’s motivations and behavior, the C text and the *Klage* provide a clear indictment – Hagen’s actions were disloyal and therefore immoral. In my view, however,

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<sup>6</sup>Line numbers cited parenthetically in the text refer to the edition by Karl Bartsch, which is based mainly on the B manuscript but also includes significant divergences in the C manuscript. A closer transcription of the B version of the *Klage* is included alongside the English translation by Winder McConnell.

<sup>7</sup>All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

it is the complex portrayal of Hagen found in the earlier B version which provides a more interesting case study of the adaptation of legendary material to address contemporary medieval social problems.

## **B. The Legacy of Early Scholarship: Theories of Germanic Legendary**

### **Transmission**

Modern scholarship on the *Nibelungenlied* began with the discovery of three complete medieval manuscripts during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the work did not become widely studied until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due in large part to growing nationalism and the corresponding desire for a German national epic. These trends led to a number of adaptations of the German and Scandinavian Nibelungen legends during this period, including most famously Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle, first performed in 1876. The influence of this societal context is also evident in the work of the earliest Germanic philologists. Nineteenth-century Germanists focused primarily on the Germanic origins of the legendary material contained in the *Nibelungenlied* and on the problem of restoring the "original" text, and it was not until after World War II that researchers began to take a more critical stance on many of the nationalist myths that had influenced prior scholarship (see Schulze, *Nibelungenlied* 278-289; Heinze "Zweimal Hagen" 32-35). In spite of their sometimes problematic approaches, the editions produced by early scholars laid an essential foundation for modern studies of the poem.

One of the first attempts to address and explain the presence of similar motifs in medieval literature in the various Germanic languages was the *Liedertheorie* of Karl Lachmann. In his book *Über die ursprüngliche Gestalt des Gedichts von der Nibelungen*

*Noth*, Lachmann postulated that Germanic epic poems like the *Nibelungenlied* in fact evolved from a series of short episodic songs, which had originally been memorized and transmitted individually by oral poets and were later assembled into a single written work. Lachmann's other notable contribution to scholarship on the *Nibelungenlied* was that he ranked the three main 13<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts chronologically and gave them the corresponding designations A, B, and C which are still used today. On the basis of this work, Lachmann also published the first edition of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Klage* in 1826. In accordance with his *Liedertheorie*, he assumed the shortest complete manuscript, the A version, to be the oldest. His edition divides the text into what he believed to be the original shorter songs and also distinguishes these songs from supposedly later interpolations (*Der Nibelunge Not* 36-37). Although most of Lachmann's conclusions are no longer accepted by modern scholars, his research was fundamental in the development of methodologies of textual criticism.

The revised *Liedertheorie* of Andreas Heusler, first published in his 1905 book *Lied und Epos in germanischer Sagendichtung*, has had a much longer-lasting influence on modern *Nibelungenlied* scholarship. In contrast to Lachmann, Heusler believed that the longer Germanic epics were not created simply through concatenation of songs, but that the poets instead gradually added layers of detail in order to create a complex written work out of a single shorter and more easily memorizable song, which he called a *Heldenlied* (heroic lay). According to Heusler, a *Heldenlied* was typically 80 to 200 lines long and consisted of "eine einkreisige Geschichte von straffem Umriß, sparsam mit Auftritten und Menschen" ("a tightly outlined story with a single cursus, economical in terms of scenes and characters"; *Altgermanische Dichtung* 147). Heusler attempted to trace the gradual

transition from oral poetry to written epic by recreating the literary precursors of the *Nibelungenlied* on the basis of other surviving texts. He argued that two originally separate lays about Siegfried and the Burgundians were expanded separately by unknown poets and then combined into a single master work by the author of the *Nibelungenlied* (*Nibelungensage* 48-53).

The most serious challenge to Heusler's *Liedertheorie* comes from the oral-formulaic theory. This approach to pre-literary poetry first emerged out of the work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, who studied the oral poetry of illiterate folk singers in the former Yugoslavia. Their research demonstrated that oral poets could in fact preserve and transmit works of epic length from memory, and that this could be achieved through the use of formulaic phrases and type-scenes to produce original renditions of traditional legends during a performance. In Lord's terminology, any text that develops a fixed, memorized form ceases to be oral poetry, whether the poem in question is actually written down or not, although most contemporary scholars of oral poetry do not maintain such a strict distinction (see also Haymes "Germanic Heldenlied," 46-47).

The debate over the applicability of the oral-formulaic approach to pre-literary Germanic poetry has significantly impacted comparative studies of the *Nibelungenlied* and other medieval texts containing related legendary material. In order to interpret recent research on the transmission history of the *Nibelungenlied*, it is therefore important to have an understanding of the theoretical perspective endorsed or presupposed by individual scholars. Both theories are still used by contemporary Germanists, but in general, the oral-formulaic theory has had a much stronger influence on English-language scholarship, whereas most German-language research tends to be rooted in a neo-Heuslerian approach.



The most prominent contemporary advocate of the theory of oral-formulaic composition within the field of medieval Germanic studies is Edward Haymes. He has critiqued Heusler's work by claiming it was based not on surviving textual evidence, but rather on the assumption that it would be impossible to memorize and recite an epic-length poem. Haymes has also argued that only a few of the heroic poems in the Old Icelandic *Poetic Edda* come close to the structure of the Germanic *Heldenlied* as defined by Heusler ("Germanic Heldenlied" 43-62). Instead, he believes that "all of the Germanic heroic poetry written down in this period [before 1000 A.D.] is composed in a broad, loosely organized and formulaic style" and that the oral-formulaic account is the best explanation for this fact because it would be unlikely for such written poetry to develop independently if there were no precedent for it in the pre-literary oral style.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, a number of other scholars have argued that the situation in medieval Germanic literature is not the same as that of the Serbo-Croatian folk poets studied by Parry and Lord and have instead proposed modifications of Heusler's *Liedertheorie* which continue to support the main argument that oral Germanic heroic poetry was transmitted in a relatively stable and fixed short form.<sup>9</sup> Theodore Andersson has argued against the work of Haymes, restating and defending Heusler's claim that the Old English *Fight at Finnsburgh* and the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* provide additional evidence that the heroic lay was the common form of Germanic oral poetry (*Preface* 20). Andersson also bases his critique of Haymes' theories on the work of John D. Niles, who has argued that the poetic style of *Beowulf*, the primary example of a supposedly Germanic formulaic epic,

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<sup>8</sup>The citation is from "Oral Poetry" 50; see also "Germanic Heldenlied" 50-1; Haymes and Samples, *Heroic Legends* 39-40.

<sup>9</sup>Examples include Andersson, "Oral-Formulaic Poetry" as well as the work of Schröder and Harris.

is actually a uniquely Old English literary form that developed alongside the older oral *Heldenlied* tradition due to the relative prosperity and cultural dominance of Anglo-Saxon England (Niles 55-58; cf. Andersson *Preface* 20-26).

### C. Comparative Research on the Nibelungen Legend

In spite of the opposition between advocates of the *Liedertheorie* and the oral-formulaic theory, these two methodological perspectives share a common goal: both approaches attempt to explain how an account of actual historical events can gradually develop into an array of divergent but interrelated literary texts. The different medieval versions of the Nibelungen legend and in particular their depictions of the character of Hagen can be treated as a fascinating case study of the results of this process. In particular, the figure of Hagen in early Latin and Scandinavian sources differs in several significant respects from his portrayal in the *Nibelungenlied*, suggesting that the material in the *Nibelungenlied* represents a more recent, reworked version of the common Germanic legendary tradition.

In seeking to understand the original events which were later transformed into legend, much research has been dedicated to the search for historical records corresponding to specific characters in the poem, with differing degrees of success. The Burgundians were a historic Germanic tribe with a kingdom located somewhere along the Rhine river, and they suffered a massive defeat at the hands of the Romans and Huns in 436 or 437 A.D. A Latin legal document, the *Lex Burgundionum* from 516 A.D., lists some of the ancestral kings of this tribe under the Latin forms *Gislaharius*, *Gundaharius*, *Gundomaris*, and *Gibica*. The former two kings correspond to the Burgundian brothers Giseller and Gunther

in the *Nibelungenlied*, and the other two names are used for the third brother and father in other Germanic sources, although these characters have been replaced in the *Nibelungenlied* by Gernot and his father Dancrat, who clearly does not fit with the alliterating name pattern of the rest of the family. The characters of King Etzel and Dietrich of Bern can likewise be traced back to the historic figures Attila the Hun (died 435 A.D.) and Theoderic the Great of Verona, who ruled the Ostrogoths in Italy from 493-526 A.D. (Schulze, *Nibelungenlied* 61-62).

The historical basis for other characters, including Hagen, is much less clear, and it is possible that details from the lives of several different historic figures may have merged over the course of the development of the legend. As a result, it is difficult to know the degree to which medieval audiences would have understood the content of epic poems to be historically accurate. There is some evidence that medieval scholars were similarly concerned about the veracity of historically based legends. The chronicle of Frutolf von Michelsberg and the anonymous *Kaiserchronik*, both from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, attempt to resolve the chronological problems that arise from the fact that the heroic figures Ermaneric, Attila, and Theoderic were not contemporaries of each other yet appear together in Germanic legend by postulating that it was in fact an earlier hero, also named Dietrich, who lived at the time of Attila (Haymes and Samples 32). Even if there was a historical figure from whom the literary character of Hagen was derived, it seems reasonable to conclude that he had already become the stuff of legend by the time of the composition of *Nibelungenlied* and that the details of his life were as opaque to medieval audiences as they are to modern scholars.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Störmer-Caysa (95) and Wailes (124) arrive at similar conclusions about medieval audiences' knowledge of the historical basis for the *Nibelungenlied*.

The legends that were created about these originally historical events and personages are thought to have developed in several stages. The material recounted in the *Nibelungenlied* is probably a combination of two originally distinct and unrelated legends, one dealing with the adventures of Siegfried and a second about the downfall of the Burgundian clan.<sup>11</sup> Although the manuscripts containing the relevant Scandinavian sources were written down more recently than the oldest *Nibelungenlied* manuscripts, some of the Scandinavian texts are thought to have been originally composed at a much earlier date. Because of this early dating, the Scandinavian sources are often believed to more accurately preserve the pre-literary Germanic legends, although this assumption is necessarily somewhat speculative.

Still, a comparison of the various sources of Nibelungen material can shed light on aspects of the character of Hagen which are unique to the medieval German tradition as represented by the *Nibelungenlied*. My comparative analysis of Hagen figures will focus on four main texts in addition to the *Nibelungenlied*. I will consider two older sources, the Old Norse *Atlakviða* (Poem of Attila) from the *Poetic Edda* and the Latin poem *Waltharius*, as well as two Old Norse sagas which are roughly contemporary with the *Nibelungenlied*, namely *Völsungasaga* (The Saga of the Volsungs) and *Þiðreks Saga af Bern* (The Saga of Dietrich of Bern). This examination of the portrayal of Hagen in other medieval sources will offer some clues as to the legends that might have been available as source material for the *Nibelungenlied* poet, as well as to his own artistic intentions in reshaping the figure of Hagen.

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<sup>11</sup>The internal structure of *Þiðreks Saga* also supports this division. The material which parallels the *Nibelungenlied* is spread across several different sections and is separated by a number of only marginally related tales dealing primarily with other characters. The section entitled “Niflunga Saga” (Saga of the Niflungs) first begins at the point when Attila decides to marry Gudrun.

Scholars interested in recreating older Germanic legends have paid particular attention to the Old Norse *Atlakviða* because it is believed to preserve the oldest surviving retelling of the downfall of the Burgundians. This work, which is thought to have originated in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, reverses the events of the *Nibelungenlied*. Rather than taking revenge on her brothers for the death of her husband, the Kriemhild figure, here called Gudrun, takes revenge on her husband Atli for the murder of her brothers Gunnar and Högni. The prose introduction which precedes the poem implies that this version of the story was widespread in Scandinavia. Under the heading “Dauði Atla” (The Death of Attila), the compiler of the Poetic Edda states: “Guðrún, Giúca dóttir, hefndi bræðra sinna, svá sem frægt er orðit: hon drap fyrst sono Atla, enn eptir drap hon Atla oc brendi hollina oc hirðina alla. Um þetta er síá qviða ort” (“Gudrun, daughter of Giuki, avenged her brothers, as is very well known: first she killed Atli’s sons, then she killed Atli and burned down the hall and all the courtiers. This poem was composed about it”).<sup>12</sup>

The *Atlakviða* is relatively short and written in a sometimes enigmatically allusive style reminiscent of skaldic poetry. Still, the poem illustrates several key aspects of the Hagen character that recur in other works. Högni is said to be the younger brother of the Niflung king Gunnar, and the poem also refers to him having a son. His wife, here only implied, plays a larger part in the directly subsequent poem *Atlamál in grænlenzco* (The Greenlandic Poem of Attila), as well as in the *Völsungasaga*. The most notable role ascribed to Högni in the *Atlakviða* is that of a wise and trusted councilor to whom Gunnar turns for advice after receiving the invitation from Atli; Högni is also the only one who is able to decipher the secret warning sent by their sister Gudrun. The second main aspect of

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<sup>12</sup>Quoted from the *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn 239. The English translation is that of Carolyne Larrington, here 210.

his character is his bravery as a warrior. When he is attacked by Atli's men, he fiercely and loyally defends his brother until their capture, and he is only killed because of a ruse by Gunnar, who asks for Högni's heart before revealing the location of his treasure so that the secret will go with him to the grave. Högni is so brave that he laughs as he is being killed, and Gunnar can even recognize his disembodied heart by its lack of quivering.

Although this issue is not addressed in the *Atlakviða*, other sources make reference to Hagen's illegitimate and in some cases even other-worldly parentage. For example, in *Piðreks Saga af Bern*, it is explained that Hagen was fathered by an elf (*álfr*) and therefore "hann er yfirlits sem troll, en eigi sem menn, ok efter skapi sína er hans ásjóna" ("he looked like a troll and not like men in shape and appearance"; ch. 189).<sup>13</sup> Some version of this complex and varied tradition may also be the basis for the somewhat puzzling magical elements in the *Nibelungenlied*, such as Hagen's encounter with the water maidens in the 25<sup>th</sup> *Aventiure*.

A similar basic constellation of characters is preserved in the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Völsungasaga* (Saga of the Volsungs). This work also combines the stories of Siegfried and the Burgundians, but in a different way from the *Nibelungenlied*. Here, it is not Hagen but rather the third brother Guttorm who is persuaded to kill Siegfried, and Hagen in fact tries to dissuade Gunnar from this plan. Additionally, the kings' sister Gudrun is given a magic potion which compels her to reconcile with her brothers, so that their death at Attila's court is prompted not by her revenge but by her husband's greed for their gold hoard. If the proposed dating of the two texts is accurate, the similarities between the events recounted in the *Atlakviða* and in the *Völsungasaga* would indicate that the role of the

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<sup>13</sup>Quotations from *Piðreks Saga* are cited according to chapter numbers in the edition by Guðni Jónsson. The English translations are those of Edward Haymes, here pg. 110.

Hagen figure in Scandinavian legendary tradition remained relatively stable over the course of several centuries.

Another important early source of Germanic legendary material surrounding the character of Hagen is the Latin poem *Waltharius* from the late 9<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> century. Important elements of the plot include Hagen's stay as a hostage at Attila's court, his escape and return to his king Gunther, and the conflict of loyalties he faces when Gunther desires to kill Hagen's escaping friend and fellow hostage Walther in order to obtain his stolen Hunnish treasure. Although *Waltharius* was written by a monk and has been reworked to include Christian moral themes, many of the originally Germanic heroic elements depicted in the *Atlakviða* are still clearly visible, if at times with an ironic or satirical twist (D. Kratz xiii-xxiv; Wolf 316-8). This text provides important evidence that the heroic legends in circulation in continental German cultural areas were initially similar to those found in Scandinavia.

As in the *Atlakviða*, the figure of Hagen in *Waltharius* is both a wise advisor and a fierce warrior. He is able to see the future in a dream, which leads him to prudently suggest that Gunther avoid battle with Walther (617-627).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, once all of Gunther's other followers have been killed, Hagen comes up with a clever plan to trick and defeat Walther (1116-22). Hagen's bravery and superiority as a warrior are also highlighted repeatedly. He is said to be the only warrior who poses a threat to Walther (1140), and although he is initially reluctant to fight, he saves Gunther's life several times in the final battle. It seems that some version of the tradition about Hagen's questionable parentage may also have been known to the *Waltharius* poet, since reference is made to Hagen's "genus infandum

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<sup>14</sup>Both the line numbers as well as the English translations given parenthetically in the text are taken from the edition and translation by D. Kratz.

[...] parentum” (“shameful ancestry”; 1067), which in this case refers to an extremely cowardly father. It is possible that Hagen’s loss of one eye at the end of the poem may also be a reference to his otherworldly nature by linking him with the one-eyed god Odin.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict of loyalties Hagen faces when his obligations to his king and nephew conflict with his obligations to his friend Walther appears to be another important aspect of his character. However, the treatment of this part of the plot in *Waltharius* is somewhat inconsistent, and the poet does not appear to take a clear stance on the morality of Hagen’s loyalties. Hagen tells Gunther that he will finally fight Walther out of loyalty to his lord, not out of revenge for his nephew’s death: “compator propriusque dolor succumbit honori regis ... Nam propter carum (fateor tibi, domne) nepotem promissam fidei normam corrumpere nollem” (“I sympathize: my own distress yields to your rank as king ... No, not even for my darling nephew (lord, I say to you) would I want to break my plighted faith”; 1109-13). However, he later says that his bond with Walther has been invalidated because Walther slew his friends and kinsmen, especially his nephew (1264-79). In the introduction to his edition of the text, Dennis Kratz even goes so far as to argue that the poet has somewhat repressed the theme of loyalty, which Kratz sees as a central aspect of the Germanic legendary tradition, in order to introduce a clerical Christian perspective on the themes of greed (xxi).

The Old Norwegian *Piðreks Saga of Bern*, a later work probably written between 1230 and 1250, also incorporates many similar motifs. This saga is particularly notable for the inclusion of a wide scope of legendary material from the Nibelungen and Dietrich

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<sup>15</sup>Cf., however, D. Kratz, who discusses the Christian symbolism of this scene (xxii). It is also possible that both explanations are correct and that the poet intentionally Christianized an originally pagan Germanic motif.



complexes (Haymes and Samples 68). In the introduction to the work, the author explains that he is recording an ancient oral tradition which is based on German sources but is also well-known throughout Scandinavia. The Nibelungen material included in the saga follows much more closely the events of the *Nibelungenlied* than those of the *Völsungasaga*, which supports the author's claim that he is recounting a continental German version of the story. This account is also consistent with the cultural environment in Norway at the time the saga was probably written, as King Hakon IV, who ruled between 1217 and 1263, was known for importing continental courtly culture and literary forms to his court. Although there is some disagreement about the precise relationships between the texts, most scholars have postulated a relatively close relationship between the *Nibelungenlied* and *Piðreks Saga*. It seems likely that some version of the *Nibelungenlied* served as a source for *Piðreks Saga*, or that a written German account from the later part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century served as a common source for both works.<sup>16</sup> However, *Piðreks Saga* incorporates a significant amount of additional material not found in the *Nibelungenlied*, making it clear that the author must have drawn on other sources as well.

The portrayal of Hagen in *Piðreks Saga* includes several key details found in earlier sources which are not explicitly stated in the *Nibelungenlied*. His character is introduced into the narrative twice with somewhat different descriptions. His magical parentage mentioned above is only discussed when he is first introduced as a future companion of Thidrek at the beginning of the section entitled "Veizla Piðreks Konungs" (Thidrek the

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<sup>16</sup>For the dating and cultural background of *Piðreks Saga* and its relationship to the *Nibelungenlied*, see the Introduction by Haymes, *Saga of Thidrek*, xix-xxx. Ursula Schulze also gives a list of earlier research on this topic (*Nibelungenlied* 68). In his 1986 chapter "An Interpretation of *Piðreks saga*," Theodore Andersson has presented the alternative argument that *Piðreks Saga* was composed around 1200 in Germany and only later translated into Old Norwegian. This would not alter the basic claim that the work primarily provides evidence for the continental German rather than the Scandinavian Nibelungen tradition.

King's Feast). Although he fights against Valtari (Walther) in the later section "Þáttur af Valtara ok Hildigunni" (The Tale of Walther and Hildigunn), Högni is not said to have been a fellow hostage at Attila's court, nor does he have any prior friendship with Walther. When he is reintroduced in "Dráp Sigurðar Sveins" (The Killing of Young Sigurd), Högni is simply said to be the brother of Gunnar and the son of King Aldrian (ch. 342). Both sections of the work describe him as having only one eye, a detail we have already seen in *Waltharius* (ch. 184, 375). Right before he is killed, Högni also fathers a son to take revenge for his death, which suggests a parallel to the older tradition of the Poetic Edda in which Hagen has a wife and son at the Burgundian court.

This comparison of earlier and later medieval sources seems to indicate that, at some point in the transmission of the legend, the portrayal of Hagen in the continental German tradition was adjusted in order to better incorporate the story of Siegfried and the story of the downfall of the Burgundians into a single plotline. Because the *Völsungasaga* combines the same legends in alternative way from the *Nibelungenlied*, some scholars have attempted to explain the divergence between the German and Scandinavian traditions by positing that the more positive image of Attila in medieval Germany would have been inconsistent with a story in which he intentionally betrays his brothers-in-law and that the characters of the story were therefore rearranged.<sup>17</sup> This suggestion does not, however, explain why Hagen in particular was chosen to become Siegfried's murderer and Kriemhild's antagonist in the *Nibelungenlied*.

Since the surviving Germanic legendary material available to modern scholars has been nearly exclusively preserved in written form, there is no way to ascertain the degree

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<sup>17</sup>For more detailed explanations of possible reasons for the transformation of these legends, see Heinze, *Nibelungenlied* 33-35.

to which the process of creating written literature has altered the traditional Germanic material or when shifts in the characterization of Hagen took place. In spite of their disagreements about the relative influence of the different stages of transmission, most scholars would agree with the basic idea that originally historical events were slowly transformed into the medieval epics as we now have them through a two-step process, namely a period of oral transmission followed by later written adaptations. Even Edward Haymes, one of the strongest proponents of the theory that the *Nibelungenlied* is written in deliberate imitation of oral-formulaic poetry, still believes that the poem is the result of the “reshaping efforts of a literary artist” who has adapted the legendary material to include “thoroughly contemporary social and political concerns” (Haymes and Samples 13; see also Haymes, *Nibelungenlied* 43-44). In the case of the *Nibelungenlied*, the strong similarities among the surviving manuscripts suggest that they are not individual retellings of the same story by different poets but rather copies which can be traced back in some way to a single work, even if it is not possible to recreate this lost original (Schulze, *Nibelungenlied* 40-42). Regardless of the content or form of earlier stages in the transmission of the work, it thus seems appropriate to treat the *Nibelungenlied* as a literary composition by a specific, although unknown, author. This applies both to the B text, which is the closest surviving version to the presumed literary original, and to the C text, which I will treat here as the later revision of a single author.

#### **D. Interpretative Approaches to the *Nibelungenlied***

We have seen above that there is significant disagreement about the precise relationships between the *Nibelungenlied* and other related medieval texts, and about the

manner in which the legendary material contained in these works has been transmitted. A second central topic of scholarly debates on the *Nibelungenlied* is whether the written version of the poem as it has been preserved can even be considered a successful literary work. Some authors, most notably Joachim Heinzle, have criticized the *Nibelungenlied* poet for creating masterfully narrated individual scenes at the expense of both structural unity and consistency.<sup>18</sup> Viewing the poem as self-contradictory has caused critics to assume that the poet either failed to adequately reconcile multiple sources of material or recycled exciting episodes and motifs purely for entertainment value without regard for the coherence of the work.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to this viewpoint, I believe we must assume that the poet and his audience were able to engage with the work as a literary product and to derive meaning from the work as a whole, even if some of the meanings they may have ascribed to it are not easily recoverable by modern scholars. The large number of manuscript copies certainly speaks to the poem's popularity with medieval readers. Similarly, the editorial revisions contained in the C Manuscript and in the *Klage* suggest that contemporary audiences were not simply reading and transmitting the work but were also actively engaged in processes of reception and interpretation.

My approach to the text is also supported by the work of a number of recent scholars who have begun to re-emphasize the need for an analysis that can encompass and explain the seeming contradictions within the poem. Instead of treating multiple layers of meaning as a flaw in the poet's conception of the poem, this complex structure can also be seen as

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<sup>18</sup>See especially "Gnade für Hagen?"; "Zweimal Hagen"; *Nibelungenlied* 89-90; and "Konstanten der Nibelungenrezeption."

<sup>19</sup>For examples of the former viewpoint, see Andersson, "Why Does Siegfried Die?" 35-38; and Neumann 164-5. For the latter perspective, see H. Kratz.

an intentional artistic choice which allows for not just one but rather multiple valid interpretations of the *Nibelungenlied*.<sup>20</sup> As Ursula Schulze puts it:

“Der Deutungsprozeß führt je nach den ausgewählten Signalen zu unterschiedlichen Ergebnissen; diese sind aber durch Referenz auf Vorgaben des Textes mit seinen literarischen Dispositionen und auf bestimmte zeitgenössische Orientierungssysteme determiniert, also nicht frei assoziierbar ... Gerade diese Oberlagerung mehrerer Motivierungsschichten prägt die Komplexität von Figuren und Ereignissen und trägt wesentlich zur Faszination des ‘Nibelungenliedes’ bei.”

(The process of interpretation leads to different results depending upon which signals are chosen; however, these are determined in reference to the specifications of the text and its literary dispositions and to particular contemporary systems of orientation, not through free association ... It is precisely this overlapping of multiple layers of motivation that shapes the complexity of the characters and events and contributes considerably to the fascination of the *Nibelungenlied*; “Gunther” 51-52)

Schulze argues that *Nibelungenlied* is structured according to a technique called paradigmatic narration (“paradigmatisches Erzählen”), which presents multiple explanations and relationships between the elements in a single scene. This method of storytelling can cause confusion to modern scholars who try to insist on a single linear narrative rather than looking for the complex and multi-layered patterns set up within the poem (*Nibelungenlied* 132-3). In the following chapter, I will present what I believe to be a crucial yet understudied example of what Schulze refers to as the “contemporary systems of orientation” within the poem, namely the courtly rivalry motif.

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<sup>20</sup>Some recent examples of authors who adopt similar perspectives include Classen, “What Could the Burgundians Have Done?” 567-568; Jönsson; Müller, *Rules for the Endgame* xii-xv; and Störmer-Caysa 94-95.

## CHAPTER 2

### COURTLY RIVALRY IN MEDIEVAL GERMAN LITERATURE

The idea that the *Nibelungenlied* contains structuring devices and plot motifs which are also found in other contemporary medieval German works is not a new claim. Hugo Kuhn was the first to point out a number of similarities between *Tristan* and the *Nibelungenlied* in his essay *Tristan, Nibelungenlied, Artusstruktur*, which was published in 1973. More recently, Stephen Jaeger has also condensed these elements into a medieval literary type which he labels the “courtier narrative,” and he summarizes the typical plot arc of such stories as follows: “a stranger appears at court, dazzles the king and his court with his charm and talents, rises swiftly to favor and power, inspires envy, and becomes entangled in romantic complications with a woman close to the ruler, and these lead to his eventual fall” (237-8). He then proceeds to illustrate this narrative structure in detail using the tale of the King of Portugal from Walter Map’s Latin work *De nugis curialium* (Trifles of Courtiers) and also briefly cites Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* and the first half of the *Nibelungenlied* as vernacular German examples of the form (236-7). However, both scholars’ analyses center predominantly on the rise and fall of a single main character: Kuhn focuses on Siegfried’s and Tristan’s roles as *Heilbringer* (saviors) and *Brautwerber* (wooers, matchmakers), and Jaeger highlights the calculated and manipulative behavior required for these characters to be accepted in courtly society (Kuhn 12-19; Jaeger 236-241).

Because of the relatively limited focus of their approaches, neither author provides an adequate description of what I consider to be one of the most important literary motifs

shared by these two works – the theme of competition between the main character and his other rivals at court. This literary schema appears with a variety of subtle variations not only in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Tristan*, but in other works from the same period as well. In this chapter, I will provide a close reading of four literary accounts of courtly rivalries drawn from the Middle High German poems *Herzog Ernst B*, *Wolfdietrich A*, *Tristan*, and *Parzival* in order to summarize the central features of this motif. This comparative analysis of the ways that individual authors have adapted a common theme for use in different literary contexts will then later be used to shed new light on the role of Hagen and his relationship with Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied*.

#### A. *Herzog Ernst B*

The anonymous travel adventure poem *Herzog Ernst B* (Duke Ernst B) provides an excellent starting place for a discussion of courtly rivalries in medieval German literature because it includes an example of this motif in a relatively simple and straightforward form. The composition date of the work is extremely uncertain, with scholarly estimates ranging from ca. 1150 to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. The oldest surviving manuscript fragments are from approximately the year 1200, making them roughly contemporary with the *Nibelungenlied*.<sup>21</sup> Although not of the highest literary quality, the story appears to have been consistently popular, as it was regularly reworked in various German and Latin versions throughout the Middle Ages and up to the present day (Sowinski 405-6). *Herzog Ernst B* describes Duke Ernst of Bavaria's attempt to go to Jerusalem on a crusade after being banished by his step-father, Emperor Otto. During his travels, he survives a series of

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<sup>21</sup>For further discussion of the manuscript evidence and composition date of the text, see Bumke "Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte" 412; Simon-Pelanda 12-13; Stock 151-9.

fantastical adventures and encounters numerous wonders of the East before eventually returning home to be reconciled to the Emperor. In the semi-historical first part of the work, Ernst is portrayed as a wise and intelligent ruler, who received an excellent education abroad (70-78). He is said to be the greatest knight in all of the German lands (140-5), and his followers love him because of his humility, loyalty and generosity (88-92, 150-8). After his widowed mother Adelheid marries the emperor, Ernst enjoys a position of honor and influence at the imperial court and is a favorite of the emperor:

sîn name stuont in allen obe  
die zu manigen jâren  
des keisers rât wâren.  
der künec im holden willen truoc  
und tete im liebes genuoc.

(His name stood above all of those who had been the emperor's advisors for many years. The king was loyal to him and showed him much love; 632-6)<sup>22</sup>

However, this close relationship between the emperor and his step-son is destroyed by another one of the emperor's relatives and advisors, Count Heinrich, who is jealous of Ernst's position. He convinces the emperor that Ernst is secretly disloyal to him and wants to usurp his power. The poet describes Heinrich's rivalry with Ernst by explaining:

das tete er niwan umbe daz  
und durch anders keine schulde,  
wan daz er des keisers hulde  
sô gnædeclîchen habete.  
do gedâhte er waz er sagete,  
dâ mite er imz gewande  
und in alsô geschande,  
daz er im von herzen wurde gram,  
wan man in ze hove niht vernam  
sô wol also dô vorn  
daz was im leit unde zorn  
und muote in und die sîne.

(He did so only because of this and no other reason, namely that he [Ernst] enjoyed the benevolent favor of the emperor. Therefore he considered what

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<sup>22</sup>Line numbers for *Herzog Ernst B* refer to the edition by Bartsch and Sowinski.



he might say, so that he might turn it from him [Ernst] and disgrace him, so that he [Otto] would bear a grievance against him [Ernst] in his heart, because he [Heinrich] was not listened to at court as well as in the past. This caused him suffering and anger and distressed him and his friends; 658-669).

At first, the emperor defends Ernst, but he is eventually convinced by the count's arguments and banishes Ernst in spite of Adelheid's protests. Although the description of conflict between Ernst and Heinrich, like other events throughout the work, may strike modern readers as somewhat lacking in internal motivation, many scholars believe that this scene may be based at least in part on contemporary political disputes, as will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis. From a literary perspective, the relatively straightforward description of courtly rivalry found in *Herzog Ernst* provides a useful model for understanding the essence of this motif and examining the more complex role it plays in other contemporary works.

## **B. *Wolfdietrich A***

The *Wolfdietrich* epics contain a similar rivalry situation which provides a valuable source of comparison with *Herzog Ernst B*.<sup>23</sup> These poems have likewise received relatively little attention from scholars of Middle High German literature in spite of their continued popularity into the late Middle Ages. Although a few fragments from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century have been preserved, most of the 16 manuscripts date from the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. These manuscripts can be grouped together into four main versions with partially differing content. I have chosen to focus my analysis on the so-called A version of the text from the Ambraser manuscript because it has the earliest posited date of

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<sup>23</sup>I was first directed to the importance of this theme in the *Wolfdietrich* epics by Ekkehard Kaufmann's article on "Königsdienst" in the *Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, 1027.

composition and is therefore the closest contemporary of the *Nibelungenlied*. Although the manuscript itself was not written down until sometime between 1504 and 1517, the text contained in it is believed to have been originally composed around 1230.<sup>24</sup>

In *Wolfdietrich A*, Wolfdietrich, the youngest of three sons, is born while his royal father is away. The treacherous councilor Saben convinces the king that the child is the illegitimate spawn of the devil and should be put to death, but the loyal courtier Berhtunc saves the boy's life. The themes of disloyalty and power struggles recur repeatedly as Saben continues to cause trouble by conspiring against everyone else at court. The critical scene in this work that best corresponds to the courtier narrative structure occurs after Wolfdietrich's father has died. In order to gain influence and power at court, Saben convinces Wolfdietrich's older brothers that their brother is illegitimate and that they should therefore banish their mother and brother and take the entire inheritance:

Zuo den junchêrren sprach er dô alle zît  
“ir sult vil rehte wizzen, hêrre, wer ir sît.  
von iuwer muoter valsche ist der dritte kûnec enwiht;  
dens iu dâ zelt ze bruoder, der ist iuwer bruoder niht.  
(He spoke thusly to the young lords all the time, “You should know truly,  
lords, who you are. The third child of your false mother is not at all a king;  
the one whom you count as a brother, he is not your brother; 266)<sup>25</sup>

Dâ von ir in den landen die liute hazzic sint.  
des sie iu dâ giht ze bruoder, der ist ein kebeskint.  
dâ mite wart zerstoeret iuwers lieben vater ê.  
got gebe daz ir geschaffet, daz ez ir übele gê.  
(The people of the lands are hateful towards you because of this. The one  
she claims is your brother, he is a bastard. Because of this your dear father's  
honor was destroyed. May God allow you to ensure that it goes ill for her;  
268)

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<sup>24</sup>For detailed information on the transmission history and surviving manuscripts of the *Wolfdietrich* poems, see Heinzle, *Einführung in die mittelhochdeutsche Dietrichepik* 41-3; and Miklautsch 30-35.

<sup>25</sup>Strophe numbers for *Wolfdietrich A* refer to the edition by Amelung and Jänicke.

A comparison of *Herzog Ernst* and *Wolfdietrich A* reveals a number of important parallels. In both cases, the trouble is started by a jealous and deceitful advisor who was already established at court prior to the ascent of the protagonist to the king's favor. The jealous older courtier convinces his ruler to unjustly banish his younger rival in spite of an attempted intervention by the young man's mother. Ernst and Wolfdietrich both are close relatives of the ruler who banishes them, and both are set apart by special characteristics: for Ernst, this is his education and courtly virtues; in the case of Wolfdietrich, it is his extraordinary strength and the magical protective clothing which saved him from being eaten by wolves as an infant. Finally, the banishment sets the stage for the mistreated man to go on a quest, during which he further distinguishes himself through fantastical adventures and eventually is able to regain his proper place in society.<sup>26</sup>

### C. Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*

In contrast to the two relatively straightforward depictions of courtly rivalry discussed above, Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* is notable in that it integrates a similar rivalry episode into a more complex narrative. The poem was probably composed around 1210, making it an even closer contemporary of the *Nibelungenlied* (Krohn 321). In his use of the courtly rivalry motif, Gottfried adds more detail to his description of Tristan's conflict with the other courtiers while still maintaining many aspects of the basic model found in *Herzog Ernst* and *Wolfdietrich A*. As in these other works, Tristan, the new figure at court, achieves prominence partly through his relationship to the king and partly through

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<sup>26</sup>Although *Wolfdietrich A* breaks off before the story is completed, we can assume from the other versions that Wolfdietrich eventually reclaims his kingdom. For an extremely detailed comparison of the different versions of the *Wolfdietrich* legend, see Miklautsch 94-218.

his own talents. Tristan, who is described as having every possible courtly virtue, is invited to join his uncle Marke's court after repeatedly impressing everyone with his knowledge of courtly hunting, music, and foreign languages:

der künec sprach: "Tristan, hoere her:  
an dir ist allez, des ich ger.  
dû kanst allez, daz ich wil:  
jagen, sprâche, seitpil.  
nu suln ouch wir gesellen sîn,  
dû der mîn und ich der dîn.  
(The king spoke, "Tristan, listen here. You have everything that I desire.  
You know how to do everything that I wish: hunting, languages, stringed  
instruments. Now we should also be companions, you mine and I yours;  
3721-6)<sup>27</sup>

However, these excessively prodigious talents again set into motion a series of events that eventually lead to Tristan's downfall. Like Ernst and Wolfdietrich, Tristan initially enjoys the favor of the king and everyone else at court until his jealous fellow courtiers begin maliciously spreading lies about him; in this case, they claim that he is a magician:

er waz dô geil unde vrô.  
künec unde hof die wâren dô  
ze sînem willen gereit,  
biz sich diu veige unmüezekeit,  
der verwâzene nît,  
der selten iemer gelît,  
under in begunde üeben,  
der hêrren vil betrûben  
an ir muote und an ir siten,  
daz sî'n der êren beniten  
unde der werdekeite,  
die der hof an in leite  
und al daz lantgesinde.  
si begunden vil swinde  
reden ze sînen dingen  
und in ze maere bringen,  
er waere ein zouberaere.  
(Then he was cheerful and happy. The king and the court were ready to do  
his will, until the accursed striving, the corrupted hatred, which rarely ever  
rests, began to stir among them, to greatly trouble the lords in their minds

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<sup>27</sup> Lines numbers for *Tristan* refer to the edition by Ranke.

and their behavior, so that they envied him for the honors and the worthiness which the court and all the people of the land placed upon him. They began very cruelly to plan his condemnation and spread tales about him that he was a sorcerer; 8315-31)

When King Marke insists that he will not marry because he wants Tristan as his heir, the courtiers become so jealous that they cannot contain their hatred. Tristan is afraid for his life and convinces Marke to go along with the courtiers' plan to send him to woo the Irish princess Isolde. The journey to Ireland is a parallel to the other heroes' banishment abroad, and the resulting ill-fated relationship with Isolde brings to mind the inability of female relatives to preserve the peace at court in the other scenes of rivalry. Gottfried adds a masterful touch of irony to the rivalry in *Tristan* in that Tristan seems to have the upper hand over his fellow courtiers when he insists on taking them to Ireland with him, but in the end, this voyage is what leads to his downfall.

#### **D. Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival***

Finally, Wolfram von Eschenbach adapts the motif of courtly rivalry to fit his theme of marital love in *Parzival*, another contemporary work dating from approximately 1203-1205 (Krohn 138). Parzival is raised by his mother in the woods with no knowledge of courtly society or values. When he encounters three knights, he decides to follow them to King Arthur's court. Along the way, Parzival naively follows his mother's parting advice that he should win the kiss and ring of a noble woman by kissing the first woman he encounters, the sleeping Jeschute (127.25-128.2, 129.27ff.).<sup>28</sup> When her husband Orilus returns, he is furious with his wife for the incident and refuses to listen to her pleas of

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<sup>28</sup>Line numbers for *Parzival* refer to the edition by Lachmann and Hartl.

innocence. Eventually, however, Parzival, having become a knight, is able to return and set things right (262.1ff.).

This scene contains the critical elements of courtly rivalry in a slightly altered form. The husband Orilus, who is already established in knighthood and in marriage, serves as a foil for the young traveler Parzival, who has just begun to enter courtly society and discover the meaning of love. Jeschute's acknowledgement of Parzival's beauty (133.18) is simultaneously a symbol for his other courtly qualities, even though these have not yet been brought forth by knightly training. As in the political rivalries described above, Orilus bases his jealousy of Parzival on the (misguided) belief that Jeschute has begun to transfer her affections to the newcomer (133.5-14). By unsuccessfully attempting to defend Parzival, Jeschute plays a role similar to that of Wolfdietrich's mother or Adelheid from *Herzog Ernst*. The fact that Parzival escapes the situation by running away just before Orilus' return forms a parallel to the banishment of the main character in other works. Wolfram's modification of the courtly rivalry motif in *Parzival* testifies to the flexibility of this literary type, and I believe that the *Nibelungenlied* poet was similarly able to adapt elements this motif to fit the central themes of his own composition.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE COURTLY RIVALRY MOTIF IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

#### A. Scholarly Interpretations of the Figure of Hagen

The application of the recurring motif of courtly rivalry to the *Nibelungenlied* provides a new angle from which to interpret the complex and much-debated figure of Hagen. There have been two primary lines of argument regarding the role of Hagen: he is usually seen either as a loyal and capable vassal or as the central villain of the poem. Among the most often cited representatives of the first group are Ursula Mahlendorf and Frank Tobin, who have described Hagen as “a politically oriented vassal of great human intelligence” (125). Otfried Ehrismann also makes a similar claim when he states that “in allem handelt Hagen (nachweislich) mit machtpolitischem Kalkül, nach den Interessen Burgunds, so wie er sie versteht” (“in everything, Hagen behaves (verifiably) with political calculation, according to the interests of Burgundy as he understands them”; 102). Edward Haymes has a slightly different but still mostly positive view of Hagen and considers him an example of a typical hero in the oral-formulaic tradition whose image later suffered because the figure Siegfried was better suited to be the protagonist of a courtly work (“Hagen” 149-155). In contrast to these more positive assessments, the figure of Hagen has also been seen as an extremely negative one, although the reasons for this assessment are quite diverse. To cite just a few examples: Lynn Thelen has described Hagen as “the embodiment of deception and cunning” who is “consumed with his own survival” (“Hagen’s Shields” 386); Holger Homann has labeled him “the agent of a superhuman, otherworldly force” (767); and Jacob Stout has condemned him as a “Bösewicht” and an “Aasgeier” (“villain,” “vulture”; 440).

The main difficulty in assessing these various interpretations of the figure of Hagen is that all of these scholars' characterizations can be supported by specific passages in the *Nibelungenlied*. Haymes sums up the textual problem succinctly when he states that the poet "roundly denounces Hagen for his treacherous murder of Siegfried, but treats him elsewhere with respect and finally gives him almost extravagant praise" ("Hagen" 149). In keeping with his belief that the poem is not a single interpretable work, Joachim Heinzle has even gone so far as to claim that there is an irreconcilable division between the portrayals of Hagen in the first and second halves of the work which reveals itself "in einer eigenartigen Doppelgesichtigkeit der Hagengestalt" ("in a strange two-facedness of the figure of Hagen") that no scholars have been adequately able to explain away ("Konstanten" 85; see also "Zweimal Hagen" 30-32).

In contrast to the perspective of scholars such as Heinzle, Germanist Jan-Dirk Müller notes that Hagen's character only appears fragmented when modern critics attempt to describe his role within the poem using a modern psychological definition of literary "characters." Instead, Müller argues, Hagen, and in fact all the characters in the poem, act in a way that is determined by and consistent with their specific social positions: "Als 'Charakter' wäre er [Hagen] zwiespältig, als Vertreter einer Position im Herrschaftsgefüge handelt er völlig konsequent" ("As a 'character,' he [Hagen] would be contradictory, as the representative of a position within the structure of authority, he acts completely consistently"; *Nibelungenlied* 90).<sup>29</sup> Gerd Backenköhler makes a similar point in his Ph.D. dissertation on the figure of Hagen in medieval literature, concluding that the *Nibelungenlied* succeeds in the creation of a "ziemlich fest umrissenen, durchaus

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<sup>29</sup>Cf., however, McConnell, who advocates the opposite viewpoint by applying psychoanalytic theory to the *Nibelungenlied*.



einmaligen persönlichen ‘Wesen’” (“considerably stable and well-defined, thoroughly unique personal ‘being’”; 87) out of the much more vaguely outlined, even stereotypically heroic character found in the Eddic sources. He further argues that the *Nibelungenlied*, in contrast to other sources, focuses on *Treue* (loyalty) as a central characteristic of Hagen’s personal ethical system which is also the ultimate cause of his negative actions: “Erfüllung seiner Treuepflichten gegenüber Gunther und Brünhild bringt die Untreue und den Verrat an Siegfried notwendig mit sich” (“Fulfillment of his loyalty obligations towards Gunther and Brünhild necessarily brings disloyalty and the betrayal of Siegfried along with it”; 88). However, Backenköhler focuses heavily on the aspects of Hagen’s character that can be traced back to older, supposedly more Germanic sources and is therefore too quick to dismiss the poet’s critique of Hagen as something that can only come from “einem ritterlich Denkenden” (“someone with a chivalric mindset”; 89).

### **B. The *Nibelungenlied* Poet’s Depiction of Hagen**

Instead, I believe that it is essential to undertake a close reading of both the positive and negative aspects of the poet’s portrayal of Hagen in order to understand his perspective on the subject matter he recounts in the *Nibelungenlied*. If we begin by examining the passages in which the poet appears to have a critical attitude towards Hagen, it becomes clear that it is above all the disloyalty of his behavior towards Siegfried which is stressed, for example in passages like the following:

Der künec gevolgete übele Hagenen, sînem man.  
die starken untriuwe begonden tragen an  
ê iemen daz erfunde, die ritter ûz erkorn.  
(The king evilly followed Hagen his man/vassal. Those chosen knights

began to carry out that great disloyalty before anyone found out; B 876.1-3)<sup>30</sup>

daz hete geraten Hagene, der vil ungetriuwe man  
(Hagen the very disloyal man/vassal had advised that; B 911.4)<sup>31</sup>

sus grôzer untriuwe solde nimmer man gepflegen.  
(No one/no vassal should ever practice such great disloyalty; B 915.4)<sup>32</sup>

Gunther und Hagene, die recken vil balt,  
lobten mit untriuwen ein pirsen in den walt.  
(Gunther and Hagen, the very brave warriors, called with disloyalty for a  
hunting expedition in the woods; B 916.1-2)

dô was der rât mit meine von den recken getân.  
(That advice was given with falseness by the warriors; B 970.4)

Hagene sîne triuwe vil sêre an Sîfriden brach.  
(Hagen very gravely broke his loyalty to Siegfried; B 971.4)<sup>33</sup>

The specificity of this disapproval suggests that the poet is not simply reducing Hagen to some sort of stock villain. Instead, his criticism is grounded entirely in his view of the behavior he feels Hagen ought to have displayed towards Siegfried. Treating the relationship with Hagen and Siegfried as an example of the courtly rivalry motif provides a framework for understanding both the poet's condemnation of Hagen's disloyalty as well as his praise of Hagen elsewhere in the work.

From the very beginning of the work, the *Nibelungenlied* poet takes care to establish Hagen as a man worthy of respect. When the members of the Burgundian court are introduced, Hagen is listed first among the kings' warriors:

Die drîe kûnege wâren, als ich gesaget hân,  
von vil hôhem ellen. in wâren untertân

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<sup>30</sup>The C manuscript substitutes "vil michel untriuwe" ("very great disloyalty"; C 884) in the second line.

<sup>31</sup>This strophe has been heavily edited in the C manuscript; the geography has been changed and Hagen's disloyalty is also no longer mentioned (C 919).

<sup>32</sup>This strophe has been replaced in the C manuscript by another which also discusses the Burgundians' disloyalty (C 923).

<sup>33</sup>The C manuscript states instead that "Gunther sîne triuwe vaste an Sîvride brach" ("Gunther vastly broke his loyalty to Siegfried"; C 980.4).

ouch die besten recken, von den man hât gesaget,  
starc und vil küene, in scarpfen strîten unverzaget.  
Daz was von Tronege Hagene und ouch der bruoder sîn,  
Dancwart der vil snelle, von Metzen Ortwîn,  
die zwêne marcgrâven Gêre unde Ekkewart,  
Volkêr von Alzeye, mit ganzen ellen wol bewart.

(The three kings were, as I have mentioned, of very great valor. The best warriors of whom has ever been told were also in service to them, strong and very bold, undaunted in fierce combat. They were Hagen of Tronege and also his brother, Dancwart the very bold, Ortwin of Metzen, the two counts Gere and Ekkewart, and Volker of Alzeye, well endowed with all valor; B 8-9)

Hagen's precise title is not specified, but the fact that he is listed ahead of two margraves suggests that he may have been part of the nobility. He is also a close relative of the Burgundian royal family and is described by the word *mâc*, meaning "kinsman" (B 1133.3, 1599.3).

The poet updates the traditional image of Hagen as a wise advisor and brave warrior to fit the social norms of medieval German society by depicting him as providing his lord Gunther with military aid and council (cf. B 151, 171). Medieval audiences would have recognized these symbolic duties of *auxilium* and *consilium* as the two main responsibilities of a king's vassal, and the fact that Hagen consistently performs this type of service implies that he held a socially important position at the Burgundian court.<sup>34</sup> Among the king's supporters and councilors, Hagen is especially respected for his wisdom and superior knowledge of the world. When no one else at the Burgundian court is able to recognize Siegfried, Ortwin recommends that Hagen be consulted, saying:

Dem sint kunt diu rîche und ouch diu vremen lant.  
sint im die herren kûnde, daz tuot er uns bekannt  
der kûnec bat in bringen und die sînen man.  
man sach in hêrlîche mit recken hin ze hove gân.

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<sup>34</sup>More information on the historical role of vassals and the use of these two terms to describe a vassal's obligations to his lord can be found in Althoff 103-104; Ganshof 86-93; and Reuter 644.

(The kingdoms and also the foreign countries are known to him. If the men are known to him, he will explain to us. The king ordered him to be summoned along with all his men. He was seen going nobly to court with the warriors; B 82)

The use of the term *hêrlîche* and the fact that Hagen is accompanied by a troop of his own retainers suggests that Hagen is not only an important vassal of the three kings, but that he is also a lord in his own right.

In the second half of the poem, the poet continues to portray Hagen as a figure generally worthy of admiration. In a scene paralleling Siegfried's arrival at Worms, Hagen again plays the role of chief advisor when he is summoned to identify the approaching Rüdiger, who has come to arrange a marriage between Kriemhild and Etzel (B 1177 ff.). Hagen has also earned respect far beyond the Burgundian kingdom. The Hunnish king Etzel likewise holds Hagen in high esteem because of the loyalty of Hagen's father, who had been Etzel's vassal:

“Wol erkande ich Aldriânen; der was mîn man.  
lob und michel êre er hie bî mir gewan.  
ich machete in ze ritter und gap im mîn golt.  
Helche diu getriuwe was im inneclîchen holt.”

(“I recognized Aldrian well; he was my man/vassal. He won praise and much honor here with me. I made him a knight and gave him my gold. Helche the loyal [Etzel's first wife] was deeply true to him”; B 1755)

The poet follows this statement with a reference to the events of older Germanic legend as recounted in *Waltharius*, namely the time Hagen spent as hostage at Attila's court and his friendship with Walther. In the version of the story recounted here, Hagen serves Etzel well and is eventually allowed to return home. The poet states, “sînen friunt von Tronege, den het er [Etzel] recht' ersehen, der im in sîner jugende vil starkiu dienste bôt.” (“He [Etzel] clearly recognized his friend from Tronege, who had offered him very many great services in his youth”; B 1757.2-3). In addition to providing more information about Hagen's life

prior to the events of the *Nibelungenlied*, this passage also appears to reflect the poet's awareness of the more positive and heroic portrayal of Hagen's character found in earlier sources. Hagen's nobility of character continues to be highlighted as he receives similar respect and praise from other important characters at the Hunnish court, including the noble knights Rüdiger and Dietrich. The phrase Dietrich uses to describe Hagen, "trôst der Nibelunge" ("comfort of the Nibelungs"; B 1726.4), is highly symbolic of the leadership role that Hagen assumes throughout the second half of the poem as he guides the Burgundians on their journey to Etzel's court.

### **C. Hagen and Siegfried: Rivals at the Burgundian Court**

In contrast to Hagen, Siegfried arrives suddenly at Worms without any prior connection to the Burgundian clan, and he must earn the kings' trust and approval through what Francis Gentry has termed "a friendship of action and deed" (*Triuwe* 73). The presentation of the cast of characters residing at the Burgundian court in the 1<sup>st</sup> *Aventiure* before Siegfried is introduced in the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Aventiure* further underscores Siegfried's status as an interloper at Worms. Within the framework of the courtier narrative, Hagen is thus assigned to the role of the respected and established courtier, and Siegfried plays the part of his newly arrived and very aggressive younger rival.

In contrast to the previously discussed works in which the younger courtier is the clear protagonist, the *Nibelungenlied* poet allows the audience to sympathize with Hagen by presenting Siegfried's attempts to ingratiate himself with the Burgundian kings in an often suspect light. In Middle High German, there is no single word which clearly expresses the modern psychological concept of jealousy (Willms 66). The Middle High

German term *nît* does not specifically refer to jealousy, as is the case with Modern German *Neid*, but instead has a much broader semantic field which Lexer's Middle High German dictionary describes as "feindselige gesinnung im allgemeinen" ("hostile disposition in general"). This term is not limited to purely psychological states but is also often used to describe political and social acts of hostility or rivalry. Neither the word *nît* nor the two other key Middle High German terms for rivalry, *ebenhiuze* and *widerhiuze*, are used to characterize Hagen's relationship to Siegfried. Because of this, Germanist Nine Miedema states: "Eine zulässige Deutungsmöglichkeit ist es, daß es zu einer gewissen Rivalität zwischen Hagen und Siegfried kommt, da Siegfried Hagens Funktion als Berater einnimmt; eindeutig gibt dies der Text allerdings nicht vor." ("It is a valid possible interpretation that a certain rivalry develops between Hagen and Siegfried, since Siegfried takes over Hagen's role as advisor; however, the text does not unequivocally state this"; 154). However, the other Middle High German texts containing courtly rivalry narratives also tend to demonstrate the conflict between the characters through depictions of their desires, speech, and behavior rather than through psychological terminology. In the same manner, I would like to suggest that a closer examination of the text reveals that the author of the *Nibelungenlied* does in fact imply a rivalry between Siegfried and Hagen through their actions and interactions leading up to Siegfried's murder.

Even before Siegfried arrives in Worms and the two characters confront each other for the first time in person, Hagen's account of Siegfried's prior adventures alerts the Burgundian kings (and the audience) to the fact that Siegfried is a potentially dangerous opponent who is willing to attack without warning or provocation (B 91-96), who possesses great wealth and magical devices (B 97), and who is nearly invincible in battle (B 100).

Given this knowledge, Hagen's warning that the kings should welcome Siegfried and not antagonize him should be seen as prudence rather than cowardice:

Wir suln den herren enpfâhen deste baz,  
das wir iht verdienen des jungen recken haz.  
sîn lîp der ist sô küene, man sol in holden hân.<sup>35</sup>  
er hât mit sîner krefte sô menegiu wunder getân.  
(We should receive the lord all the better, so that we do not earn the young warrior's hatred. He is so bold that one should have his loyalty. He has done so many wonders with his strength; B 101)

Even though Gunther follows this advice and receives Siegfried courteously, Siegfried immediately confirms Hagen's earlier suspicions by threatening to fight the kings for control of their land:

Nu ir sît sô küene, als mir ist geseit,  
sone ruoch ich, ist daz iemen liep oder leit:  
ich wil an iu ertwingen, swaz ir muget hân:  
lant unde bürge, daz sol mir werden undertân.  
(Now you are as bold as I have heard tell, so it does not distress me whether that is good or hateful to anyone else: I will take from you by force whatever you have: land and fortresses, they shall be subject to me; B 110)

Mary Thorp has suggested that Siegfried's initial plan was to win Kriemhild by force in single combat with Gunther (164-6), an analysis that would lend further support to the argument that Hagen was justified in perceiving Siegfried as a threat to the Burgundian court. It is impossible to determine Siegfried's true intentions or hidden motives in this scene, as the *Nibelungenlied* poet generally shows little interest in explaining the psychological states of the characters. Within the narrative, however, Siegfried's violent and reckless actions provide clear and reasonable grounds for even greater mistrust on Hagen's part. This assessment of Siegfried's behavior allows Hagen to accurately predict

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<sup>35</sup>Otfrid Ehrismann points out the potential ambiguity of this line. If "holden" is interpreted as a noun rather than as an adjective, it can also be translated as "vassal," which foreshadows Siegfried's deception of Brünhild by pretending to be Gunther's vassal and may also hint at the future conflict between Siegfried and Hagen (101).

the trouble that Siegfried will later cause in spite of his apparent reconciliation with the Burgundians:

Dô sprach der starke Hagene: “uns mac wol wesen leit,  
allen dînen degenen, daz er ie gereit  
durch strîten her ze Rîne; er soltez haben lân.  
im heten mine herren sölher leide niht getân.”

(Then strong Hagen spoke, “It will surely prove hateful to us, to all of your warriors, that he ever had ridden here to the Rhine on account of conflict; he should have let it be. My lords would not have caused such harm to him; B 121)

This statement foreshadows the second half of the work while also providing yet another testimony of Hagen’s wisdom and foresight as an advisor.

Within the first year of his residence at Worms, Siegfried has the opportunity to begin assuming Hagen’s duties of *consilium* and *auxilium*. When news of impending attack reaches Worms, Hagen recommends that Gunther share this information with Siegfried, but only because there is not enough time to send for their other supporters (B 151). After being summoned, Siegfried asks Gunther’s permission to take part in his council, a privilege that was normally permitted only to those with legal ties to the ruler, such as relatives and vassals, stating:

“welt ir vriwent suochen, der sol ich einer sîn,  
unt trouw ez wol volbringen mit êren an daz ende mîn.”

(“If you want to search for a friend, then I should be one and trust myself to carry it out with honor until the end of my days”; B 156.3-4)

Siegfried later takes charge in formulating battle plans, appointing himself the unofficial commander of Gunther’s army while sending the Burgundian kings home (B 172-5).

When Gunther announces his desire to travel to Brünhild’s court to woo her, Siegfried and Hagen offer opposing counsel. Siegfried initially advises against Gunther’s plan, but Hagen suggests instead that the king invite Siegfried to join them on the mission



since he has prior knowledge about Brünhild (B 329-331). Hagen's reasons for including Siegfried in this second plan are not explicitly stated. One possible explanation is that this is another instance of the courtly rivalry motif comparable to the scene from *Tristan* discussed above in which the courtiers convince the king to send their rival on a dangerous mission. There are of course alternative possibilities, such as that Hagen is simply acting as a prudent councilor who wants to ensure that his king's plan has the best chance of success, or that the poet wanted to allude to additional legendary material about Siegfried's prior relationship with Brünhild which is not explicitly described in the *Nibelungenlied*.

After joining the expedition, Siegfried again assumes the position of chief advisor normally held by Hagen. However, he openly acknowledges that that he is only serving Gunther in order to win Kriemhild, a statement which gives Hagen further cause to doubt his loyalty to the Burgundians:

Jane lob' ichz niht sô verre durch die liebe dîn  
sô durch dîne swester, daz scêne magedîn.  
(I do not promise it so much out of love for you as on account of your sister,  
the beautiful maiden; B 388.1-2)

Siegfried's willingness to use magic and trickery to deceive Brünhild and further his own ends again calls his trustworthiness and moral character into question. Lynn Thelen has argued that the public nature of Siegfried's deception of Brünhild by pretending to be Gunther's vassal has an important symbolic function within the text on several levels: it drives the narrative by providing Brünhild with a legally verifiable as well as psychologically plausible accusation against Gunther and Siegfried, characterizes Siegfried by providing evidence of his pride (*superbia*), and also dramatically and ironically foreshadows Siegfried's eventual downfall ("Vassalage Deception," 471-2, 490-1). A similar argument could be made about the effect that this deception has on Hagen's

relationship to Siegfried, since Hagen is aware not only of the vassalage deception but also of Siegfried's use of the *Tarnkappe* during the contest of strength. Although Hagen is complicit in these deceptions of Brünhild, it is Siegfried who plans and then carries them out. This dishonest behavior, together with Siegfried's prior threats upon his arrival at Worms, creates reasonable grounds for suspicion that Siegfried would be willing to use similar deceptive means against the Burgundians. From Hagen's perspective, Siegfried is a potential threat to the safety and stability of the Burgundian court.

In addition to the harm that Siegfried could cause, the poet adds another layer of motivation for Hagen's rivalry with Siegfried by making it clear that Hagen's reputation and honor are at stake. During the war against the Saxons, Siegfried gives orders to Hagen while reserving the most glorious task of scout for himself (B 180). The poet specifically mentions that the honors won by the other knights look insignificant ("gar ein wint"; B 228.3) in comparison to Siegfried's great single-handed exploits, even though Hagen's men are the ones who suffer the greatest losses in battle (B 234).

Likewise, during the episode at Brünhild's court, the poet repeatedly contrasts Hagen's anxiety and fear of death with Siegfried's confidence and control of the situation. When Hagen is unwilling to hand over his weapons to Brünhild's soldiers, Siegfried begins to lecture him. The poet comments "des volgete vil ungerne Hagen, Guntheres man" ("Hagen, Gunther's man/vassal obeyed this very unwillingly"; B 407.4), a statement which hints at resentment of Siegfried's interference. After a spear is brought out for the contest of strength between Gunther and Brünhild, the poet states that Dancwart and Hagen are afraid, but immediately follows this up by saying that, at the same time, Siegfried has begun

to put his plan to help Gunther into place (B 430-1). Upon seeing Brünhild's shield, Hagen again has a similarly fearful reaction:

Alsô der starke Hagene den schilt dar tragen sach,  
mit grimmigem muote der helt von Tronege sprach:  
“wâ nû künec Gunther? wie vliesen wir den lîp!  
der ir dâ gert zu minnen, diu ist des tiuveles wîp.”  
(As strong Hagen saw the shield being carried in, the hero from Tronege spoke with grim feeling, “What now, King Gunther? We will lose our lives! The woman you desire to love, she is the devil's wife”; B 438)<sup>36</sup>

Although Siegfried is not entirely unafraid, he is still able to master his emotions and come up with a clever plan. Here, it is stated even more explicitly that Siegfried is the one who saves Gunther's life:

den gêr si hôhe zuhte: dô gienc iz an den strît.  
Gunther unde Sîfrit die vorhten Prünhilde nît.  
Unt wære im Sîfrit niht ze helfe komen,  
sô hete si dem künige sînen lîp benomen.  
(She raised the spear high: then the fight began. Gunther and Siegfried, they feared Brünhild's hatred. And if Siegfried had not come to help him, she would have taken the king's life; B 451.3-452.2)

The poet thus demonstrates throughout the bridal quest episode that Siegfried is beginning to influence and impress Gunther more than Hagen can.

As a third level of motivation, the poet also hints that Hagen may be jealous of Siegfried's wealth or at least desirous of claiming it for himself and for the Burgundians.

Hagen comments on the generous gifts that Siegfried can afford to give a messenger:

“Er mac”, sprach dô Hagene, “von im sampfte geben.  
er'n kundez niht verswenden, unt sold er immer leben.  
hort der Nibelunge beslozen hât sîn handt.  
hey sold er komen immer in der Burgonden lant!”  
(“He can comfortably give it away,” said Hagen then. “He could never spend it all, even if he lived forever. His hand has won the treasure of the Nibelungs. Oh, he should always come to the land of the Burgundians!” B 774)

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<sup>36</sup>The C manuscript emphasizes Hagen's fear even further by changing “mit grimmigem muote” to “in vil grôzem unmuote” (“in very great distress”; C 447.2).

Here, the last sentence is grammatically ambiguous because the word *er* can refer either to Siegfried or the treasure hoard. If the second reading is chosen, then this sentence could also be translated as “Oh, if it should ever come to the land of the Burgundians!” The surface interpretation is that Hagen is simply glad that Siegfried will visit Worms, but at the same time, this line foreshadows the fact that Hagen will later help the Burgundians take the treasure. We know that the veiled double meaning of this passage did not go unnoticed by medieval readers, as the poet of the C version amends the final line of the strophe to refer unambiguously Hagen’s desire to obtain Siegfried’s wealth for the Burgundian kings: “hey, solden wir den teilen noch in Buregonden lant!” (“Oh, if we could yet share it in the Burgundian land!” C 780.4; cf. Hoffmann 123). Similarly, when the Nibelungen hoard is brought back for Kriemhild, the poet concludes his description of the treasure with the line “jane het es âne schulde nicht gar Hagen gegert.” (“Indeed, Hagen had not wanted it without reason”; B 1123.4).

These subtle additional motivations suggest that Hagen may have been personally jealous of both Siegfried’s treasure and reputation at court, or that he at least desired to obtain this power and wealth to enhance his king Gunther’s status instead. The complexity of the events and driving forces leading up to Siegfried’s death seems to indicate that the poet intentionally incorporated secondary motivations alongside the primary plot-driving explanations such as Kriemhild’s exposure of Brünhild’s deception and the resulting loss of honor to the Burgundians. In Ursula Schulze’s conception of paradigmatic narrative style, layered motivations of this type serve as signals that point interpreters of the work to structuring themes, especially when these secondary motivations can be productively linked to recurring elements in other scenes (*Nibelungenlied* 132-3). The inclusion of subtle

indications of the conflict between Hagen and Siegfried thus provides further evidence that the poet was attempting to shape their relationship within the framework of courtly rivalry.

Overall, the poet goes to great lengths to present Hagen as an understandable and even respectable character in spite of his disloyal decision to murder Siegfried. As previously discussed, some authors have interpreted this complex portrayal of Hagen's character as an indication of the poet's failure to create a plausible and unified narrative. In my view, however, the presence of the medieval courtly rivalry motif in a very elaborate form within the *Nibelungenlied* seems to indicate exactly the opposite – namely, that the poet made significant attempts to restructure and rework the material at his disposal, using a common literary device in order to more effectively integrate two different legendary traditions. As Joachim Heinzle, one of the most prominent critics of the structural unity of the *Nibelungenlied*, has himself pointed out, such use of recurring literary motifs to restructure and simplify complex historical narratives is a common process in the transmission of epic sagas because it converts partially forgotten historical events into a form that is meaningful to later audiences (*Nibelungenlied* 25-27; see also Schulze, *Nibelungenlied* 65). Rather than simply caricaturing Hagen as a villain, the poet was able to preserve aspects of the traditional image of Hagen as a heroic character by introducing a plausible motivation for Siegfried's murder that would already have been familiar to his audience from its widespread usage in contemporary literature. Structuring the work in terms of the courtly rivalry motif thus allowed for the integration of potentially conflicting traditions into a multi-faceted and intriguing character.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE THEME OF LOYALTY (*TRIUWE*) IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

We have seen in the previous chapter that the relationship between Siegfried and Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied* is depicted using many of the features of the courtly rivalry motif. The question remains, however, why the poet might choose to include this literary device in such complex fashion. I do not view this decision as merely a convenient narrative strategy. Instead, I believe that the poet's incorporation of the courtly rivalry motif is designed to link the complex relationship between Hagen and Siegfried to the broader theme of *triuwe*, the Middle High German term for loyalty, which is a recurring concern throughout the *Nibelungenlied*. Francis Gentry even goes so far as to state that *triuwe* is “without doubt, the most important concept in the work ... [it] defines every human association in the *Nibelungenlied*, whether within the feudal social structure or the structure of personal relationships” (“Key Concepts” 74). The central role of loyalty, and even more specifically, of loyalty conflict, within the *Nibelungenlied* can be demonstrated through a closer examination of two figures whose actions are determined in large part by their loyalty relationships.

In addition to the relationships between Gunther and his two advisors Siegfried and Hagen, the most notable instances of characters caught in a conflict of loyalties are Rüdiger and Kriemhild. Previous scholarly studies on these figures have pointed to the key role that their interpersonal relationships play within the structure of the poem as a whole. For instance, Albrecht Classen has analyzed Rüdiger as a model of friendship (“Friends and Friendship”; “Friendship in the Heroic Epic”), and Kriemhild's relationship with Siegfried

is often seen as an instance of courtly love, or *minne* (e.g. Greenfield; Haymes, *Nibelungenlied* 47-54.) Although these authors certainly present valid interpretations of the text, the use of modern terminology to describe these interpersonal relationships often has the effect of creating artificial categorical distinctions that do not accurately reflect the wording of the original poem. In fact, the Middle High German text uses similar terminology to describe romantic love, friendship, and many other types of loyalty relationships, as Francis Gentry has demonstrated in his thorough semantic study *Triuwe und Vriunt in the Nibelungenlied*. For this reason, it seems more appropriate to treat the broader concept of *triuwe* as the central theme of the poem which is presented through multiple case studies of individual loyalty relationships.

#### **A. Loyalty Conflict in the *Nibelungenlied* and in Contemporary Literature**

The figure of Rüdiger provides the clearest illustration of the tragedy of loyalty conflict. He is Etzel's vassal and has sworn an oath to protect Kriemhild (B 1256-8), but he has also sworn an oath of friendship to the Burgundians (B 1682), promised his daughter in marriage to Gunther's brother Giselher (B 1678-9), and led the Burgundians to Etzel's court (B 2144). When both sides claim his loyalty, Rüdiger does everything in his power to avoid breaking faith with the Burgundians but is ultimately forced to support his king, even though he believes it will cost him both life and soul:

Nu liez er an die wâge sêle unde lîp.  
dô begonde weinen daz Ezzelen wîp.  
er sprach: "ich muoz iu leisten, als ich gelobet hân.  
owê der mînen friunde, die ich ungerne bestân."

(Now he placed his soul and body in the balance. Then Attila's wife began to cry. He spoke, "I must do for you as I have promised. Woe for my friends, whom I unhappily attack"; B 2166)

This passage makes it clear that Rüdiger is in the unfortunate situation of having to decide between his personal feeling as to what is morally right and the requirements of the social structures within which he operates. If Rüdiger followed a strictly feudal definition of loyalty, he would not experience such a conflict, and thus the depictions of his inner turmoil suggest that he, and probably the author of the B manuscript as well, considers personal ties of love and friendship to be more binding than legal obligations.

Kriemhild also must choose between loyalty to her family and to her beloved husband. Her desperation for revenge after Siegfried's death causes her to abandon her son Gunther (B 1087), endure the shame of marrying a heathen (B 1248), and sacrifice her son Ortlieb (B 1961) and her favorite brother Giselher (B 2101-3). Here the poet's stance is somewhat more ambiguous, and there does not seem to be a specific ranking assigned to these different types of personal loyalty. Instead, by depicting the extreme degree to which Kriemhild is willing to betray her other relationships and accept the overwhelming destruction that results, the poet of the B manuscript seems to imply that excessive devotion to a single person can blind one to other types of loyalty which also need to be observed. Through their attempts to exonerate Kriemhild, the authors of the C text and of the *Klage* modify this relatively moderate stance to place romantic love at the top of the hierarchy of loyalties, a revision that may reflect the importance of *minne* in courtly literature and culture. The fact that these later texts highlight and expand upon the questions of loyalty addressed in the B text provides evidence that medieval interpreters considered this theme to be a central issue within the poem, and the need to comment on and clarify the morality or immorality of the character's choices also suggests that the difficulties of resolving loyalty conflicts resonated with medieval audiences.



Loyalty conflict is not only a major theme in the *Nibelungenlied*. Characters forced to choose between personal and legal forms of loyalty appear in a number of other works from the classical Middle High German period, indicating that other authors also considered loyalty conflict to be a relevant social concern of their era. For example, Hartmann von Aue devotes nearly a fourth of *Der arme Heinrich* to a conversation in which the farmer's daughter convinces her parents that she should sacrifice her life out of love for Heinrich and devotion to God despite the problems this will cause for her family (lines 525-902). Hartmann also deals repeatedly with the theme of misplaced loyalty in *Erec*: Erec becomes so obsessed with his love for his wife Enite that he neglects to rule his kingdom, Enite must decide whether she should honor her promise to Erec to remain silent or save his life by warning him of impending danger, and the knight Mabonagrín swears a foolish oath out of love for his wife that leads him to neglect his knightly duties (Willson 5-6, 18-19). In Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, in addition to the courtly rivalry discussed earlier, the title character is torn between his duty to the king Marke and his love for the king's wife Isolde (see Jaeger 236-7). It is important to note that, as in the *Nibelungenlied*, each of these examples of loyalty conflict demonstrates a tension between personal affection and the legal and social obligations arising from one's position within the societal order.

### **B. The Figure of Hagen as an Example of Loyalty Conflict**

The case of Hagen's conflict of loyalties is somewhat different from these other examples of loyalty conflict in that Hagen appears to feel loyalty only to the Burgundian kings and to his role as a vassal, rather than considering himself to have any personal ties

with Siegfried. It is especially interesting in this regard that Siegfried, after receiving his death wound, also accuses the Burgundians of *untriuwe* (disloyalty) on the grounds of his earlier service to them and his status as their kinsman rather than because of his personal friendship with them:

Dô sprach der verchwunde: “jâ ir vil böesen zagen,  
was helfent mîniu dienste daz ir mich habet erslagen?  
ich was iu ie getriuwe; des ich engolten hân.  
ihr habt an iuwern mâgen leider übele getân.  
(Then the mortally wounded one spoke: “Oh, you very base cowards, what good are my services, since you have slain me? I was always loyal to you; for which I have paid the price. You have done a terrible evil to your kinsman”; B 989)

This passage indicates that Siegfried may subscribe to a similar system of social norms governing loyalty relationships as Hagen does, since he references the legal ties of service and marriage as the basis for his relationship with Burgundians. In fact, Siegfried’s reproach even overstates his case for deserving the Burgundians’ loyalty – he is not truly their blood relative, but only their relative by marriage, a point the poet makes clear elsewhere in the poem through his use of kinship terminology. While Hagen is twice described as a member of the Burgundian clan through the use of the term *mâc*, meaning “kinsman,” (B 1133.3, 1599.3), the three kings are only Siegfried’s *konemâgen*, his wife’s kinsmen (B 749). Whatever obligations the Burgundians kings may have incurred towards Siegfried through friendship or marriage, Hagen considers them less binding than his duty to protect the safety and honor of his liege lord, and according to common feudal practice, he was justified in doing so. Even though two vassals might co-operate in providing military aid or even develop a personal friendship, their only legal obligation was to their lord rather than to each other (Althoff 120). Hagen’s murder of Siegfried thus demonstrates

both his loyalty to the Burgundian house and his loyalty to his position as Gunther's most trusted supporter and vassal.

### C. The 37<sup>th</sup> *Aventiure* and the *Nibelungenlied* Poet's Stance on Loyalty Conflict

The poet appears to be familiar with and even somewhat understanding of Hagen's conception of loyalty, since he takes care to demonstrate that, for Hagen, the decision to kill Siegfried is a legally justifiable and even reasonable response to the situation. As Francis Gentry has pointed out, it is only the morality, never the legality, of Hagen's actions which is called into question ("Hagen" 5). However, even as the poet expresses understanding of Hagen's worldview, he also condemns it, suggesting that he desires to advocate a conception of *triuwe* different from the system under which Hagen and Siegfried operate. This new definition of loyalty transcends legal requirements to encompass and even prioritize personal and moral obligations as well. Because the tragedy of the second half of the *Nibelungenlied* is a result of Siegfried's death, the poet implies that Hagen's misjudgment of his loyalty obligations is what leads to the ultimate downfall of the Burgundians.<sup>37</sup>

Near the end of the *Nibelungenlied*, the poet places Hagen in a second situation that allows him to illustrate this new and alternative definition of loyalty.<sup>38</sup> As previously discussed, Rüdiger, who faces a conflict of loyalty between Etzel and the Burgundians, exemplifies the poet's ideals of friendship-based loyalty and the impossibility of carrying out those ideals in the face of the legal requirements of feudal society. In the 37<sup>th</sup> *Aventiure*,

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<sup>37</sup>Francis Gentry provides a similar analysis of the poet's perspective on the loyalty conflicts faced by Rüdiger and Hagen, "Key Concepts" 76-77.

<sup>38</sup>Alain Renoir has also pointed out the importance of this scene in allowing the audience to reflect on and reevaluate Hagen's character (114).

Rüdiger tells the Burgundians that he will have to fight them and asks them to release him from his obligations towards them so that he can preserve some of his honor. The kings show no sympathy for his predicament, and it is only Hagen who recognizes Rüdiger's noble character and permits him to fulfill his oath of friendship by asking for Rüdiger's shield in place of his own broken one (B 2194-5). Rüdiger hesitates for only a brief second to consider his obligations to Kriemhild before gladly giving the shield to his friend:

Vil gerne ich dir wære guot mit mînem schilde,  
torst' ich dir in bieten vor Kriemhilde.  
doch nim du in hin, Hagene, unt trag' in an der hant.  
hey soldest du in fûeren heim in der Burgonden lant!"  
(I would very gladly be helpful to you with my shield, if I dared to offer it to you in front of Kriemhild. But no, you take it, Hagene, and carry it in your hand. Oh, if only you might carry it home to the land of the Burgundians! B 2196)

Rüdiger, one of the main examples of loyalty conflict within the poem, does not merely forget about his other loyalties when he offers his shield to Hagen. Instead, he is allowed to redeem himself once more before his death by deliberately choosing friendship over feudal loyalty.

In this scene, the seeming suddenness of Hagen's request should not be taken to indicate that he is "taking advantage of a distraught individual," as Lynn Thelen has claimed ("Hagen's Shields" 390; see also Stout 440-2). As Francis Gentry points out, the poet has in fact prepared the audience for Hagen's change of heart by showing him in a noble light throughout the second half of the *Nibelungenlied* ("Hagen" 10-11; *Triuwe* 77-79). The uniqueness of Hagen's actions in this scene serves to underscore the fact that it is specifically Rüdiger's nobility of character which wins Hagen over and allows him to recognize the loyalty of friendship in addition to the loyalty of feudalism. Hagen has always exemplified *triuwe* in the legal sense, but it is not until he experiences friendship with

Rüdiger and witnesses Rüdiger's decision to value this friendship above his feudal obligations that Hagen is able to achieve a deeper understanding of *triuwe* which is based on morality and personal fidelity. This change of heart is indicated by his response to Rüdiger's gift:

Swie grimme Hagen wære und swie herte gemuot,  
ja erbarmte im diu gâbe, die der helt guot  
bî sînen lesten zîten sô nâhen het getân.  
Vil manec ritter edele mit im trûren began.  
(As grim as Hagen was, and as hard of feeling, the gift still moved him,  
which the good hero gave him so close to his last moments. Very many  
noble knights began to grieve with him. B 2198)

The poet underscores the powerful impact of Rüdiger's willingness to doom himself to save a friend by providing a rare glimpse into Hagen's inner world – here, he grieves for his friend in spite of his usual lack of emotionality (he is normally “grimme” and “herte gemuot”). In his article “Hagen's Shield Request: *The Nibelungenlied*, 37<sup>th</sup> *Aventiure*,” Ian Campbell has argued that Hagen is intentionally testing the strength of Rüdiger's personal friendship with him and that his emotional reaction is caused by astonishment and amazement at the depths of Rüdiger's commitment and generosity.

However, it is also clear that Hagen's change of heart is not merely an emotional one; it also affects his actions. His recognition and understanding of this new definition of loyalty is demonstrated when he decides he will no longer fight against Rüdiger:

“Nu lôn' ich iu der gâbe, vil edel Ruedegêr.  
swie halt gein iu gebâren dise recken hêr,  
daz nimmer iuch gerüeret in strîte hie mîn hant,  
ob ir si alle slüeget die von Burgonden lant.”  
(Now I will reward you for the gift, very noble Rüdiger. Whatever stance  
these lordly warriors take against you, my hand will never touch you in  
combat here, even if you were to slay all of those from the Burgundian land;  
B 2201)

This promise of loyalty to Rüdiger is the ultimate test of his acceptance of the superiority of the ideal of friendship, as this act not only aids his friend but simultaneously goes against his feudal obligations to the Burgundians. This response provides a clear parallel to Rüdiger's decision to offer the shield only a few strophes before – like his friend, Hagen is now also willing to risk his life in order to place personal over feudal loyalties.

In creating this scene, the poet may be drawing on some of the traditional legendary material about Hagen to create an additional implied connection between him and Rüdiger. In *Waltharius*, it is Hagen who faces a conflict of loyalties between his lord Gunther and his friend Walther similar to Rüdiger's dilemma in the *Nibelungenlied*. The emotional resonance of this personal scene between Hagen and Rüdiger stands out among the depictions of incredible violence and destruction that take place throughout the final *Aventiuren* of the poem. The poet skillfully uses their interaction to portray Rüdiger as a role model of true loyalty who is able to cause Hagen's change of heart, thus subtly suggesting the superiority and inherent persuasiveness of his own definition of loyalty to the audience.

We have seen that loyalty conflict plays a central role in the *Nibelungenlied* and that the poet uses the character of Hagen to advocate his own stance on how one should navigate the complex problem of conflicting loyalties. This attitude and thematic focus on the part of the poet can explain both the condemnation of Hagen's decision to kill Siegfried as well as the nobler and more heroic portrayal of Hagen in the second half of the work, culminating in Hagen's final interaction with Rüdiger. Since similar themes of loyalty conflict are prevalent in other contemporary texts, it seems reasonable to conclude that the

*Nibelungenlied* poet intended to express his own viewpoint as part of broader societal debates about this topic.

## CHAPTER 5

### LOYALTY CONFLICT IN MEDIEVAL GERMAN SOCIETY

If, as I have argued in Chapter 4, the *Nibelungenlied* poet indeed uses literary production as a means to take a stance on an important social issue, then we should expect to be able to draw parallels between the thematic material of the poem and the changing sociopolitical climate of medieval Germany. In fact, a number of scholars have pointed out archaic stylistic features of the *Nibelungenlied* which suggest that the poem deliberately recalls a somewhat earlier pre-courtly era (see Haymes, "Germanic Heldenlied" 47-48). For example, older designations for warriors such as *helt*, *recke* and *degen* are often used in place of the more courtly *ritter*, and a statistical comparison demonstrates that these older terms occur much more frequently in the *Nibelungenlied* than in contemporary courtly romances (Bunke, *Concept of Knighthood* 17-21). In addition, the poem incorporates a number of formulaic phrases which mimic an oral style.<sup>39</sup> Rather than seeing these literary devices as leftovers from an earlier stage of poetry, the deliberately old-fashioned style of the *Nibelungenlied* could also serve as an indication to the audience that the work is set in an earlier time period. Such an analysis would likewise be consistent with the poet's inclusion of outdated political structures, such as the three-fold kingship of the Burgundian brothers and the fact that relatives of the royal family still hold court offices, a position usually occupied by lower-ranking *ministeriales* rather than by free noblemen (Ehrismann 101). This deliberate archaizing of the poem suggests that the centrality of the

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<sup>39</sup>For a detailed example, see Curschmann (89-95).



theme of loyalty conflict may reflect the fundamental shift in political and social definitions of loyalty that had taken place in the centuries preceding the poem's composition.

### **A. The Changing Social Order of Medieval Germany**

Although the reciprocal bond between a lord and his *comitatus*, or band of loyal retainers, is at the heart of the traditional understanding of the Germanic conception of *Treue*, it is not necessary to look as far back as the unknown Germanic past in order to discover a historical context for the ethical system under which Hagen operates. In fact, as Thomas Bisson has argued in his recent book *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century*, ordinary people in the Middle Ages experienced lordship and authority less through an organized legal system of government and more through the personal power and influence of a specific king or nobleman (3). Especially in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the kings of Imperial Germany enjoyed an unusually strong degree of central royal power over their subjects, and their bishops, dukes, and counts likewise had considerable power as rulers. In this context, the granting of favors and benefices to important vassals was not so much a legalized system of governance as a method for ensuring personal alliances and loyalty to the emperor (111-6).

However, the later part of the 11<sup>th</sup> century saw the advent of what Bisson has labeled "crises of power" (182ff.). These dramatic upheavals in the German social and political order created a number of opportunities for conflicts of loyalty similar to those portrayed in Middle High German literature. To cite one well-known example, the struggles for power during the Investiture Controversy forced many people to choose between loyalty to secular and religious authorities. The radically reformist Pope Gregory

VII challenged traditional practices of simony and clerical marriage, making him unpopular with the German emperor. When Emperor Henry IV and the German bishops wrote him an angry letter in 1075 accusing him of usurpation of power and demanding that he step down from the papacy, the pope excommunicated Henry and released his subjects from their obligations of loyalty towards him (203-5). As a result, Henry's subjects were torn between their oaths of fealty to their sovereign and their spiritual and moral duties to the Catholic Church. When this conflict was officially resolved in 1122, the relationship between the king and the ecclesiastical princes became increasingly governed by feudal law, which continued to create opportunities for conflict between secular and ecclesiastical authorities (Fuhrmann 97).

A related example from the same time period demonstrates that subjects could also face moral dilemmas relating to the degree of politic loyalty they owed to a specific person. King Henry IV was drawn into another political conflict when he attempted to reconsolidate royal authority in the dukedom of Saxony beginning around the year 1070. A central issue in this ongoing conflict was the fact that Henry built a number of additional castles and fortifications through constrained labor, a practice to which the Saxons, both nobility and peasants, strongly objected. Although technically his vassals, the Saxons interpreted the increased military presence as an undue exercise of power which infringed on their own rights (Bisson 213-221). Henry's aggressive use of force in an attempt to secure his power was certainly not unique during this period, but the strong resentment and resistance on the part of the Saxons indicates that not even loyalty to a powerful ruler was viewed as an absolute obligation.

This context of increasing political violence and conflict also led to the rise of the class of *ministeriales*, an interesting and distinctively German development which caused significant shifts in the sociopolitical order. Due to the unique political situation of Imperial Germany, the obligation to provide military service to one's overlord played an unusually prominent role in that region in comparison with other Western European countries. Emperors and would-be candidates for that title had traditionally demanded military service from their supporters and had often provided them with land which could be used to provide financially for the necessary horses, arms, and other military equipment. The wealth and property that thus accompanied imperial military service raised the status of both free and unfree soldiers above vassals of equal legal rank who owed more menial service to the emperor. It was this elevated social standing which allowed the originally unfree *ministeriales* to eventually achieve free status and even enter the nobility (see Arnold 23-27; Fuhrmann 98-99; Reynolds 438-9). The concurrent gradual impoverishment of many families of the free nobility often necessitated intermarriage between the two classes, and the resulting societal changes provide a historical precedent for the dramatic conflict between the two queens in the *Nibelungenlied* (Gentry, "Key Concepts" 70-71).

These shifts in social order, combined with the gradual development of increasingly complex feudal structures and feudal law, naturally led to an enlarged bureaucracy and to a transition from personal to legally regulated forms of loyalty. As a consequence, the limits of political loyalty relationships were often poorly defined, and opportunities for conflicting loyalties were common. Vassals often swore loyalty to more than one immediate overlord, and it was also unclear when and if a vassal owed allegiance to his

lord's lord.<sup>40</sup> The difficulty of maintaining fidelity in the face of these increasingly complicated feudal relationships provides a possible historical background for the *Nibelungenlied* poet's criticism of the inadequacy of a legal definition of loyalty as a moral standard for decision-making.

The political conflicts surrounding Henry the Lion, a prominent member of the Welf family and the duke of Saxony and Bavaria, exemplify both the political importance and the complexity of feudal law during this period. Henry's constant attempts to consolidate and expand his power base led to his involvement in various political disputes with his relative Emperor Frederick I (Barbarossa) and other leading nobles and churchmen of his day. He was eventually summoned to a series of trials, where he was sentenced to an imperial ban and consequently to outlawry (see Tyerman 377-8; Jordan 160-182). According to historian Karl Jordan, these events mark a "key turning-point in 12<sup>th</sup> century German history" because they firmly established legal and constitutional precedents that had been developing in the years before (178). The cooperation between Henry and Frederick initially began to unravel when Henry refused to support the Emperor in his military campaigns in Italy. As with the issues of loyalty conflict portrayed in the *Nibelungenlied*, Henry's actions were legally justifiable in that feudal practice did not require him to provide military aid under these specific circumstances. However, it can also be argued that Henry owed personal allegiance and gratitude to Frederick for the latter's prior support (Jordan 163-4). Similarly, when forced to choose between loyalty to their immediate lord or to the Emperor, many of Henry's vassals and *ministeriales* felt legally justified in leaving his service after he had been outlawed, although his harsh

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<sup>40</sup>For more discussion of these legal issues, see Kaufmann, "Treue" *Handwörterbuch* 332-3; Reynolds 47, 473; Reuter 646-7.

governing practices certainly may have influenced their decision as well (175). The court proceedings carried out against Henry the Lion also demonstrate a growing awareness of the need to regulate issues of loyalty and loyalty conflict through feudal law. Although these political conflicts cannot be directly connected to the events of the *Nibelungenlied*, they do illustrate the broader sociopolitical climate which informed the poet's attitudes towards the poem's central themes of personal and feudal loyalty.

### **B. Scholarly Critiques of Feudalism and Their Relevance to the *Nibelungenlied***

When discussing the relationship between literary representations of political structures and the historical realities of medieval Germany, it is important to address recent criticism of the traditional scholarly understanding of feudalism as the defining organization principle of later medieval society. Closer scrutiny of medieval charters and legal documents has led scholars such as historian Dominique Barthélemy to suggest that medieval European political structures were much less uniform than had been previously assumed. However, most of the critical research conducted in this area has focused on early developments in France and England and therefore cannot be directly applied to the situation in Germany, which, as we have seen before, was in several ways quite unique.

In addition, much of the recent criticism of the concept of the feudal system has centered on the temporary or permanent granting of fiefs to one's vassals and the degree to which this was a universal or even regular practice, a debate which is not truly relevant to the questions addressed in this thesis. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen is described rather vaguely as Gunther's *man*, a term I have rendered consistently in my translations as

“man/vassal” for the sake of preserving the ambiguity of the original text.<sup>41</sup> However, the poem makes no specific mention of Hagen being granted a title or lands as a result or condition of his service to the Burgundian kings. The rest of the work demonstrates that the concept of the fief was not unknown to the poet – although it is not necessarily expressed in legal terms, Rüdiger is clearly portrayed as holding his title and lands as a grant from Attila. However in the case of Hagen, the poet does not appear to view these details as particularly relevant for understanding Hagen’s motivations and decisions and instead focuses mainly on Hagen’s symbolic acts of service and their impact on his social status. Most of the recent debate over the accuracy of scholarly feudal terminology for describing the evidence preserved in medieval Latin charters is thus irrelevant for our discussion of Hagen’s role in the *Nibelungenlied*.

To the degree that it does address symbolic aspects of the legal relationship between lords and vassals in medieval Germany, recent critical scholarship on feudalism actually supports many of the conclusions I have outlined earlier. Historian Susan Reynold’s extensive study *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*, published in 1994, is unusual among Anglo-American scholarship in that it includes a substantial chapter on Germany, a region which the author admits had developed its own complex scholarly tradition which is not often discussed in connection with developments in other

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<sup>41</sup>Hagen’s legal status within the poem is extremely unclear. As court offices were normally held by *ministeriales* during this time, the fact that Hagen’s brother Dancwart is the king’s marshal could imply that he, and consequently also Hagen, belonged to this class. However, as has been mentioned earlier, this would have been a somewhat unusual situation around the year 1200 given that Dancwart and Hagen are also relatives of the Burgundian kings. If Hagen is in fact a *ministerial*, the changing legal status of this class of retainers could explain why Kriemhild later feels she can ask Hagen to accompany her after her marriage, and also why Hagen refuses (B 696-9). However, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions about these issues because the *Nibelungenlied*, as a fictional literary work, may not accurately reflect the specific details of contemporary legal practice. For more information on the role of *ministeriales* in holding court offices, see Arnold 184-9. For further discussion of the sometimes imprecise legal terms used in the *Nibelungenlied*, see Schulze “Gunther” 45.

parts of Western Europe (396-8). Although her work certainly demonstrates the heterogeneity of political structures in medieval Europe in different kingdoms and time periods, Reynolds's interpretation of German historical documents from around the time the *Nibelungenlied* was written indicates that many of the major scholarly assumptions about feudal relations were at least partly applicable during this period. Scholars of medieval German history have traditionally paid relatively less attention to the development of feudal structures for several reasons, including of a lack of dialogue between medieval German historians and historians working in other disciplines, an alternative focus on the supposedly Germanic concept of personal fidelity (*Treue*), and the assumption that Germany only developed feudal structures relatively late under French influence (397). Reynolds' findings in fact demonstrate that "if one takes one of the defining characteristics of feudalism as an obligation to military service from fief- or benefice-holders, then Germany looks distinctly more feudal than France" (439).

Of particular relevance to the *Nibelungenlied* is Reynolds' conclusion that the duties of *auxilium* and *consilium*, which scholars have traditionally seen as forming the backbone of medieval vassals' obligations to their feudal lords, did in fact carry a significant amount of weight in Germany. Kings were obliged to consult their supporters before carrying out any important decisions, including military campaigns or disciplinary actions against other nobles, and unlike in France, participating in a royal council was a regular practice of important nobles which did not diminish either their status or that of the king (410). To give one example, we know from the surviving records of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa that important dukes and counts regularly attended and served as witnesses at his imperial councils (cf. Ehlers). The obligation to provide military service,

like the obligation to attend councils, was generally associated with higher status and even nobility in 12<sup>th</sup> century Germany, even if it is not possible to speak of a consistent legal standard at this time. As discussed earlier, it was primarily this importance of military service which contributed to the rise in status of the *ministeriales* during this period. The continued significance of military aid and counsel in German society seems to indicate that medieval German audiences would have clearly recognized the relevance of these duties for the *Nibelungenlied* poet's portrayal of Hagen and understood them as symbols conveying his important standing at the Burgundian court. Thus even scholarship generally critical of the concept of the "feudal system" supports the applicability of reading the *Nibelungenlied* through the lens of changing sociopolitical definitions of loyalty and the resulting possibility for loyalty conflicts.

### C. Representations of Political Conflict in Contemporary Texts

This type of engagement with contemporary social issues through literary production was not unique to the *Nibelungenlied* but is in fact also evidenced in other contemporary texts. As I have mentioned briefly above, a number of attempts have been made to link episodes of political strife in various medieval German texts with specific historical conflicts. As quickly becomes apparent from a survey of literature on this topic, many of the suggested correspondences are highly debated and must remain conjectural at best. To give one example, the banishment of Duke Ernst *Herzog Ernst B* has been linked to a variety of prominent medieval figures. Here too, the figure of Henry the Lion would have had significant contemporary relevance, as he was ordered to either go on a Crusade or be exiled in 1180 (Tyerman 377-8). Scholars have also suggested a number of earlier



events which may have provided the initial inspiration for the story, including the imperial ban placed on Henry the Proud, Duke of Bavaria and Saxony and the father of Henry the Lion; the inheritance dispute and ensuing rebellion of Duke Ludolf of Swabia against his father Emperor Otto I in 953; and the inheritance dispute between Duke Ernst II of Swabia and his stepfather Emperor Konrad II in 1026.<sup>42</sup> However, an academic treatise written by Englishman Robert of Courçon, a preacher of the Fifth Crusade, indicates that embarking on a Crusade to avoid choosing between disinheritance and leading a rebellion was in fact a relatively common practice among Western European noblemen (Tyerman 613). This suggests that the conflict depicted in *Herzog Ernst B* may actually reflect widespread political trends and problems rather than a single historical incident. Although it is likely impossible to establish concrete historical models for specific literary representations of political conflict, the more general connections that can be drawn demonstrate that medieval German authors often engaged with contemporary sociopolitical issues in their writing.

Additional evidence that literate audiences were beginning to view political relations as an appropriate topic for academic debate comes from Eike von Repgow's *Sachsenspiegel*, a legal code which probably dates from the 1220s. Although clearly of a different genre than either the *Nibelungenlied* or *Herzog Ernst B*, the portion of this code dealing with *Lehnrecht* (feudal law) also addresses the issue of potentially conflicting obligations to a vassal's immediate lord and to a higher ranking authority ("de overste herre"; cf. section 14.3 and Reynolds 454). Although this document can by no means be viewed as a definitive statement of actual legal practices throughout the German-speaking

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. Sowinski 408-9, 413-416; Spuler 410.

lands, the existence of this type of law code indicates that the educated elite was interested in discussions of controversial points of feudal law, and even the justice of these laws (Reynolds 451-4). I would argue that these types of legal debates over the obligations of lords and vassals provide another example of a written response to contemporary political conflicts arising out of contradictory loyalty obligations

#### **D. Conclusion**

The motif of courtly rivalry found in the *Nibelungenlied* and in other contemporary texts should thus be seen not merely as a literary device, but also as a reflection of wider-reaching literary and political discussions about loyalty conflict and its relationship to the changing social and legal norms of medieval German society. In this context, the character of Hagen can be interpreted as the representative of an older form of unquestioning loyalty to one's king and feudal lord which the poet wished to challenge. In addressing this theme, the poet adapts a common literary type, the courtly rivalry motif, to present Hagen as a generally wise and brave vassal whose initially misplaced loyalty causes him to act unjustly towards Siegfried, but who is also capable accepting a new form of loyalty based on reciprocal friendship. Although some of these elements of Hagen's character may have a basis in Germanic legendary tradition, the *Nibelungenlied* poet skillfully adapts them to present his own perspective on the problem of loyalty conflict. I view this complex layering of older plot elements and motivations with contemporary legal and sociopolitical questions not as an artistic failure on the part of the author, but as an intentional narrative choice which is a key factor in the ongoing popularity and relevance of the work among both medieval audiences and modern scholars.

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