

**The Development of the *Nibelungen*-legend
in Various Periods of German Literature**

by

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ABSTRACT

The development of the *Nibelungen*-myth throughout German literature shows a pattern of unbroken storytelling, the substance of which began even before the advent of the written word and continues still in our time. The following work examines these issues throughout various periods and in diverse genres of German literature. The origins of the myth are first addressed in a discussion of the ultimate connection between history, legend, and myth. This looks specifically at the content of the first written versions of the tale, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsungensaga*. The medieval version of the story, the *Nibelungenlied* poem, is then examined. This focuses on the specific changes that occurred as the myth was taken from its mythological heathen setting and placed into Christian courtly context. The third topic covered is the baroque *Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried*. As with the medieval version, this discussion examines the selective process by which the author constructed his story, removing many of the mythical elements in exchange for a farce-like tale. Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* is the final variation of the myth discussed. The changes that Wagner made in his own version are examined, as well as his restoration of the essence of the original version of the myth and its elevation into the operatic form, referred by Wagner as the ultimate of arts. Concluding remarks will support that the endurance of the story itself lends credence to its claim as a 'national literature', the product of a nation which reflects its own character and ideals.

Table of Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	1
<u>1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL LITERATURE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE EARLY SOURCES OF THE <i>NIBELUNGEN</i>-MYTH</u>	4
1.1 Development and Characteristics of Oral Literature.....	4
1.2 Problems Faced in the Transition from Oral to Written Literature.....	13
1.3 The Partnership of Mythology and History.....	18
1.4 The Earliest Written Versions of the <i>Nibelungen</i> -Myth.....	24
<u>2. ASPECTS OF THE MEDIEVAL <i>NIBELUNGEN</i>LIED</u>	30
2.1 Medieval Germany and the Written Word.....	31
2.2 The Poem as a Product of Oral Literature.....	34
2.3 Structuring of the Historical and Mythological Sources.....	41
2.4 Love, Loyalty and Honor: Whose Tragedy is it?.....	46
<u>3. A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE VOLKSBUCH 'EINE WUNDERSCHÖNE HISTORIE VON DEM GEHÖRNTEN SIEGFRIED'</u>	55
3.1 The Volksbuch.....	55
3.2 The Selective Process and Style.....	62
3.3 The Role of the Hero.....	75
<u>4. COMPOSITION AND ASPECTS OF WAGNER'S <i>RING DES NIBELUNGEN</i></u>	82
4.1 Nineteenth-Century Germany.....	82
4.2 The Structure of Sources.....	92
4.3 Wagner's Treatment of Symbols and Themes.....	95
4.4 The Role of the Heroic Figures.....	106
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	111
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	112

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INTRODUCTION

The development of the *Nibelungen*-myth throughout German literature shows a pattern of unbroken storytelling, the substance of which began even before the advent of the written word and continues still in our time. The endurance of the story itself lends credence to its claim as a 'national literature', the product of a nation which reflects its own character and ideals. The aim of this thesis will be to explore the use of the myth in various periods of German literature, as well as its representation in various genres; the medieval heroic poem, the baroque Volksbuch, and opera of the late Romantic period. By tracing its development, this work will aim to provide a clear look at the pathway taken by the *Nibelungen*-myth throughout the various works discussed.

The first chapter of this thesis will examine the origins of the myth itself, and its place within the tradition of oral storytelling. Some general comments on oral literature will be made, as well as a look at some of the problems faced when a story is transformed from oral to written forms. The partnership of history, legend and myth will be discussed in relation to how they merged to form the basis of the first written versions, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsungensaga*. A brief look will then be taken of these versions in order to illustrate the nature of the earliest recorded accounts of the *Nibelungen*-myth.

Various aspects of the medieval *Nibelungenlied* will then be examined. This discussion

will aim primarily to show the many changes which took place as the substance of the myth was taken from its mythological heathen setting and placed into a Christian courtly context. Aspects of the poem as a work originating in the tradition of oral literature will be investigated, as well as the further influence of history upon the mythological matter. The second chapter will then conclude with a look at the role of the main characters, and will aim to answer the often-posed question, 'whose tragedy it is'?

The third chapter of this thesis will take a comparative look at the Volksbuch-version of the myth. The end of the sixteenth century marks the emergence of this genre, and with it a renewed interest in the *Nibelungen*-substance. *Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried*, whose author remains anonymous, stands as a testament to its era. Unfortunately, it also illustrates a decline in the heroic ideals of the original myth. The selective process and style of the author will be examined, as will the role of the hero. This discussion will aim to understand how the author has greatly altered not only the events of the tale, but also the traditional roles of the characters.

The discovery of the manuscript of the medieval poem at the end of the eighteenth-century marks a revival in interest in the *Nibelungen*-myth. Praised by its critics, the substance of the courtly poem was raised to the status of a national epic. Chapter four of this work will discuss Richard Wagner's treatment of the myth in his opera, *Ring des Nibelungen*. Social and literary conditions of his time will be discussed by examining various letters written by Wagner to friends and family during the composition of the opera's poem. His structuring of

sources will also be reviewed, as will his use of symbols and themes. The role of the heroic figures will also be examined. These points of discussion will aim to show how Wagner returned to the earliest versions of the tale in order to restore the mythological character of the story.

The conclusion of the thesis will examine the *Nibelungen*-myth as a national epic, by tracing its development throughout the various periods of literature. The aim of this final discussion will be to show that the endurance of the myth as a signal of its potency in reflecting the character and ideals of the German people.

1. The Importance of Oral Literature and its Relationship to the Early Sources of the *Nibelungen*-myth

“...*language always bears the stamp of its speaker.*”¹
Albert Bates Lord

The ultimate origin of the *Nibelungen*-legend lies in oral traditional literature. The focus of the first chapter of this thesis will be therefore an examination of the nature and function of oral literature in relation to the subject at hand. This will commence with a discussion of various aspects of the development and general characteristics of oral literature, as well as its transition to written forms. The relationship between myth, legend and history will also be examined, with the purpose of illustrating the process and the effects of their interaction. This chapter will then begin the discussion of the primary sources which led to the development of the medieval version of the *Nibelungen*-legend, a poem which encompasses both aspects of oral literature as well as the intermingling of myth, legend and history. The ultimate focus of this chapter will be to provide an overview of how language, oral or written, does indeed bear the stamp of its speaker.

1.1 Development and Characteristics of Oral Literature

¹Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960) 31.

The word 'literature' most often brings to mind the notion of the written word, and we tend to forget the immense importance of the heritage which preceded writing - oral storytelling. In preliterate society, 'orality' itself served many functions later replaced by writing. The communication and preservation of social and legal codes were orally transmitted, as were ideas and education. Communication between peoples, whether between towns or countries, also relied on the oral word to bring news of neighbors. But perhaps the most important aspect of 'orality' is its function as entertainment, since storytelling often also transmits many of the previously stated purposes. This storytelling is commonly referred to as 'oral literature', and it comprises various genres - ritual song, myth, riddle, tale, and proverb.

One must begin by first looking at what is meant by the term 'oral literature'. Albert Bates Lord, in Epic Singers and Oral Tradition, chooses to define this term by distinguishing between the spoken and written word: "...words heard, when set in the forms of art, are oral literature; words seen, when set in the forms of art, are written literature."¹ This is a very general explanation, but its importance lies in the indication of the method of transmission of the 'forms of art', which Lord writes lies in the concept of the oral song. Oral singing itself is connected to two concepts: performance, and the idea of a story. The performance of oral literature will not be discussed in this chapter at any great length since, as Lord points out, the most important aspect of the oral tale is the process of composition which takes place during its presentation and not the presentation itself.² The following analysis will therefore

²Lord, Epic Singers 5.

seek to expose the manner by which the idea of a story and its composition take place.

There are many factors which contribute to the composition of an oral work. Lord describes its totality as a 'living organism'³, something that grows at the hands of the poet. The growth of an oral poem takes place by the combination of these many factors, a process which also implies a certain sense of flexibility within its construction. This flexibility, as will be shown, implies that the oral poet does not simply memorize and repeat the poem. Rather, the poet uses certain devices by which he is able to construct the framework and subject matter of the story.

One such device is commonly referred to as 'formula', both in the sense of formulaic phrases and formulaic expression. Lord explains and defines formulaic phrases; "The matter of his stories is repetitive, and when an idea is repeated it most frequently is repeated in the same or very similar words. When a story is sung in verse, the requirements of the medium limit the possible choices of phrases more than prose does, and the repeated phrases become more noticeable, more 'visible'."⁴ These 'repeated phrases' are in themselves 'formulaic'. One should not view the repetitive nature of the formulaic phrases as 'memorized' - they simply evolve into a common stock from which the poet shapes his story. The purpose of having this common stock of formulas to draw from lies in the limits placed on the poet in the act of oral composition itself; "...it is the function of formulas to make composition easier under the necessities of rapid composition in performance."⁵ Restrictions placed upon the poet by such

³Lord, Epic Singers 24.

⁴Lord, "Perspectives on Recent Work in Oral Literature", from Oral Literature, edited by Joseph J. Duggan (Great Britain: W.C. Henderson & Son Ltd., 1975) 16.

⁵Lord, "Perspectives" 17-18.

factors as time and the expectations of the audience are eased by the aid of this stockpile of repeated ideas and repeated phrases. Formulas in this sense are like tools which help the poet to compose a well-balanced and entertaining story. Formulaic expression is the grouping of such ideas into a framework by the poet. Lord calls this “the offspring of the marriage of thought and sung verse.”⁶

The oral poet also uses a second device to facilitate composition - themes. Lord defines ‘theme’ as “...groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song.”⁷ It is very much the subject matter of the song. Lord gives the example of the ‘council’ theme, in which an important figure approaches counselors in search of advice towards an important decision. There are also what Lord refers to as minor themes, such as the approach of a messenger.⁸ It is important to recognize that themes are what Lord calls “a grouping of ideas”⁹, and are not necessarily fixed words - they and their use by the poet are flexible, or as Lord would say, ‘fluid’. This variation may depend on the intentions of the poet, or perhaps even the expectations of the audience. But there is also a certain level of ‘stability’ amongst certain themes - perhaps this could also be called ‘popular use’ of certain themes. Lord writes that frequent themes tend to be more stable, as are shorter ones.¹⁰ The stability of short themes, in comparison to longer ones, is also a further indication of the restrictions placed on the poet during the act of rapid composition. How does a poet choose

⁶Lord, Epic Singers 31.

⁷Lord, The Singer of Tales 68.

⁸Lord, The Singer of Tales 78.

⁹Lord, The Singer of Tales 69.

¹⁰Lord, Epic Singers 27.

his particular themes? Lord writes that themes are directly related to the action of the story; “the poet moves forward in this way.”¹¹ In this sense, the theme is used as a method of composition, moving the action of the story forwards by supplying it with direction. Lord writes that ‘habitual association’¹² also plays an important part in the use of themes, in the sense that certain themes imply the presence of others. An example of such, which is also found in the medieval *Nibelungenlied*, are the themes of wedding and army, which Lord says are often synonymous.¹³ ‘Habitual association’ functions in the sense that ‘theme a’ may imply the use of ‘theme b’, as the use of the wedding theme often entails the use of the theme of war - the reason for such connections seem to lie in the subject matter of the repeated formulas themselves.

The choice of themes is also governed by the audience of the poem. Haymes, in The Nibelungenlied; History and Interpretation, writes that “the ‘tradition’(i.e. the community of people who know the text) will resist major change.”¹⁴ Lord also writes that in oral epics, themes do become in a sense ‘repeated passages’, “...not simply a repeated subject, such as a council, a feast, a battle, or a description of horse, hero, or heroine.”¹⁵ Franz Bäuml and Edda Spielmann, in their work entitled “From Illiteracy to Literacy; Prolegomena to a Study of the *Nibelungenlied*”, suggest that the ‘subject matter’ of the epic successfully functions in four distinct ways, and these four ways are clearly related to the thematic structure of the

¹¹Lord, The Singer of Tales 95.

¹²Lord, The Singer of Tales 97.

¹³Lord, The Singer of Tales 68.

¹⁴Edward R. Haymes, The Nibelungenlied; History and Interpretation (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 24.

¹⁵Lord, Epic Singers 27.

song. First, the familiarity of the audience to the ‘traditional narrative elements’ is important. Secondly, it is important that the poet uses these ‘narrative elements’ as actions. This is similar to Lord’s argument that the theme, when working in relation to the action, carries the story forward. Here we see that it draws the audience along with it, due to their familiarity with its content. Thirdly, the ‘rhythmical organization’ of the subject matter is important. The subject matter, when used in relation to the action of the song, must be used in such a way as to accurately represent what the poet wishes the audience to hear and subsequently feel. Fourthly, Bäuml and Spielmann point to a “high degree of visual suggestion” in order to further stimulate the audience by bringing the story to life. According to these two authors, these four steps result in narrowing the distance between the audience and the poet¹⁶. Theme, in relation to its use within the story as well as its ‘cultural context’, serves as an important part in the composition of the oral song and therefore also in its performance before an audience.

Another important aspect is the use of ornamentation during the performance of an oral song, what Bäuml and Spielmann refer to as ‘visual suggestion’. Lord calls this the “living eye of the singer’s imagination,”¹⁷ meaning that in his ability to use descriptive language, the singer builds upon the basic framework of a theme. Another quote by Lord illustrates the importance of descriptive ornamentation in regards to both the story of the song and the audience; “The quality of an oral epic tradition depends no small measure on the

¹⁶See Bäuml, Franz and Edda Spielmann, “From Illiteracy to Literacy; Prolegomena to a Study of the *Nibelungenlied*”, in Oral Literature, edited by Joseph J. Duggan (Great Britain: W.C. Henderson & Son Ltd., 1975) 65.

¹⁷Lord, The Singer of Tales 92.

singer's skill in fashioning descriptions of heroes, arms, and castles. In them the forward march of the story is halted while the listener sits and marvels at the scenes presented."¹⁸ In this sense, ornamentation is linked directly to the expectations of the audience - it is used in the same fashion the singer shortens or lengthens his performance to successfully complete his song while still holding his audience's imagination captive. In these two cases, we see clearly the flexible relationship between the poet and his audience, as well as between the poet and his song - this is what Lord must mean when he refers to the singer's tradition as 'fluid'. Apart from the needs of his audience, there are several guidelines the singer follows in regards to the use of ornamentation. Lord points out that the level of description often reflects the importance of each character, in such instances as dressing and arming for battle.¹⁹ As well, only important parts of a song are ornamented by the singer. Lord gives the 'journey' theme as an example; "...neither because they [the ornamented parts] are realistic pictures of heroic life nor because they are artistically useful in showing passages of time, but because the archetypal journey in epic was of a ceremonial nature and its stages were marked by significant events and meaningful encounters."²⁰ In this case, he argues, ornamentation is used as both "a signal and a mark"²¹ of important points throughout the story. In this same sense, he writes, "The descriptions are vivid because they follow the action."²² Just as with formulas and themes, the use of ornamentation requires that the singer have a vision of the song as a

¹⁸Lord, The Singer of Tales 86.

¹⁹Lord, The Singer of Tales 89.

²⁰Lord, The Singer of Tales 109.

²¹Lord, The Singer of Tales 91.

²²Lord, The Singer of Tales 92.

whole in mind. By ornamenting key parts to the story, he brings to life the action itself, the well-placed descriptive language carrying the story forward with it.

The relationship between composition and the idea of a story is also governed by what is considered to be 'traditional', in the sense of oral 'traditional' literature. Lord provides two important explanations. First, he defines 'a tradition' as "...the body of formulas, themes, and songs that have existed in the repertoires of singers and storytellers in a given area over usually a long period of time."²³ This is clearly a broad definition, one which tells us that a particular 'tradition' is identified by its various elements. Lord also provides a more specific explanation for that which is often referred to as 'traditional' elements within a song; "...phrases tied to the traditional ideas and subjects of the songs."²⁴ In this sense, there is a direct relationship between 'traditional' and the subject matter of a song. Lord then explains how the terms 'oral' and 'traditional' function together, in the sense of 'oral traditional literature'; "... 'oral' describes the weave of style, and the 'traditional' defines the subject matter, the specific words and word combinations which express the ideas and set the specific patterns of the weave."²⁵ 'Orality' is therefore the creative moment that exists when all elements come together to produce the song, and 'tradition' is the idea or content purveyed by that song. Such oral poetry is indeed a blend of both stable and flexible elements; "What I am describing here is that special kind of composition in verse that does not seek newness or originality, that is not afraid of using old expressions - a special kind of 'improvisation',

²³Lord, "Perspectives" 17.

²⁴Lord, "Perspectives" 17.

²⁵Lord, "Perspectives" 17.

if you will, but not improvising out of whole cloth.”²⁶ The ideas in an oral song are traditional, but are not fixed in the sense of shape in visible words preserved in their final expression on paper. Lord describes this balance as the ‘fluidity’ of oral literature - its ability to remain consistent while gradually evolving and adapting. Bäuml and Spielmann describe the importance of the ‘traditional’ element from a different perspective; “Oral poetry, therefore, fulfilled an encyclopedic function, transmitting the very fundament of preliterate society.”²⁷ They list such ‘fundamentals’ as law, myth, rules of conduct, and so forth. Traditional elements in this sense preserve not only stories, but also many of the elements which define a particular culture or community, and which are reflected in the subject matter of the song itself. They are ‘encyclopedic’ in the sense that they become like a reference guide of information reflecting and pertinent to that particular culture.

But despite these many elements which contribute to the composition of an oral poem, it is really the poet who controls the way in which they come together during the creative process. Lord describes the typical poet as young in age, likely belonging to a family of oral poets. His training is quite important, and Lord describes this process in three steps.²⁸ First, the would-be poet listens to others sing. By doing so, he absorbs both the traditional material and themes used by the poets, but even more importantly he learns what Lord refers to as “rhythm of thoughts in song”²⁹, the feeling of structure within an oral poem. Next, the would-be poet himself sings. In this way, he is able to give shape to what he has learned, and to

²⁶Lord, “Perspectives” 17.

²⁷Bäuml and Spielmann, “Illiteracy to Literacy” 64.

²⁸Bäuml and Spielmann, “Illiteracy to Literacy” 21.

²⁹Bäuml and Spielmann, “Illiteracy to Literacy” 21.

develop the ""primary elements of the form""³⁰, rhythm and melody. And finally, the poet learns to use the whole of the tradition in order to develop a repertoire of songs. Many of these will be traditional, but he may also add new elements as well, which in themselves will be absorbed into the tradition. The writer of a song, or the idea of authorship, does not apply here in the same sense it does to written literature. Lord writes; "...a performance is unique; it is a creation, not a reproduction, and it can therefore have only one author."³¹ Authorship in oral literature therefore occurs in the moment of its creation, and the poet is at once both performer and creator.³²

1.2 Problems Faced in the Transition from Oral to Written Literature

Many problems arise in the transition of an oral world to a written one. The examination of a text which has its origins in the oral tradition, or the intent to prove such, requires knowledge of such problems; "It must be said at the beginning that one must know something - the more the better - about the tradition in question to which a singer belongs as well as his own habits of composition in order to make the judgement."³³ Lord also points out that we, as a modern audience, tend to think of writing as superior. He reminds his readers that oral literature was well-developed long before the introduction of writing, and that it was indeed this new form of literature which had yet to develop into perfection; "...our

³⁰Bäumli and Speilmann, "Illiteracy to Literacy" 21.

³¹Lord, The Singer of Tales 102.

³²Lord, The Singer of Tales 13.

³³Lord, Epic Singers 25.

poetics is derived from the world of orality.”³⁴ In fact, writing did not have an immediate effect on people - it influenced those who could already read, and was used primarily as a means of recording. For many cultures, such as the Germanic tribes, the oral tradition continued long past the introduction of writing. In order to examine or identify a text believed to be based in the oral tradition, it is important to examine the oral “parts” which remain, and to consider why changes may have been made.

A central problem in the transition from oral to written text lies in the issue of its recording. It is clear that early cultures did not have access to modern recording devices. The literate poet was therefore responsible for the transition from oral to written word. Having discussed the nature of the oral poem, it is clear that several problems would arise in the process of recording. Lord points out two specific problems; repetition and pausing. The problem here lies in the speed of the oral poem itself, which as mentioned earlier, follows the natural patterns of speech/song. It would certainly have been quite difficult, if not impossible, for the writer to capture every word the oral poet sang. He likely would have requested the singer to repeat any parts which had been missed. Lord argues that this goes against the nature of the oral poem as a text, for no song is repeated in exactly the same words. Each repeated part would therefore represent a different song. The written text, fixed in nature, simply cannot accurately represent any particular performance.³⁵ Asking the oral poet to pause during recitation also poses a problem. Lord refers to this scenario as “traditional

³⁴Lord, The Singer of Tales 32.

³⁵Lord, The Singer of Tales 125.

patterns in an unusual circumstance.”³⁶ The spontaneous flow of the oral poem would thus be interrupted by the ‘unusual circumstance’ of pausing while the literate poet wrote the poem down. Despite these two problems of recording the epic, Lord points out that “changing a few words is not as bad as changing a structure.”³⁷

But many structural changes do occur, and this is perhaps the greatest problem faced by anyone examining an oral-derived work. Accuracy in interpretation must lie in understanding which changes occur and if possible, why. One structural change that would likely have taken place involves the aspect of time. Although it is clear that oral poets were capable of reciting quite lengthy poems with the aid of formulaic devices, it is also reasonable to state that the poems also occupied a certain period of time. This may very well have even depended on the attention and interest of the audience - the oral poet’s function is to entertain, after all. The poet must have a vision of his poem as a whole, and utilizing such devices as ornamentation and themes, he is able to mold a story which he feels captivates his audience while at the same time completing the story or action of the poem itself. The written text interrupts this process. A literate poet would certainly now have the opportunity to return to the written text of the oral poem in order to edit or expand areas which he may feel better suit his particular audience. This results in the intended structure given to the poem by its original ‘author’ being altered. The result of this are poems of a greater length than would have been intended by the poem’s original ‘author’, the oral poet.

Thematic changes are also related to the poet’s audience. As previously mentioned,

³⁶Lord, The Singer of Tales 127.

³⁷Lord, Epic Singers 24.

the oral poet's audience does indeed influence his composition. Lord points out that such an influence also occurs between a literate poet and audience; "...the new reading public, though it will be small at first, will undoubtedly have different tastes developing from those of the traditional nonliterate audience."³⁸ Different tastes imply new themes, or even new combinations of themes. If time allows the literate poet to edit or expand his text, it certainly would allow for the creation of these. This is one explanation for thematic change. Lord points to the problem of rapid composition in order to find another; "...writing will free him from the need of the themes for purposes of composition."³⁹ The literate poet is no longer bound by time during the process of composition, as is the oral poet. Especially in regards to poems epic in character, staple themes that were once called upon in order to compose the poem are no longer necessary - even when dealing with a lengthy poem, the literate poet has the time to alter old themes or create new ones. In this sense, although he is changing the tradition, he also complies to the expectations of his audience as the oral poet does. This argument is valid whether the audience is a group listening to a written piece or an individual reading it from a book, and the fact remains that thematic changes are likely to occur during the transition from oral song to written text.

If the literate poet no longer relies on staple themes for composition purposes, what other structural changes would he likely have made? Themes were not the only things used in repetition in order to facilitate composition; formulas and formulaic expression were also relied upon. It has become clear by examining texts which are known to derive from oral

³⁸Lord, The Singer of Tales 131.

³⁹Lord, The Singer of Tales 131.

sources that change also occurs along these lines. The changing of a few words is not important here - even the oral singer sometimes breaks the pattern by adding or omitting. The ultimate change lies in the decline in the use of such formulas. Lord describes this as a movement away from truly oral literature; "If, for example, he uses some new, non-traditional, phrases or constructions, nevertheless still keeping mostly to the traditional diction, he would be moving in the direction of written literature."⁴⁰

This would also seem to express a new meaning of the word 'stability'. Whereas the oral poet strove for the stability of his poem by use of formulaic expression, the written word provides stability of the text for the literate poet. What can be said of this stability? Lord writes; "...singers who accept the idea of a fixed text are lost to oral processes. This means death to oral tradition and the rise of a generation of 'singers' who are reproducers rather than re-creators."⁴¹ Stability of text is then a form of imitation, for even if the poet tries to follow the traditional pattern of oral composition, it is clear he cannot.

Oral poets often continued to sing despite the introduction of writing, and writing actually had little impact on the oral songs themselves. Yet there is also the possibility of what Lord refers to as 'indirect effects' within the community itself.⁴² This relates to the changes that were likely to occur within a society which welcomed literacy. Lord argues that as the influence of the literate text grew, there would have been the strong possibility that cultural activities, such as the singing of traditional oral songs and stories, would also change in their

⁴⁰Lord, Epic Singers 25.

⁴¹Lord, The Singer of Tales 137.

⁴²Lord, Epic Singers 24.

importance to the community. The prestige once given to the oral poet would likely have been transferred onto the literate poet, therefore changing the prestige placed on the traditional songs which accompanied him. Even if the traditional oral songs were preserved on paper, it has been clearly shown that the medium itself cannot accurately preserve the oral song or performance itself, resulting in changes too great to be ignored. With the rise of a literate community must certainly have come the decline of an oral one.

Walter J. Ong, in Orality and Literacy, also calls to mind the notion that written words are removed from the writer himself. Once placed on paper, they no longer 'belong' to the author in the same sense as with the oral poet - they may now continue to exist in spite of the author. Permanency for the oral poet lies in the act itself, in the performance/composition of the song. In this sense, there is an undeniably crucial relationship between poet, song, and audience - the song lives in this moment. Yet with a written text, there is a sort of permanency which exists separately from the author and even the reader of it. Creative expression has become permanently fixed in a way which does not reflect its full potential. The changes which have occurred are permanent, and reading a written text aloud as an oral poet would cannot bring back to life what has been lost. The very nature of oral literature, what Lord called its 'fluidity', cannot be preserved by the written word.

1.3 The Partnership of Mythology and History

The previously mentioned aspects of oral literature were important to discuss because they relate directly to the subject at hand, the progression of the *Nibelungen*-legend throughout various periods of German literature. In examining the earliest written versions

of the tale, it is clear that they evolved from a long-standing tradition of oral storytelling. Unfortunately, we will never be able to trace backwards the myth to its original state - we lack the certainty of resources from which to draw conclusions. What the written texts do offer us is a permanent window looking into a specific moment in the legend's tradition. The previous discussion on the aspects of orality served to illustrate the possible influences upon the works before us prior to their being written down.

Another aspect which must be addressed is the influence of history on mythology in the evolution of oral literature, which applies to the progression of the *Nibelungen*-legend in its written forms. The first written versions of the tale, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsungensaga*, are products of this partnership between history and mythology. It is perhaps best to take a look at the significance of these two elements and their relationship before progressing with a discussion of the earliest written forms of the *Nibelungen*-legend.

The meaning of the term 'mythology' is important in terms of understanding the basis from which the *Nibelungen*-literatures emerged. Unlike history, which tells us of *what* has happened in the past, myths are interpretive accounts which attempt to explain *how* and *why* things happen. Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, offers many insights into the meaning and importance of the myth itself. Its meaning, he writes, lies in its use as a "metaphor for what lies behind the visible world."⁴³ Beyond the 'visible world' of external reality lies the spiritual world - myths speak to the restless soul, whose search for answers to the experience of life and its complexities leads it past what it finds in the external world of action. In its

⁴³Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) xvii.

search for a 'deeper' meaning, myths help us to understand what we as humans have difficulty explaining in our own language. They are the language of symbols, offering a deeper awareness of the human experience. And human experience is the feature encompassed by the meaning of the myth - it is what lends the world's various mythologies a sense of universality in its common themes and messages.⁴⁴ Modern-day use of the word often reminds us of its ulterior meaning as something which is false or untrue - 'no, that's just a myth'. But mythology holds with it truths that we have difficulties otherwise explaining. We must look beyond the form the myth takes in its personages and events and look to what it *tells* us.

The development and preservation of the world's first myths were a result of the extensive use of oral storytelling within cultures. The original myth of Siegfried is lost to us forever. We are only able to sift through its remnants as preserved in the earliest written accounts of the legend, and by doing so build an interpretive framework of what the myth was and meant.

In reading the earliest written accounts of the *Nibelungen*-legend, one can easily separate the mythological from the historical element. The myth preserved here is that of the heroic Siegfried, who rises up to slay the dragon and is torn down by rivals. George Henry Needler, in the introductory notes to his prose version of the medieval poem, writes that the legend likely originated as a nature myth;

The young day slays the mist-dragon and awakens the sun-maiden that sleeps
on the mountain; at evening he falls a prey to the powers of gloom that draw

⁴⁴“What human beings have in common is revealed in myths.” Bill D. Moyers in response to Campbell, The Power of Myth 5.

the sun down again beneath the earth.⁴⁵

Needler also suggests that the myth served as a parallel for the changing of seasons;

...the light returns in spring, slays the cloud-dragon, and frees the budding earth from the bonds of winter.⁴⁶

In these two examples we see the myth as a metaphor for the experience of awakening. In its first written forms, the figure of Siegfried rises up to slay the dragon in a symbolic act of growth into manhood. If myths serve to give us great truth, what then does the example of Siegfried teach us? As the archetype of strength, he is more interested in his imperfections as a way to understand the message sent by his presence. "The perfect human being," writes Campbell, "is uninteresting."⁴⁷ Campbell tells us that we must look to the answer of our question in the downfall of our hero, for his faults will illustrate the lesson of the myth itself. These aspects of the myth will be further discussed as the thesis progresses through its various arguments.

Early Germanic mythology found its way into lays and poems by the influence of circumstances surrounding the migration of the Goths in the first century B.C., whose tribes first settled in what is present-day Poland. Nancy Bevenga, author of Kingdom on the Rhine: History, Myth and Legend in Wagner's Ring, discusses this historical aspect in relation to the development of Germanic heroic poetry;

It was the circumstances associated with this move - situations of adversity, such as the inevitable conflicts with the inhabitants of the new areas they

⁴⁵George Henry Needler, The Nibelungenlied (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1904) xviii.

⁴⁶Needler xviii.

⁴⁷Campbell 4.

sought to occupy, or the deeds of heroic leaders such as the legendary Filimer under whom the Goths first ventured forth from Scandinavia - that gave birth to Germanic heroic poetry. The memories of such adventures, which reached their culmination in the unsettled, stormy years encompassing the Migration Period of the fourth and fifth centuries, were enshrined in poems, lays and ballads...⁴⁸

Heroic song had its place in the earliest of Germanic tribes, preserved only by means of oral storytelling. As previously discussed, these were subject to the adaptations of each reciter, who in keeping the essence of the story may have changed superficial details. But as Bevinga points out, "It is evidence of the irrepressible vitality of this early poetry that...the heroic legends survived in some form attractive enough to inspire subsequent poets until eventually the great literature was produced which survives today."⁴⁹ In other words there must be something inherent in the original myth itself which has sustained its survival over centuries of adaptation. The aim of this thesis will be to examine various stages of this process in order to determine how this process has taken place and what the message of the myth is.

At some point the myth merged with elements of history in order to transform it into a hero-saga, and that this process had taken place before the first written accounts of it were even made. When this amalgamation took place and exactly how are points of discussion not easily resolved, for without the advent of writing, there are no other recorded versions of the myth prior to the ones to be presented in this chapter. But the combination of these two elements resulted in the formation of what has so far been referred to in this thesis as the *Nibelungen*-legend. 'Legend' in itself is the combination of myth and history, resulting in an

⁴⁸Nancy Bevinga, Kingdom on the Rhine: History, Myth and Legend in Wagner's Ring (Harwich: Anton Press, 1983) 3.

⁴⁹Bevinga 4.

amalgamation of these two elements.

The historical element of the *Nibelungen*-legend lies in the downfall of the Burgundian empire in 437, and the near-extinction of their people. Having settled on the west bank of the Rhine, the East Germanic tribe was confronted by the Huns and suffered great losses. The remaining Burgundians fled southwards. As Needler points out, this event likely created quite an impression on their neighboring Franks - fact soon became intertwined with fiction, beginning the process of developing myth and history into legend. Although it is quite certain that Attila himself was not present at the battle between the Huns and Burgundians, the defeat was later attributed to him. This likely developed as a result of Attila's fame as a conqueror, and the success of the clash being subsequently accredited to him. A few years later, Attila met his own fate in a rather mysterious manner. The day after his wedding to a German princess named Hildikô, he was found in a pool of blood as the result of a hemorrhage. The unusual circumstances prompted further merging of fact with fiction. Needler writes, "The mysteriousness of Attila's ending inspired his contemporaries with awe, and the popular fancy was not slow to clothe this event also in a dress of fiction."⁵⁰ His death was soon attributed to his wife, and the motivation for murder given to the many battles between the Huns and Germans - it became known that she must have murdered him out of revenge for the death of her kinsmen.⁵¹ The saga of Attila's death became connected with that of the Burgundian downfall, and as Needler suggests, the figure of Hildikô quickly became the sister of three

⁵⁰Needler xix.

⁵¹See Needler xix, who draws upon the historian Jordanes for references to Attila's life and death.

Burgundian kings - Gundahari, Godomar and Gislahari. The vengeance motif in the death of her brothers now became her motivation in taking Attila's life.

The question of how the combination of these two legends and that of the myth of Siegfried took place is a difficult one to answer. The myth is clearly the oldest element, so it stands to reason that the historically-based legend was introduced and amalgamated over time. But as previously mentioned, without the guidance of reliable written sources, it is impossible to know when and how the process took place. One thing is for certain - with the introduction of the element of history began the decline in the use of the Siegfried myth within the legend. Both elements are preserved rather equally in the first written accounts, but as will be shown in the preceding chapters of this thesis, the decrease in the use of the myth in various periods of the development of the legend did occur. Campbell writes that the decline in the use of myths in general and their importance to the modern world are the very things which should remind us of their relevancy. He writes, "...the remnants of all that 'stuff' [myths] line the walls of our interior system of belief, like shards of broken pottery in an archeological site."⁵² The myths of times forgotten serve to educate us as to what man searched to know in the past and perhaps stills seeks to understand today. This message must also answer the question of the legend's vitality throughout periods of German literature.

1.4 The Earliest Written Versions of the *Nibelungen*-legend

The earliest written versions of the legend are preserved in two primary works: the

⁵²Campbell, xiv.

Edda, and the *Völsungensaga*. The nature of the written text allows us to finally see specific and concrete moments in the tradition of the tale as it progresses through history.

There are two versions of the 'Eddic poems'; the *Poetic Edda* and the *Snorra Edda*. The latter of the two was written by Snorri Sturluson around 1200. It was believed that Sturluson had used another primary source in the composition of the poems, an assumption which was confirmed when in 1643 a manuscript of similar Eddic poetry emerged. Although it was clearly a younger manuscript than Sturluson's, its content showed that it was indeed of older origins and was likely the source first used by him. This collection of poems is referred to as the *Poetic Edda*, and were composed anonymously. Their substance was likely the subject of poets for centuries before being written down, and it is probable that some of the poems emerged and developed independently from others. One gathers this from the lack of consecutive story - their collector clearly made an attempt to put them in a logical sequence, but some parts overlap others, and some events are told twice.

The *Völsungensaga* was composed around 1275 in Iceland. It tells of the race of Volsung, beginning with its divine ancestry to the god Odin. The first part of this prose version of the *Nibelungen*-legend describes the events leading up to the death of Sigmund and the birth of his son, Sigurd. The second half of the work tells of the life and death of Sigurd. Although the work follows the outline given of the Eddic heroic poems, the version of the tale found in the *Völsungensaga* is certainly more detailed. Not only is there a greater description of events, but the Icelandic version is also more complete, giving information not to be found in the *Edda*.

In bringing together the elements of each of the versions, one may compile a general

account of the substance of their stories. From the *Edda* comes the story of three gods, Odin, Hönir, and Loki, who wander the earth. They come across an otter. Loki kills it and removes its skin. The three gods seek shelter for the night, and are given lodging by Hreidmar. They show him the skin of the otter only to discover that it was actually Hreidmar's son who had taken animal form. He seizes them with the help of his sons, Fafnir and Regin, and sets a ransom for their lives: Loki must fill the skin of the otter with gold. He sets out for a waterfall, where he is given a net by a sea-goddess. With the net he is able to capture Andvari, a dwarf who has taken the form of a fish, and who would be able to help fulfill the ransom. Andvari tries to withhold a golden ring, but when it is wrested away by Loki, he curses the entire treasure. Upon his return, Loki hands over the gold and tells Hreidmar of the curse. Refusing to give some of the gold to his sons, Hreidmar is killed by Fafnir, who later takes the form of a dragon in order to guard over the hoard.

Both versions now join to form the story of King Völsung, and his descent from Odin. The eldest children of Völsung are the twins Sigmund and Signy. A king asks for the hand of Signy, which is given by her father against her will. At the wedding feast, a mysterious stranger enters the hall, produces a sword, and proceeds to thrust it into the mighty oak which stands in the middle of the room. No one is able to draw the sword from the tree, except Sigmund. He refuses to hand it over to Signy's new husband, Siggeir, who then begins to plot revenge. The newlywed couple leave behind an invitation for Völsung and his sons to visit them.

Signy suspects her husband is planning something, and upon the arrival of her father and brothers, she attempts to warn them repeatedly. But they refuse to heed her warnings,

and Völsung is slain in battle with Siggeir. His sons are taken captive, and left tied to a tree in the woods. Each night, a she-wolf comes to devour one of them, until only Sigmund is left. Signy helps him escape.

Signy then begins to plan revenge for the death of her father and brothers. One at a time she sends her sons to Sigmund, and their courage is tested. Both fail. Signy realizes that only a pure Völsung will be able to fulfill the deed. She exchanges forms with a witch, and stays for several nights with Sigmund. From this comes the birth of Sinfjotli, whom Sigmund is unaware is his own son. The two set out for Siggeir's castle, and are captured after slaying the king's sons. They manage to escape, and set fire to the kingdom. Signy reveals the true relationship of Sinfjotli to Sigmund, and then enters the castle to perish with her husband.

Sigmund returns home and marries Borghild. She is sent away after killing Sinfjotli with a poisonous drink. He then marries Hjordis, but is attacked by a rival suitor. Having slain many enemies, the mysterious stranger returns. Sigmund's sword is broken against the stranger's spear, and he is wounded. Before dying, he tells his wife to guard the pieces of the sword in order that their unborn son will weld them together and use the weapon to achieve glory.

She does give birth, and the son is named Sigurd. He is raised in the court of Hjordis' new husband, and is tutored by Regin. Regin welds the sword together, and it is so powerful that Sigurd breaks the anvil in two with it. Sigurd takes revenge for the death of his father. Afterwards, Regin convinces him to seek the treasure which is still being guarded by Fafnir. Sigurd plunges the sword into the beast's heart, which he removes to roast. Before dying, Fafnir also tells him of the curse. While roasting the heart, Sigurd burns his finger and brings

it to his mouth to cool. In tasting the blood, he is able to understand the language of the birds above him, who tell him of the valkyrie Brynhild who sleeps on a mountain top encircled in flames. Sigurd mounts his steed Grani and takes with him the treasure. Upon waking the sleeping figure, he discovers she is actually a woman. She tells him how Odin placed in the flames as punishment for disobedience, with the promise that only a hero who knew no fear could waken her. Brynhild reads runes of wisdom for Sigurd, and warns him that their love may have consequences. Ignoring this, they swear mutual love for one another.

Sigurd leaves and comes to the court of King Gjuki, whose sons are named Gunnar and Hogni. The Queen gives Sigurd a potion of forgetfulness and succeeds in gaining him as a husband for her daughter Gudrun. Gunnar decides to woo Brynhild, and sets off with Sigurd to the mountain-top where she resides. Gunnar is unable to pass through the flames, and Sigurd must take his form in order to approach Brynhild. She reluctantly consents to marry Gunnar, but since he has proven himself by passing through the flames, she is given no choice. Sigurd takes the ring from her finger and replaces it with the one of his own treasure, and afterwards returns to his own form. Gunnar weds Brynhild, and it is only at this point that the magic of the potion wears off, and Sigurd remembers his oath of love for Brynhild.

Some time later, Gudrun and Brynhild decide to bathe together in the Rhine, and a quarrel ensues as to who should enter the water first. Brynhild argues that her husband is mightier and more courageous. Gudrun reveals the secret that it was actually Sigurd who had taken Gunnar form on the mountain-top, and as proof she produces the ring taken from Brynhild's finger. Brynhild is furious, and Sigurd tries to calm her down, even offering to leave Gudrun for her. But Brynhild refuses, and demands of her husband Sigurd's death.

Gunnar himself cannot do the deed, having sworn an oath of friendship with Sigurd, and must send his son Gutthorm instead. The actual murder is quite cowardly - Gutthorm tries twice to perform the deed but is frightened each time by the might of Sigurd's presence. Finally, he approaches him in his sleep and thrusts his sword into Sigurd. Gudrun awakens in time to hear Sigurd's dying revelation that it was Brynhild who is responsible for his death. Gudrun's grief is inconsolable. Despite her joy in Gudrun's pain, Brynhild commits suicide and asks to be placed next to Sigurd on the funeral pyre.

The king of the Huns, Atli, now seeks Gudrun's hand in marriage. She refuses, but Grimhild gives her a potion of forgetfulness in order to leave behind memories of Sigurd. The treasure itself had been taken possession by Gunnar after Sigurd's death. Atli decides it should become his property along with Gudrun. When his demands for the hoard are refused, he attacks Gunnar and his entourage. Many are slain on both sides, but the secret hiding place of the treasure is never revealed by Gunnar. Atli then throws Gunnar into a pit of serpents. With a harp given to him by Gudrun, he manages to pacify all of the snakes but one which stings him deadly in the heart.

Peace returns momentarily to the castle, but Gudrun secretly plans her revenge for the deaths of her kin. She kills their sons, and serves their blood and meat to Atli at a banquet. Later that night, she stabs him in the heart and sets fire to his castle.

2. Aspects of the Medieval *Nibelungenlied*

The *Nibelungenlied*, a medieval poem which dates around 1200, is a heroic epic which has long been the subject of fascination for scholars and readers alike. It is a tale of knightly ethics, strife between nations, and the power of seeking vengeance. At its heart lies a multitude of interesting and complex characters, as well as a clear picture of medieval courtly life and ethics. This chapter will approach several aspects of the poem, with the primary aim of illustrating the manner by which the poet has infused the original legend with new purpose and meaning. A brief summary of the likely conditions under which the poem was composed will be discussed, as well as its place within the medieval literary traditions of Germany. An outline of the poet's use of earlier sources will then be presented in order to give a clear picture of how he was able to make the transition from mythological legend to courtly poem. The poem's 'orality' will then be discussed, for these aspects suspend the poem between the world of oral and written literature and also serve many important functions in bringing the reader closer to its content and message. In conclusion, the role of the primary characters will be approached with the purpose of examining the question: 'whose tragedy is it?' The purpose of these arguments is to show the *Nibelungenlied* as the product of a myth which emerged from oral literature and which moved forwards through history to find its place within the realm of medieval chivalry. Not only is it a literary monument, but also a fascinating and complex look at human nature and the forces which motivate individuals to act.

2.1 Medieval Germany and the Written Word

The *Nibelungenlied* is most often classified as a Germanic 'heroic epic' poem. It is considered heroic in nature due to its emphasis on the adventures and deeds of great figures, and 'epic' in style because of both of its content and structure.

There are several characteristics which are common to the epic as a genre, and which will give proof of the *Nibelungenlied's* classification as such. William T.H. Jackson, in The Literature of the Middle Ages, describes these characteristics at length. One of the primary attributes is the intermingling of legend and history in the epic, and when considering the nature of legends, this can also mean they include mythical elements. As will be discussed, the medieval poem in question is certainly a blend of these elements; reminders of an earlier age are brought on by the slaying of dragons and the service of dwarves, as are the echoes of a specific period in time and mention of real historic figures. Although one may ascertain with great effort the distinction between these elements in the *Nibelungenlied* - considering the poet's skill in blending his sources - Jackson writes that most often the elements of legend and history in the epic are "inextricably confused."⁵³ Luckily, one may use the first written sources of the legend to determine how 'creative' the poet was in combining the historical aspect of the work with previous mythological elements.

Historical events in the epic most often reflect the poet's own age, and this can certainly be determined by the *Nibelungenlied*-poet's precision and dedication in reproducing an accurate and vivid picture of the medieval court and its customs. History itself, writes

⁵³William T.H. Jackson, The Literature of the Middle Ages (New York: Columbia Press, 1960) 176.

Jackson, is raised to a "larger grandeur, to superhuman size" by the poet⁵⁴. Although he does not elaborate on this comment, Jackson is likely referring to the elevation of a particular event by the poet, who by emphasizing the deeds of his characters also raises the event itself beyond the confines of a historical 'account'. The glorification of the successes and defeats of the characters capture our imaginations - the longevity of the *Nibelungen*-legend certainly offers proof of this. Jackson mentions also the frequent appearance of historical personages. In the case of the *Nibelungenlied*, Attila and Theodoric play minor albeit important roles.

There are also several common features in regards to the element of legends within the epic. Folklore and fairy tales are often used in abundance, and are intertwined with historical events by the poet. In the *Nibelungenlied*, the use of the Siegfried-myth brings with it the episode of the slaying of the dragon, although in the poem it is reduced to a description of events by a third party. Jackson also points out other motifs, such as tests of manliness in the effort to gain a bride and the hero who helps a weak king. Both of these motifs are combined into one in the medieval poem, seen in Gunther's reliance on Sigfried to help him win Brunhild as a wife. Jackson also points out that more general values also help in the selection of motifs in the epic. For example, the importance placed on the bond of family ties likely is the motivating factor behind the motif of revenge.⁵⁵

Although there was some mention of 'epic' oral storytelling in the first chapter of this thesis, the term used in regards to the written text implies other aspects which must be considered. The length of the oral epic may have been longer than that of an oral riddle or

⁵⁴Jackson 176.

⁵⁵Jackson, 177.

song, but the nature of the written epic allows the poet to make it even more detailed and greater in length. The advent of writing in the medieval age was introduced by the Christian Church. At the onset, writing was used primarily for the recording of social and legal ethics. The first pieces of literature to emerge were clerical in nature, and it is believed that the Church used the medium in order to further its message. In order to do so, it was important to reach greater numbers by writing in the vernacular. In this manner, the Church was able to exert control over what was written and to whom it would be distributed. This may have been one of the reasons the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* chose to infuse the mythological nature of the legend with greater emphasis on the historical features - in the process blanketing heathen elements with Christian ones. In doing so, his aim may have been to avoid any form of criticism or suppression.

Determining the actual genesis of the *Nibelungenlied* is a difficult process, for we know virtually nothing concrete about the specific conditions under which it was composed or even who may have written the original manuscript. It is unique in the sense that many manuscripts of the poem have been preserved and yet the ability to generate a conclusive theory as to its origins has been unsuccessful, and likely will remain so.⁵⁶ In dating these manuscripts and also judging by the vivid descriptions of chivalric ethics and medieval customs, it has been inferred that the poem was likely composed around 1200. Although assumptions have been made as to the identity of the poet, it is clear that he must have been

⁵⁶D.G. Mowatt and Hugh Sacker, The Nibelungenlied: an Interpretive Commentary (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967) 19: "...thirty-four manuscripts or fragments of it are extant, and that is more than exist of most works of Middle High German literature."

intimately familiar with such settings in order to have been able to depict them with such clarity.⁵⁷ Such assumptions include the early theory that the poet was a travelling minstrel, but more recent ones conclude that he was likely a knight or cleric, which corresponds more closely to the idea that he must have been somehow very familiar with such an age. It is also believed that the poem was written for the nobility of Austrian courts.

2.2 The Poem as a Product of Oral Tradition

The *Nibelungenlied* is clearly a product of oral literature. Considering that the oral tradition of this nature is lost forever, it is important to observe what is known of oral literature in general in order to make assumptions as to the circumstances under which this poem was composed. The general characteristics of the *Nibelungenlied* correspond to Lord's observations of the genre, as seen in the use of formula and theme. In fact, the poet of the work gives the narrator a strong presence and an active voice, something which seems to celebrate its origins as an oral work.

The relationship between the poet and the narrator is one of the most important aspects of 'orality' within the *Nibelungenlied*. In reading the poem, one is left with the impression that poet and narrator are meant to be identified as the same person, as one voice. This effect is produced by the constant presence of the narrator throughout the poem, both in passive and first-person accounts of events and descriptions of personages. The presence of the narrator's voice also gives the illusion that the poem is 'oral'. One example of this is seen in the opening stanza of the poem;

⁵⁷See Mowatt and Sacker 21.

Uns sind in alten Mären Wunder viel gesagt
 von Helden, reich an Ehren, von Kühnheit unverzagt,
 von Freude und Festlichkeiten, von Weinen und von Klagen,
 von kühner Recken Streiten mögt ihr nun Wunder hören sagen.⁵⁸

In this example, the narrator uses the personal pronoun 'uns' as a way to suggest familiarity between himself and his audience, and in this way he closes the distance between them by gaining both their attention and confidence. In addition, the medieval poem was likely intended to be read aloud before an audience, something suggested here by the use of the verb 'hören'. But as modern *readers* of the work, the above example still gives us the presence of the oral poet. There are many such examples throughout the poem, and I believe that the poet intended the narrator's patterns of speech to closely reflect the designs of the oral tradition - in doing so he attempts to rekindle the voice of an oral poet within the story. It is true that a written work which seeks to preserve 'orality' seems like a contradiction, but the importance here lies in its function; it brings the aims of the poet and the voice of the narrator closer together, and in doing so ultimately bridges the gap between poet and audience. The bond of trust which is created between the two parties is of no small importance - we, the audience, look to the narrator to guide us through the tale. The story becomes a journey in itself, an effect which likely occurs whether the story is sung aloud or read silently.

One of the most important aspects of preserving the 'oral voice' within the poem is the extensive use of foreshadowing throughout the poem, a technique used by the poet in many different ways. By following the voice of the narrator, one may divide these into two methods of foreshadowing: indirect suggestions and straightforward statements. Indirect suggestions

⁵⁸“Das Nibelungenlied”, stanza 1.

occur when the narrator plants the *idea* of something which may occur. This style of foreshadowing is vague, and its purpose is to give a subtle look forward at what may happen. Often, the indirect suggestions do not even refer to a specific event, but rather a general feeling. The most prominent example of which is the ominous tone throughout the poem, perpetuated consistently by the voice of the narrator. When Sigfrid swears an oath to help Gunther gain his bride, the narrator adds, "Drum mußten die Vielkühnen noch in starker Sorge sein."⁵⁹ We do not know specifically what will happen, but a negative inference is made. This allows for suspense to build up throughout the poem, and it is an important technique in capturing the attention of the audience, regardless of whether the work is heard or read. This method of foreshadowing is also used by the poet to reach into the feelings of the characters. In the same 'Abenteuer' as the previous example, the departure of the men to Iceland is met with grief by onlookers. Describing the tearful women, the narrator adds, "Mich dünkt, ihnen sagt ihr Herze ihr künftiges Ungemach."⁶⁰ The same ominous tone is present, but in this example it is incorporated with the heartfelt farewell of the women, and their feelings deepen the significance of the foreshadowing. This, and other examples like it, gives us the impression that anguish is the mirror of what will happen to our heroes. Through the use of indirect suggestions, we know that something will happen, but we are not given any substantial indication as to *what*.

The second method of foreshadowing is done with straightforward statements. These are accounts of specific circumstances and events. Unlike indirect suggestions, these

⁵⁹Stanza 346.

⁶⁰Stanza 386.

descriptions do tell us *what* will happen, but usually not *how*. The audience is told of the event before it occurs, thus building up suspense until the actual moment in the poem when the foretold event is enacted by the characters. The narrator tells us during the same scene with Gunther - before they even leave for Iceland - that Sigfrid will indeed succeed in winning Brunhild; "Er gewann mit großen Listen das gar herrliche Weib."⁶¹ There are also several examples in which the narrator describes events which had been simply acted out in the earlier sources. For example, the difficult contests arranged by Brunhild in order to ward off potential suitors. In the *Völsungensaga*, one does not hear specific details of the contests until actually witnessing them. However, in the *Nibelungenlied* the narrator gives a description of them even prior to the heroes' arrival on the island. There are other examples of this, and one has to wonder why the narrator would give so much information prior to the actual event. It does seem that our knowledge of the events before they happen allows us to put our focus elsewhere - on the *how*. Instead of following only the actions of the characters, the attention of the audience is placed on the great struggle between Sigfrid and Brunhild itself. We marvel at Sigfrid's strength and skill in overpowering his competitor, and because we already know *what* he needs to do, we are more able to appreciate *how* he does it when the event actually occurs. Neil Thomas also indicates another important benefit of the narrator's generosity with information; "The technique of what the rhetorical handbooks termed *praemonitio* also provides considerable dramatic irony: *we* are aware of future doom, but not the characters..."⁶² In this sense, the poet is preparing his audience by building suspense and by

⁶¹Stanza 350.

⁶²Thomas 17.

preparing for the actual outcome of the event.

But apart from foreshadowing, perhaps one of the greatest skills of our poet is his ability to allow the narrator to look into the minds and hearts of the characters. This not only deepens our awareness of the characters, but also greatly affects our understanding of their relationships within the poem. The expanded length of the poem allows for this luxury. One example of such is the struggle between Sigfrid and the dwarf Alberich, during which Sigfrid's shield is smashed to pieces. In addition to recounting Alberich's strength and the events of the combat, the narrator also tells his audience of the fear which touched the heart of the brave hero Sigfrid; "Drum kam in große Sorge da der wackere Gast."⁶³ This look inwards further emphasizes Sigfrid's heroic virtues, as he throws aside the pieces of the shield and draws his sword in renewed courage. However, the recounting of events may leave a rather odd feeling with the reader- despite the fact that the words are supposedly coming from the mouth of Hagen, the vivid and extensive description seem to indicate the strong presence of the narrator. Regardless, such insights are not always consistent throughout the poem. An example of such finds itself in the final scene of the poem, in which Kriemhild brings the severed head of her brother before Hagen. The narrator tells us that Hagen felt 'voll Unmut'⁶⁴, but nevertheless maintained his stubborn vow not to reveal the location of the treasure. Despite the evil depiction of this character, one is almost given to admire him, especially when viewing him in contrast to Kriemhild, who by this point is so racked with anger and lustful revenge that she destroys without hesitation the only person who could

⁶³Stanza 511.

⁶⁴Stanza 2441.

reveal the location of her husband's treasure. And yet despite the intensity of this scene, the voice of the narrator all but disappears in what may be the most dramatic moment of the entire poem. One can only imagine the heightened emotion and suspense which would have been produced by being able to see into the mind of Hagen as he watched his foe's sword being raised above him. And in the case of Kriemhild, we are told that she wailed and screamed most horribly when struck down by Hildebrand, and yet we are not given any insight into what she thought or felt. Was she aware in that moment that all had been in vain? Instead of showing us the answer to this question, the narrator shifts his focus to the pain and suffering of the people left behind to mourn the dead, and in doing so fails to remain consistent.

The question of consistency must be addressed, for although the use of the narrator's voice throughout the poem is frequent, one cannot say that it is dispersed evenly throughout the scenes. The earliest adventures of the poem contain the greatest frequency of descriptive narrative, that which gives the illusion of a third party mediating between audience and characters. These scenes resemble even a fairy tale - dashing prince meets beautiful princess. But the resemblance comes not just from the dreamy elegance of the characters, but also from the frequent use of the narrator's voice - fairy tales derive from oral storytelling as well. Yet this effect does not last throughout the entire poem. Often, the narrator lets the actions speak for themselves, and he offers no commentary. This creates what may be considered to be an 'imbalance' within the poem. The narrator gives great detailed accounts of royal clothing and customs, but does not provide the same insight into some of the crucial scenes - such as with the winning of Brunhild. This is not true of every important event in the poem, as one can see

by the detailed account of the bloodshed brought on by Kriemhild at the end. Perhaps the poet sought to please his audience by filling their ears with visions of lavish clothing and ceremonies - after all, he set the substance of the myth within the element of his own time. His audience likely enjoyed hearing of things familiar - the figure of Brunhild and her bridal contests would certainly have seemed unfamiliar to them, since she still bears a resemblance to the awesome mythological figure found in the original sources.

The subject of clothing and ceremonies brings us to another important element deriving from oral traditional literature - the use of ornamentation. The poet of the medieval version spares no detail in his account of the physical attributes of his characters, the preparation of royal clothing, or the grand banquets and jousting tournaments. One can imagine that such descriptions must also have been present during earlier oral performances, although it would be impossible to determine to what extent. Not only would such lavish descriptions arouse a visual image of the characters and their customs, but they also serve to keep the audience interested in the story itself. The extensive use of ornamentation in the medieval *written* version likely also serves another function, this one being connected to one of the features apparent in the transformation of an oral tradition to a written one - the increase in the length of the story. The advent of writing allowed the poet to lengthen his work and to expand upon details. The descriptions compensate for the extended length of the poem by providing additional information which is both lively and interesting. One could argue that this is also one of the main functions of an active narrator's voice - his constant presence is meant to capture the attention of the audience and to remind them that he is indeed participating in the story itself. Should his voice be eliminated from the written version,

the poem would then seem more like a straightforward account of people and events, and would lack the luster and grace which stand as elements of the chivalric era.

The previous chapter of this thesis also made mention of another important element in the tradition of oral storytelling - the use of motifs. There are several important motifs throughout the medieval version as with its northern counterparts, and many of these are used more than once. Take for example the motif of the bridal quest, of which there are no less than three in the *Nibelungenlied*: Sigfrid marries Kriemhilt, Gunther weds Brunhild, and later Kriemhilt remarries to Etzel. Glamorous parties are also a repeated motif in the poem, and the poet uses it as often as possible; Siegfried's initiation as a knight, the three aforementioned weddings, Sigfrid and Kriemhilt's visit to Gunther and Brunhild, and so forth. Henry Kratz, in "Inconsistencies in the *Nibelungenlied*", writes that the repeated use of the party theme is an attempt on behalf of the poet to lend his version of the story a 'courtly flavor', and by doing so he brings it 'up to date'.⁶⁵ This is seen particularly in the lavish descriptions of the courtly clothing. But as previously mentioned, such ornamentation is also used for the benefit of the audience.

2.3 Structuring of the Historical and Mythological Sources

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the influence of history on the *Nibelungen*-legend was already present at the time of its first written accounts. In this version, the medieval poet has also shaped the legend in order to reflect his own time, again allowing

⁶⁵Kratz, Henry: "Inconsistencies in the *Nibelungenlied*". In "Waz sider da geschach": American-German Studies on the *Nibelungenlied*, (Göppingen; Kümmerle Verlag, 1992) p.72.

history to affect the content and structure of its substance. These changes place the medieval version in a very different context than the *Völsungensaga* and the *Poetic Edda*. The following analysis will focus on the original elements preserved by the medieval poet, as well as the new aspects added to the poem.

It must first be said that the element of myth so rich in the earlier versions is greatly reduced in the medieval poem. The courtly setting of the *Nibelungenlied* is the first indication that the heathen tale has been brought forward into a different era. The beginning of this version of the legend in comparison to its earlier sources shows many differences. The presence of the gods is entirely removed, allowing for the transition of the legend from heathen myth to Christian tale. King Völsung's descent from Odin is absent, as is the life of Völsung and his twin children Sigmund and Signy. The lack of these episodes in the medieval version results in two important changes: Sigmund's ancestry and descent from the god Odin, and the treatment of the treasure. In the northern versions, Sigmund is a blend of both prince and mythical being. In the medieval version, he is portrayed only as a king and father to Sigfrid. The absence of divine lineage also effects our perception of the medieval Sigfrid, who is no longer a 'mythical' hero whose powers derive from his ancestry to Odin, but rather a courtly prince whose strength of character is now attributed to his royal lineage. By eliminating the presence of the gods, the medieval poet must now change the treatment of the treasure and the events leading up to the curse placed on it. In both versions, it belongs to a dwarf - in the northern versions he is called Andvari, and in the medieval Alberich. In the earlier versions it is the god Loki who takes it from the dwarf, but it later comes into the possession of the giant Fafnir, who changes his shape into that of a dragon in order to stand

guard over it. In the medieval poem it is Sigfrid himself who wrests it from Alberich. Although the medieval poet allows an important element of the myth to fall into the hands of our hero Sigfrid, unfortunately we only hear about it through Hagen's account of the events. The treasure is a central motif throughout the poem, but its presence in the medieval version is to attest to the hero's courage and great strength. Despite the absence of divinity, the motif of the treasure still lends itself greatly to the overall structure of the medieval poem.

The versions of the story begin to resemble one another at this point, but the *Nibelungenlied* shows very little of Sigfrid's youth. In the northern versions, we are told of Siegfried's life with the smith Regin, his forging of Sigmund's sword, and Sigfrid's subsequent slaying of the dragon in order to gain the treasure. In the medieval poem, these events are again placed in the words of Hagen, who recounts how Sigfrid slew the dragon and later won the hoard, the magical cloak, and the sword Balmung - both events are told as having occurred separately from one another. Scholars have argued that these changes made by the medieval poet have all but eliminated the mythical element⁶⁶. This seems a rather harsh criticism - despite the absence of the divine element which connects the dragon to the treasure, these motifs are in fact the few remaining 'mythical' elements to be found in the medieval poem. They lend the medieval poem a sense of wonder and amazement, and their presence alone reminds us that they derive from earlier times - dragons and dwarfs *are* the product of a mythical past.

Another important difference between the versions is the treatment of the episode

⁶⁶See George Henry Needler's comments on the matter. In the introductory notes of *The Nibelungenlied*, (New York; Henry Holt and Company, 1904) xvi.

between Sigfrid/Sigurd and Brunhild/Brynhild. The relationship between these two characters is the central focus in the original versions of the legend, but the *Nibelungenlied* makes no mention of the fearless hero's ride through a circle of flames to awaken the sleeping valkyrie. There is a complete absence of this scene in the medieval poem, and no direct relationship between Sigfrid and Brunhild is presupposed. Despite this, the medieval Sigfrid has a disturbingly good knowledge of Brunhild and the customs of her people, something which seems quite out of place in the poem. The poet clearly sought to keep a connection between the two characters, and fumbling to do so, neglected to provide a smooth transition from the episode of the mythical source into his own poem. Perhaps his eagerness to foreshadow many of the events in his version of the story led him to reveal too much of the relationship between the two figures as found in the mythological sources. Regardless, one is left with a strange feeling when reading this scene of the *Nibelungenlied*, for without any prior knowledge of the earlier sources, one can almost take for granted that a meaningful connection did exist between Sigfrid and Brunhild⁶⁷. As previously indicated, perhaps her importance is greatly reduced in order to mask strange and mythical elements within the legend in order to make it more acceptable to its audience.

The quarrel between Brunhild and Kriemhilt takes place in both versions, and in each it results in the death of Sigfrid. The motive in each account is different. In the northern sources, the women fight over who will go into the stream first. This is further compounded by the disagreement over whose husband is braver and mightier. In the medieval version, the

⁶⁷In fact, the name of the valkyrie awakened by Sigurd is never even mentioned in the Northern versions, and we are led to assume that she is the same figure whom he woes for Gunnar (the medieval Gunther).

women stand before a church and dispute who should enter first. Their argument is of a political nature - during the contests to win her, Brunhild had been led to believe that Siegfried was Gunther's vassal. Therefore she argues that as the wife of a king, she should enter the Church first. The attitudes of the other characters towards Brunhild are also different. In the medieval version, Sigfrid and Gunther brush aside the argument of the two women. But in the earlier source, Sigurd tries to pacify Brunhild, and even offers to leave Gudrun. In all of the versions, the quarrel is the event which brings about the downfall of the heroic figures.

The medieval version is distinctly divided into two parts; the first half is the life and death of Sigfrid, and the second half is the revenge taken by Kriemhilt. The death of Sigfrid/Sigurd marks a point where both versions begin to differ greatly. The northern version shows Gudrun drinking a potion of forgetfulness, and thereby consenting to marry Atli. In contrast, the medieval Kriemhilt marries Etzel with the intention of using his political position to avenge the death of Sigfrid. This poses an interesting point in regards to the perception of the Atli/Etzel figure. Nancy Bevenga discusses this in her Kingdom on the Rhine, writing that the difference in portrayal of this character depends greatly on the locality of the different versions;

As the North regarded Attila as a villain who lusted after power and wealth, the Burgundians are destroyed through his greed for his treasure. However, the South German tradition, having arisen in areas occupied by former allies of the Huns, had a favourable picture of Attila as the kindly King Etzel...⁶⁸

This also influences the role played by Kriemhilt. Considering the agreeable relationship

⁶⁸Bevenga 18.

between Southern Germans and Attila, the figure of Kriemhilt is made to bring down the Burgundians. This must also be another reason for the decline in the figure of Brynhild; in the earlier versions, she is the sister of Atli. This relationship and the sister-vengeance theme is absent in the *Nibelungenlied*, and therefore the need for her character to have any importance in regards to the resolution of the conflict is removed.

2.4 Love, Loyalty and Honor: Whose Tragedy is it?

As mentioned in the previous section, structural changes undertaken with the substance of the myth have also allowed for changes in the function of many of the characters within the medieval version. These changes invoke many interesting arguments as to the roles played by the medieval heroic figures. The following discussion will examine various themes in the poem, while aiming to answer the question of whose tragedy lies at its centre.

One of the most striking differences in comparing the earlier versions of the myth to the medieval version is its transition from heathen legend to Christian courtly poem. We have seen already that many aspects of the poem have been affected by such a transformation. The medieval poet, writing for a refined courtly audience, was quite aware of the changes he was making to the substance of the story. In doing so, his focus was to tailor the piece to his audience - a central function of both the oral and literate poet.

A central theme within the earliest written versions of the *Nibelungen*-myth is the heathen conviction that the bond of family was the strongest possible connection between people. This is clearly seen in the *Völsungensaga* and the *Edda*, where the figure of Gudrun avenges her brother's deaths by murdering Atli. The transition of the myth from pagan to

Christian is evident when comparing this aspect of heathen belief to its medieval rendition. In Christian society, the heathen importance placed on the bond of family is replaced by the bond of marriage. In the *Nibelungenlied*, therefore, Kriemhilt now avenges the death of her husband and not those of her brothers. The poet had a clear understanding of the importance of the social value of loyalty in marriage, and in altering the motivation and actions of the Kriemhilt figure he was able to set things properly according to the customs of his own day and the tastes of his audience.

There is much discussion in regards to the true role of Kriemhilt in the *Nibelungenlied*. Many scholars argue that the poem's division into two parts serves the function of showcasing the lives and deaths of its central heroic figures; Sigfrid and Hagen. Furthermore, it has been said that the role of Kriemhilt is no more than a structural one, holding together the two halves of the work. Keeping these points in mind, one must also consider the question of whose tragedy lies at the centre of the poem. It is certainly true that the structure of the poem is intended to showcase the heroic lives and tragic deaths of both Siegfried and Hagen. We are meant to view Sigfrid's death as the result of two factors: the abuse of power, and the jealousy of greedy rivals. Sigfrid's use of his supernatural power to deceive Brunhild in the both the series of contests and also in the bedroom seems quite contrary to what is deemed as heroic - since when are our greatest heroes anything but just and honest? The intervention of a woman is important here, for if it were not for the persistence of Brunhild, the offence likely would have remained hidden. In an effort to remove Sigfrid from any responsibility, the poet assigns her the task of uncovering the insult to her honour and to seek its vengeance. Logic tells us that she has the right to do so - an injustice

deserves to be rectified. But our admiration for the flawless Sigfrid makes us despise her for doing what is genuinely right. In addition, the greed and jealousy of Sigfrid's rivals simply adds to his own innocence. Hagen acts on behalf of both of these parties. One must consider that his loyalty to Gunther also serves his own purposes, and his loyalty to Brunhild gives him further reason - a justification in itself - to kill Sigfried. Through these two scenarios we are led to see Sigfrid as virtually blameless for his own death. His downfall does not come as the result of a duel in which he is bested by a competitor, but rather he is approached from behind and is stabbed between the shoulder blades. This act arouses our outrage at its brutality - we may be torn because instinctively we know that his actions began the whole of the situation, but the actual event itself relieves him of any responsibility.

The second half of the poem places its focus on Hagen. As a sort of anti-thesis to Sigfrid, we may call him a 'heroic' figure. He certainly displays many of the qualities that are considered to be typically 'heroic', such as loyalty and devotion - regardless of his ulterior motives, his persistence in acting under the veil of such qualities still leaves its impression on us. One must also remember that he was the only figure to recognize Sigfrid as he approached their court, and that there must be some validity in the notion of a character recognizing in another what they have in themselves. This sort of self recognition, if it may be interpreted as that indeed, creates a subtle sense of balance between the two figures. However, Hagen is not permitted the glory given to the character of Sigfrid - his function in the poem could not allow such liberties, for a figure so glorious could not possibly do something so brutal. Hagen's downfall also arouses a sort of sympathy from us, as we witness his fate unfold before him and his helplessness to do anything about it. We are even given to admire his

resolute stubbornness when faced with the ultimatum of life or death. And Kriemhilt's transformation from a sweet and delicate girl to a cruel and horrific woman, prepared to kill anyone in her way, also increases any positive feelings we may have for Hagen.

But the juxtaposition of the two characters - Hagen and Kriemhilt - brings us back to the question of balance within the poem; 'whose tragedy is it'? Perhaps we should first look at the figures of Kriemhilt *and* Brunhild. The *Nibelungenlied* certainly brings with it its own opinion on the position of women. We see this both thematically and structurally within the poem. One cannot overlook Sigfrid's scorn at his new wife for demanding her share of properties from her brothers, or Sigfrid's own resolution to set a good example of conduct for women by his determination to overcome and subdue the wild Brunhild. But the most convincing examples come from the structure of the poem, and especially from the figure of Brunhild herself, whose function in this version is completely different from the heathen ones. She is no longer the awesome mythical creature who asks to be united in death with her beloved Sigfrid. It is likely that the poet chose to alter his portrayal of this figure in order to appeal to his audience - dragons may bring wonder and amazement, but a woman of striking power likely would have been too much for courtly onlookers to contend with. He permits Brunhild her physical power, but in accordance with the Christian age, removes any trace of heathen divinity. In doing so, the medieval poet creates a character whose *only* asset is physical strength. Even the wisdom she imparts unto Sigfrid in the earlier versions is gone. And by this the poet alters her function within the legend itself. Bevinga writes, "...Brunhild is no valkyrie but a super-powerful amazon to be won, not through braving magic fire but by

being bested at a series of athletic contests..."⁶⁹ And one must keep in mind that she was not bested once, but twice. Not only is Brunhild a woman to be won, but more importantly, overcome. On the level of social ethics, one could say that the second attempt to subdue her in Gunther's chambers is meant as a way to reinforce social codes and acceptable behaviours. We should not forget the comedic nature of the whole episode following the wedding of Gunther and Brunhild - the very use of comedy itself reduces her from a powerful force to a performer. To make matters worse, she virtually disappears from the story after they leave to visit Kriemhilt and Etzel. Not only is she a thing to be won, but also a thing to be easily neglected and forgotten by the poet. Considering this, one must determine her role in the poem to be primarily that of a structural device; she is the object of someone else's deception, and in being so perpetuates the events which eventually lead up to the final catastrophe at the end of the poem.

Just as the figure of Brunhild is reduced in importance and function within the poem, so is the character of Kriemhilt raised to heights unknown in the earlier versions. She is single-handedly responsible for the downfall and destruction of nearly every figure in the poem. One might even go so far as to make the general statement that the primary function of women in the *Nibelungenlied*, apart from their dramatic contributions, is to showcase the stature of their husbands. In the case of Kriemhilt, the delicacy and grace attributed to this character seems a perfect compliment to the perfect strength and courage of her husband. Once Sigfrid is killed, Kriemhilt's desperate attempt to seek retribution also illustrates her loyalty to the most unfailing of husbands. The figure of Brunhild produces the exact opposite

⁶⁹Bevenga, p.13.

effect. Her strength against Gunther on their wedding night shows his own physical weakness. Sigfrid must lend his strength in order to subdue her. Not only does Gunther need his assistance, but it would have failed on its own were it not for the use of the Tarnkappe, which gave Sigfrid additional strength. Here we also see something about Sigfrid's character – he succeeds only because he abuses the power of the magical cape. The role of the women therefore also helps to bring to light the actual argument of the poem – abuse of power. The exploitation of strength also brings up the issue of the insult. Siegfried's actions are what begin the process of his own downfall. In recognizing this, we see Brunhild justified in her determination to have justice. Not only was she bested twice by Sigfrid, but also deceived twice. But despite her importance in the argument of the poem, Brunhild quickly disappears once the insult is avenged.

It is at this point that Kriemhilt really begins to assert herself as a character. One must admire the irony of it all - the downfall of one hero is followed by the destruction of the other in the subsequent half of the poem. It is an insult which starts the argument - the deception played onto Brunhild - and another which ends it, namely the insult to Kriemhilt in the death of her glorious husband. In judging her importance to the structure of the poem, perhaps the answer may be found thematically. Clearly one of the main focuses of the poem is on the downfall of its heroes, Sigfrid and Hagen. But perhaps the similarities between the roles of the avenging women also contributes to the argument that the tragedy of the poem really does lie with Kriemhilt. Not only is she the one consistent figure to be found throughout the poem, apart from Hagen, but she is a key figure involved in both of the insults. Structurally, Kriemhilt must be the most important figure because she holds together the two halves of the

poem. But even thematically, the notion of seeking vengeance for injustice also makes her a primary figure.

Why, then, are critics afraid to assess the tragedy of the poem to the figure of Kriemhilt? Perhaps our respect for her loss is marred by her careful planning and single-handed destruction of almost everyone in the poem. But everyone in the *Nibelungenlied* acts under masks - why is her deception in inviting the Burgundians to her court any more disconcerting than Sigfrid's use of the Tarnkappe to overcome the mighty Brunhild?

Perhaps Kriemhilt should be given due where it is deserved. Structurally, it seems that she is a pivot upon which balance both parts of the poem. The thematic structure of the poem reflects the emotional impact sought by the poet. In this light, we must assess the tragedy of the poem to Kriemhilt's own downfall. One must think back to her demands to know the location of the treasure, a scene which is filled with both anger and passion. Anger is a mask for pain, and her desperation comes from the need to find some closure for that emotion. The treasure is clearly a symbol for her slain husband, and in demanding its returning Kriemhilt is really saying, 'give me back what I have lost'. Or yet, 'give me back what you have taken from me', a question directed at Hagen. The tragedy lies in the emptiness of revenge - it may restore honor, although doubtful here due to the manner in which her anger is portrayed - but it will not bring back something which has been taken away in death. Kriemhild is vindicated in her actions, both structurally and emotionally. Then why are we afraid to see her as justified? Dare we even call her 'heroic'? In her actions she rises above the other characters in the poem, and achieves a stature not given even to the figure of Sigfrid, whose sudden death allows for her to move forward into the spotlight. Despite her misplaced anger, one

forgets to admire her loyalty to her dead husband, or even the courage and intelligence it took to orchestrate such chaos at the end of the poem. Perhaps she is trying to restore the honour due to her before his murder, but anger and a lust for revenge cloud even her own better judgment. Having brushed off the concerns of the insult to Brunhild, surely her brothers would not have acknowledged their wrongful part in their own insult to her. The figure of Kriemhilt casts a striking contrast to Brunhild in that she is perhaps the least passive character in the entire poem.

Perhaps one can take the argument even further in comparing the conclusion of the poem with its earlier sources. In the Norse legends, it is Brunhild who asks to be reunited in death with her beloved Sigfrid on the funeral pyre. If we compare this impulse to be reunited with one's true love, then Kriemhilt's insistence to find her treasure - the only remaining symbol of her slain husband - is quite reasonable, and may even be viewed as a reflection of the heathen version of the poem. The symbolism of the treasure in this final scene moves beyond its representation of Sigfrid, and instead becomes the one element which could in Kriemhilt's eyes redeem the insult to her honour. Could the poet have been aware of this connection? It really does not matter, for its symbolism suggests we read this scene independent of the poet's intentions and in contrast to its origins. Considering the extent of her anger and hatred toward Hagen, it is highly unlikely that Kriemhilt would have let him live even if he had revealed the location of the treasure. Her demands themselves are symbolic of the desire to be united with her beloved.

Therefore it seems that from many perspectives the tragedy of the *Nibelungenlied* does indeed lie with the figure of Kriemhilt, both in the sense of the poem's structure and use

of themes. Campbell offers a final insight into the message of the myth, which although it has certainly declined in its presence in the medieval version of the Siegfried-legend, still holds true:

One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.⁷⁰

In the case of Kriemhilt, the final scene of the poem is indeed her 'black moment', a search for some kind of reconciliation or even redemption. Her demands to Hagen may be interpreted as pleas - she is asking for transformation, and subsequently salvation.

⁷⁰Campbell 39.

3. A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE VOLKSBUCH EINE WUNDERSCHÖNE HISTORIE VON DEM GEHÖRNTEN SIEGFRIED

“So muß ich denn für die Enkel niederschreiben, was die Unterirdischen mir aufgetragen, und was mein flimmernd Gedächtnis mir nicht versagt.”⁷¹

Joseph Görres

The end of the sixteenth century marks the emergence of a new phenomenon in German literature, called the ‘Volksbuch’. One of the most popular and beloved of this genre, entitled Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried, represents the very issues faced by both the writer and the reader in the development of this new form of literature. This chapter will explore the Volksbuch as a genre, and will examine the selective process undertaken by the author of this work. It will also look at the role of the hero and other relevant characters in order to gain a clear understanding of the significance of this particular Volksbuch.

3.1 The Volksbuch

Although first emerging at the end of the sixteenth century, the Volksbuch gained its height in popularity in the seventeenth century. The term “deutsches Volksbuch” was actually coined some two hundred years after its first appearance, by the physicist Joseph Görres. While looking through the library of his friend Clemens Brentano, Görres came across a

⁷¹Joseph Görres, Ausgewählte Werke (Germany: Verlag Herder Freiburg im Breisgau, 1978)146.

collection of stories. He was so intrigued by the style and substance of what he had read that he rose to defend them against skeptics. In July of 1807, he wrote an essay entitled “Die teutschen Volksbücher” in the form of a letter addressed to Brentano. In his essay, Görres rejects the view that these collections are vulgar in both content and style. Instead, he praises them as important landmarks in both literature and history. The name given to the stories by Görres, the ‘Volksbücher’, reflects the assumption that this literature emerged from and belonged to the people.

The origin of the Volksbuch goes back to the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. Although most manuscripts from this time have been lost, one should still consider it as the Ursprungszeit of the genre.⁷² This period also marks the transition from the end of the Middle Ages into a more modern society. Historically, the decline of the power given to aristocracy gave way to the rising importance of the upper middle class. Commerce and trade grew, and political power was transferred from castle to town. Signs of a change in tastes and style in literature also became apparent, and the end of the sixteenth century marks the emergence of baroque-style literature. The decline of the artistic epic poetry of the Middle Ages made room for new forms of literature to emerge, and even for old themes to be re-examined. Many new types emerged, such as the beast fable and the prose novel. Apart from Schwanksammlungen and the first prose novels, Volksbücher were one of the first forms of entertainment literature, a feature that would later bring them much criticism.

The printing press did contribute greatly to the popularity and wide distribution of the

⁷²Peter Suchsland, Deutsche Volksbücher (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1979) vi.

Volksbücher, and it became a quick and simple way for people to gain access to the written word. Without the printing press, monumental events such as the Reformation likely would have proceeded in a much different manner. Literacy itself became a necessity, and merchants and craftsmen alike relied on the written word to organize their affairs. As the distribution of books increased, more people wanted to learn to read and write. This "Lesehunger"⁷³ grew steadily, and in addition to the invention of the printing press, became one of the major factors in the wide circulation of the Volksbuch. Unfortunately, the large format and intricate design of the handwriting⁷⁴ made the first collections of the Volksbücher too expensive for the average person, and they were subsequently purchased only by those who could earn or save enough money. In response to this limitation, publishers created a smaller format and used less expensive paper, allowing the accessibility of books to everyone. It was at this point that the Volksbuch began to flourish as a genre.

The question of their popularity is very important due to the fact that it contributed to the longevity of their circulation; the more people read, the more new works were published. One reason for the popularity of the Volksbuch comes from its form. The function of the rhyme and verse in epic poems of the Middle Ages had been used primarily for oral recitation. Not only were such recitations reserved for a select crowd, but also the style was too far removed from the tastes of the ordinary citizen. Here, the form of prose resembled more closely the patterns of speech in what Peter Suchsland, editor of a modern-day

⁷³Suchsland vii.

⁷⁴The typeset of the press was designed to imitate the intricate script of the Middle Ages.

collection of these Volksbücher, calls “ungebundene Rede”.⁷⁵ The simple narrative form of the Volksbuch had a more direct appeal to its readers. The content also contributed to their popularity, as well as the variety of types; Traum-, Zunft-, Rätsel-, and Legendenbücher are a few examples. This being a period of decline in creativity, the story’s content most often came from pre-existing works.⁷⁶ The most frequent sources drawn from were German courtly epics and French knightly poetry, as well as fairy tales from the Orient. It is likely, as Suchsland points out, that the idealised harmony of the Middle Ages depicted in its literature captured the imagination and dreams of the people,⁷⁷ and subsequently contributed to their longevity. The popularity of Arthurian tales during this time had begun to decline, giving way to the blossoming of a new literature.⁷⁸

However, the Church viewed the books with great mistrust, and deemed their content offensive and morally corrupt, calling them “pestbringende Bücher”⁷⁹. Works such as ‘Tyl Ulenspiegel’ were virtually banned. But the Church also recognized the potential for the books as a tool of propaganda on their own behalf, and an attempt was made to reform their content. This effort was fruitless largely due to the persistence of the reading public and of the authors, who refused to alter their treatment and choice of subject matter. Having captured the hearts and minds of the people, it was virtually impossible to remove or even

⁷⁵Suchsland xiii. These are ‘modern’ in the sense of their date of publication in 1979.

⁷⁶Suchsland vii.

⁷⁷Suchsland xvi.

⁷⁸Eduard Engel, Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis in die Gegenwart (Wien: F. Tempsky, 1912) 68.

⁷⁹See Suchsland xiv - xvi.

change the Volksbuch as a popular literary form.

Despite the great number of titles produced,⁸⁰ the authors and/or collectors of these works were largely anonymous. One must also consider what is properly meant by the term 'author'. It is important to remember that the substance of these collections came from pre-existing tales and epics, and therefore the authors/collectors must be regarded as 're-writers' or 're-workers' of a piece.⁸¹ Apart from reworking the substance of these sources, an established Volksbuch itself was often rewritten. In the case of the former, the frequent tendency of the author was to alter and lengthen the substance of his sources, most often into the opposite of what the piece originally represented.⁸² The direction given to the newer piece most often reflected its author's social and religious position, and the popularity of the Volksbücher certainly suggests that there was also a close connection between the authors and their readers in terms of ideas and perspectives, the authors therefore clearly understanding the interests and demands of the people. However, many of the changes made to a particular story often led to contradictions in both style and substance. The reading public largely ignored such problems within the text, and continued to consume stories as new ones appeared. Peter Suchsland examines the source of this problem. He writes that the reading public was able to ignore contradictions found in texts simply because, in terms of social attitudes, such contradictions were born into the hearts and minds of people as well. Perhaps something inherent in the stories provided relief in a time of tumultuous politics. One could

⁸⁰Suchsland vi: "70 Titel, 700 Ausgaben."

⁸¹For the sake of convenience, the term 'author' will continue to be used in reference to the anonymous 'creator' of this work..

⁸²Suchsland ix.

even suggest that the subject matter of a story such as Von dem gehörten Siegfried was meant to arouse sentiments such as loyalty and patriotism among its readers. In relation to this, Suchsland points out that the best and most enduring stories were those which developed out of the tastes and sensibilities of the reading public; “Die besten und dauerhaftesten Geschichten blieben freilich jene, die aus dem Leben und aus den Träumen des Volkes erwachsen waren oder deren Stoffe sich das Volk anverwandelt und zu eigen gemacht hatte.”⁸³ Görres even suggests that because of their longevity and close ties to the people, Volksbücher are in a sense the very base of all literature;

Wie sehen wir nicht jedes Jahr in der höheren Literatur die Geburten des Augenblicks wie Saturn seine Kinder verschlingen, aber *diese* Bücher leben ein unsterblich unverwüsthlich Leben; viele Jahrhunderte hindurch haben sie Hunderttausende, ein ungemessenes Publikum, beschäftigt; nie veraltend sind sie, tausend und tausendmal wiederkehrend, stets willkommen; unermüdlich durch alle Stände durchpulsierend und von unzählbaren Geistern aufgenommen und angeeignet, sind sie immer gleich belustigend, gleich erquicklich, gleich belehrend geblieben, für so viele viele Sinne, die unbefangen ihrem inwohnenden Geiste sich geöffnet. So bilden sie gewissermaßen den stammhaftesten Teil der ganzen Literatur, den Kern ihres eigentümlichen Lebens, das innerste Fundament ihres ganzen körperlichen Bestandes, während ihr höheres Leben bei den höheren Ständen wohnt.⁸⁴

In this sense, the Volksbuch stands as a representation of its reading public. Another of Görres' arguments bases its defence on their popularity itself, stating that “...diese Schriften bei ihrer äußeren Verbreitung wohl auch eine gewisse angemessene innere Bedeutsamkeit besitzen.”⁸⁵ Does the popularity of a genre necessarily elevate it to the status of ‘good literature’? This question will be further examined through the argument of this paper, and

⁸³Suchsland ix.

⁸⁴Görres 147.

⁸⁵Görres 148.

will be done so by comparing its structure and content with its original sources.

The primary source used by the author of Von dem gehörnten Siegfried is the *Nibelungenlied*, itself a work of adaptation and manipulation. With the decline of Middle High German epic poetry, the *Nibelungenlied* was virtually forgotten for a time.⁸⁶ Its revival begins in the sixteenth century, with Hans Sachs' play entitled "Der huernen Seufrid", which looked to remake the story with new meaning. This was the first time in the tradition of the tale that an author could be identified with his work. Later, the 'Stoff' of the *Nibelungenlied* was re-worked into verse in a poem entitled "Der hürnen Seyfrid", this time anonymously written. It is clear in reading this piece that the meaning and direction of the medieval version had been greatly altered. Another adaptation emerged at the end of the seventeenth century⁸⁷, this one a prose version bearing the title Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried. Although there is a great deal of time separating the two pieces, little was changed except the format. However, there is certainly a great difference between the text in question and its ultimate source, the *Nibelungenlied*. The changes made by the author show a striking disregard for the tradition of the heroic epic in order to create a work which would be popular among less learned readers as well - many elements of the medieval epic were sacrificed for the sake of enlarging its reading public. The argument of this paper will therefore also focus on an analytical and comparative description of this problem, with the aim of understanding the author's perspective and motivation in straying so far from a great work such as the

⁸⁶Engel 68.

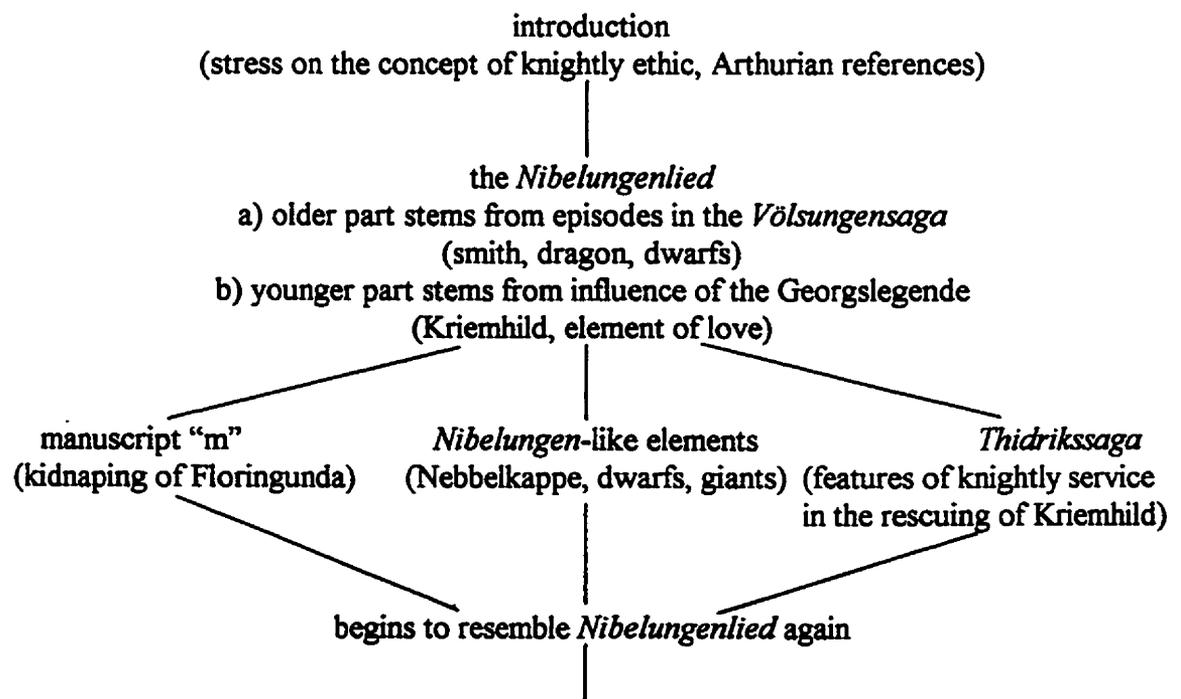
⁸⁷This is the estimated time of its first appearance, but the only surviving manuscript is dated 1726.

Nibelungenlied.

3.2 The Selective Process and Style

The selective process undertaken by the author in the composition of Von dem gehörnten Siegfried is of great importance, as it illustrates the very nature of the Volksbuch as a genre. This is not to say that all of the stories suffered the same fate - as previously mentioned, the authors wrote from their own unique perspectives, a factor which accounts for the variety in substance and style. The author of this work clearly had knowledge of the 'Stoff' of the *Nibelungenlied* and several other relevant works, which he shaped to form one story. The problem here, as will be examined in comparison to these sources, lies in the question of unity and coherence among the parts.

The following is a diagram of the structure of Von dem gehörnten Siegfried, and focuses on the primary works used in its composition;



(pledge of love, journey home, wedding)

“Arcadia”, by Sir Philip Sydney
(episode featuring Jorcus & Zivelles)

return to the *Nibelungenlied*
(Siegfried’s death, Kriemhild’s revenge)⁸⁸

The combination of these works will now be discussed in relation to their function and problematic nature within Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried.

In comparing the introduction of the *Nibelungenlied* with that of Von dem gehörnten Siegfried, one can see clearly that they are quite different. The *Nibelungenlied* begins with its ‘younger’ part, the childhood of Kriemhild, in the ‘Erstes Abenteuer’. It is quite significant that the story begins with this character and not with its heroic figure, Siegfried, for two reasons; it indicates her importance and well as acts as an element of foreshadowing. Her importance as a character comes in the sense of both her relationship with Siegfried and also her revenge upon his death - she is very much a central figure in that the second part of the story focuses on her. The element of foreshadowing comes from the events within the ‘Erstes Abenteuer’, namely the prophetic dream she has of a beloved falcon being clawed to death by two eagles. Kriemhild’s mother interprets the falcon as a noble lord, which the reader clearly understands to be Siegfried. Here we are introduced to the hero before he even makes an appearance, and the indication is given clearly that he will suffer a terrible fate. A

⁸⁸These aspects are discussed in the ‘Anmerkungen’ of Suchsland’s collection. He also discusses the continuation of the tradition of the *Nibelungenlied* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

secondary element of foreshadowing in this episode is found in the voice of the narrator, who sums up the 'feeling' of the epic as a whole in the first lines;

Uns sind in alten Mären Wunder viel gesagt
 Von Helden, reich an Ehren, von Kühnheit unverzagt,
 von Freude und Festlichkeiten, von Weinen und von Klagen,
 von kühner Recken Streiten mögt ihr nun Wunder hören sagen.⁸⁹

The opening line, "Uns sind in alten Mären Wunder viel gesagt", gives the story a feeling of timelessness in a similar sense to the typical modern fairy tale beginning, "es war einmal..."⁹⁰. In addition, the narrator identifies himself clearly with his audience, seen in the use of the personal pronoun 'uns'. This technique also gives the illusion that the voice of the poet and narrator are one, which is further indicated by the constant presence of the narrator throughout the poem. For example, in order to avoid the prophesy suggested by her dream, Kriemhild vows never to marry. Yet the narrator informs the reader that she does indeed marry a "gallant lord". In this sense, the narrator serves as a sort of advisor to the reader, foreshadowing things even the character is not yet aware of. The effect of this technique forms a basis of trust between the narrator and the reader, as it becomes clear that this figure is unfolding the events of the story and will guide the reader to a clear understanding - trust even gives the illusion of unity. In addition, the technique of the 'knowledgeable narrator' heightens the reader's anticipation of the coming events, and in this sense draws its audience closer to the events and characters of the story. After Kriemhild dreams of the falcon, the voice of the narrator provides even stronger images of the destruction and death to follow;

⁸⁹"Das Nibelungenlied" (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam; 1992) stanza 1.

⁹⁰Typical fairy-tale beginning, see for example Grimm's fairy tales.

Das war derselbe Falke, den sie im Träume sah,
den ihr gedeutet die Mutter. Wie rächte sie es da
an ihren nächsten Magen, die ihn geschlagen tot!
Durch des einen Sterben kam mancher Mutter Kind in Not.⁹¹

At this point it is clear that the ensuing story will be the unfolding of events leading up to the death of Siegfried. Keeping these points in mind, one may summarize by stating that the purpose of the introductory 'Abenteuer' is to foreshadow the theme and substance of the tale. In comparison, the first line of Von dem gehörnten Siegfried shows a clearly different perspective;

Es wird in vielen Historien gelesen, wie daß König Artus
aus Britannien zu seiner Zeit so eine herrliche Hofhaltung
mit den allerwertesten Rittern, so zu der Zeit gelebt,
gehalten bei der Tafelrunde; von demselben ist auch zum
Ritter geschlagen der vortreffliche noch junge Herr Wigoleis
vom Rade, der dann kurz darauf in seinen noch blühenden
Jahren die allervortrefflichsten Abenteuer ausgestanden, das
kaum zu glauben ist, indem er nicht allein Riesen und andere
Ritter getötet und entliche gezwungen, daß sie seinen Willen
erfüllen und selbst die Zeitung nach der Tafelrunde
bringen müssen, daß sie von ihm überwunden wären...⁹²

One is able to see a great difference in both style and purpose in the work of this author. Here the opening line begins to capture the feeling of unspecific time as seen in its medieval counterpart, but then loses it by naming a particular heroic tradition, that of King Arthur and the Round Table. In the 'Einleitung' of the text, Suchsland points to the popular use of Arthurian legend as the current phenomenon of "soziale Utopie" during that time, a reference used as a parallel to the Siegfried tale. This reference is used for the benefit of the reader, who

⁹¹"Das Nibelungenlied", stanza 19.

⁹²Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried, 243. The author continues here to describe heroic tradition and deeds.

would likely have been familiar with the popular tales of King Arthur; in this way, even if the reader was not familiar with the *Nibelungenlied* itself,⁹³ he would be able to identify with a tradition popular in his own time, and therefore would be able to identify with it and appreciate the work of the author on a more elevated level. The narrator's voice is also present in this text, but appears only once, at the end of the first chapter;

Fast dergleichen ist folgende Historia, zu welcher wir uns ohne
fernere Weitläufigkeit wenden wollen.⁹⁴

A similarity between the two texts is seen here in the use of the personal and reflexive pronouns 'wir' and 'uns'. We see the author attempting to bring himself closer to his audience through the voice of the narrator, and yet here it seems somehow misplaced. The voice of the narrator is not a continuous presence as it is in the *Erstes Abenteuer* of the *Nibelungenlied*, and this comment at the end of the chapter, although clearly a recognition of the need to bridge the gap between author and reader, falls short of its aim. One has the feeling that the narrator has forgotten his audience until the very last line, where he indicates his reason for the preceding introduction, and subsequently one is not drawn into the story as with the *Nibelungenlied*. Although the beginning of this modern version does not seem necessarily problematic, it is an indication of changes to come in the text. One has to wonder why the author did not simply describe the tradition of the *Nibelungenlied* instead of the references which are made to King Arthur and his knights.

The two versions begin in unison in the second chapters, with the youth of Siegfried.

⁹³...likely either because only select audiences were privy to the recitation of the poem, or perhaps the decline in interest in the *Nibelungenlied* at that time.

⁹⁴Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried, 243.

Several important elements are present in both, such as Siegfried's noble status, his need for freedom in the world, and the council motif. However, the similarities end here. Siegfried's motivation for going out into the world in Von dem gehörnten Siegfried is greatly changed from that of his medieval counterpart. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried is called to reign over his parent's kingdom, but has no wish to do so. Instead, he wants to battle injustice in the world. He becomes even more convinced about leaving the security and riches of his parents when he hears of the beautiful Kriemhild, whose hand he is determined to win. He sets off bravely for Worms with the intentions of seeking out adventure and love. In Von dem gehörnten Siegfried, Siegfried pays little attention to his parents;

Der Knabe war gross und stark, darum er auch weder auf Vater noch Mutter etwas gabe, sondern nur allezeit damit umging, wie er sein eigen und, wie man sagt, ein Freiherr werden moechte, darob seine Eltern grosse Sorge hatten.⁹⁵

He wants to go out into the world as well, but here it is described with a definite sense of impatience, and the Siegfried of this version does not even wait for the help of his father or even to say goodbye;

Siegfried konnte der Zeit nicht erwarten, bis ihn der Vater ausmundieret hatte, sondern zog ohne Urlaub davon, sein Ebenteuer zu versuchen.⁹⁶

After two days of travelling, Siegfried encounters a smith. At this point, he also feels a great hunger, which emerges as a recurrent theme in this work, and he must choose between returning home and approaching the smith;

Darzu schämete er sich, wieder nach Hause zu laufen, auch

⁹⁵Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried, 244.

⁹⁶Eine wunderschöne Historie, 244.

war der Weg zu fern.⁹⁷

Instead, he approaches the smith. Siegfried's shame in returning home is a curious aspect added by the author of this version. Perhaps by including this detail, there is a message for the audience about finishing what one has started. It may also simply be an indication of pride on behalf of the character that he does not return, or even a recognition of the child-like impatience shown in his departure, something which is certainly quite contrary to the heroic characteristics displayed by the medieval Siegfried.

The encounter with the smith is an old 'Sagenelement', which in this case actually originates from much earlier sources than the medieval version of the *Nibelungenlied*, namely the *Völsungensaga*. In the *Völsungensaga*, the relationship between the smith Regin and Sigurd (Siegfried) is far more amicable than in Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried:

Regin schmiedete ein Schwert und gab es Sigurd in die Hand. Der nahm das Schwert und sprach: "Das ist schlechte Schmiedearbeit, Regin!" Er hieb auf den Amboß, und das Schwert zersprang. Er warf die Klinge weg und hieß ihn ein anderes, besseres schmieden. Regin schmiedete ein anderes Schwert und gab es Sigurd; der blickte es an. "Dieses wird dir gefallen", sagte Regin, "aber schwierig ist es, für dich zu schmieden." Sigurd versuchte dieses Schwert und zerbrach es wie das vorige. Da sprach Sigurd zu Regin: "Du wirst deinen früheren Gesippen gleichen und treulos sein."⁹⁸

In this case, the blacksmith is actually helping Siegfried to attain a sword equal to his own strength. In the medieval version, Siegfried's encounter with the smith is narrated by

⁹⁷Eine wunderschöne Historie, 244.

⁹⁸"Die Völsungen-saga"(München: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1993) 40.

Hagen, giving less emphasis to a central episode found in the *Völsungensaga*. The author of Von dem gehörten Siegfried revives this scene from the *Völsungensaga*, with the likely intention of entertainment for his readers;

Wie nun der Meister seinen neuen Jungen oder Knecht zur Arbeit angespannet, schlägt derselbe mit so grausamer Stärke auf das Eisen, daß es davon entzwei und der Amboß fast halb in die Erden sank, dessen der Meister sehr erschrak und Siegfrieden beim Kopfe nahm und ihn ein wenig zausete... Wie nun Siegfried seines Meisters Schläge nicht länger erdulden konnte, nimmt er denselben beim Kragen und wirft ihn wider Gottes Boden, daß er sich in langer Zeit nicht besinnen konnte.⁹⁹

In comparing both versions, one again sees the absence of heroic character in this version. In the *Völsungensaga*, Siegfried forges his mighty sword. Here, Siegfried does not produce one. In fact, little comes of this episode except that it provides another example of his childish behavior, seen in the narrator's apology for Siegfried's abuse of the smith;

Siegfried, der solches Dings nicht gewohnt und deshalb erst neulich von seinen Eltern weggegangen war, weil er keinen Zwang leiden konnte...¹⁰⁰

The fact that nothing really comes of this scene can only mean it was intended as entertainment. The author clearly did not understand or care about the significance of this episode in the early version, and it seems as well to be a mockery of the tradition from which it stems. The childish nature displayed by Siegfried is actually quite 'unheroic'.

The smith, frightened by Siegfried's strength, sends him off into the woods in search of coal. Siegfried does not realize that the smith has actually sent him in the direction

⁹⁹Eine wunderschöne Historie, 245.

¹⁰⁰Eine wunderschöne Historie, 245.

of a fierce dragon, which the smith believes would be able to destroy Siegfried. In reading of Siegfried's encounter with the dragon, it is clear that the author has also made some important changes here as well. The first change lies in the destruction of the dragon. Unlike in the *Völsungensaga*, Siegfried does not have a sword, and instead uses his physical strength to overcome the dragon by ripping trees from the ground and throwing them on top of the creature. He then sets fire to the branches, whose flames burn the dragon. Perhaps the author is aware of the discrepancies in the previous two examples, and by having Siegfried use the strength of his bare hands, wants to place emphasis on the fact that he is supposed to be regarded as a heroic figure. What was once heroic has now become an act of purely physical strength. The second change takes place after the death of the dragon. In the *Völsungensaga*, Siegfried tastes the blood of the slain dragon, and hears the voices of the birds overhead, which tell him to bathe himself in the blood of the creature in order to create a protective layer over his skin;

Sigurd ging und briet das Herz am Spieße, und als der Saft
herausquoll, rührte er mit seinem Finger daran und
probierte, ob es schon gebraten wäre. Er verbrannte sich
und steckte den Finger in seinen Mund; und als das Herzblut
des Wurms ihm an die Zunge kam, da verstand er die
Vogelsprache.¹⁰¹

Here the discovery of the magic properties comes by coincidence - he puts his finger into his mouth because it burns. In doing so, he becomes in touch with the natural world around him. And in this act, he absorbs the qualities of the dragon - its tough layer of skin. However, the author of the Volksbuch version has Siegfried dipping his finger into the 'Fett' of the dragon;

¹⁰¹"Die Völsungen-saga", 48.

Here, the element of nature is removed - Siegfried discovers the secret of the dragon without the help of the birds. One might even imagine that he tastes the substance out of pure curiosity. In this case, the author gives this character a sense of independence from the world, and he is able to conquer by sheer strength.

Siegfried's reason for going to Worms in this version is also different. He has heard great things about Gibaldus, here the equivalent figure to Kriemhild's father;

Wie nun Siegfried sich aller Orten hörnigt befand, gedacht er,
du kannst hinfüro wohl ein anderer Kavalier (wie man itzo
redet) werden, begibt sich demnach von dannen an des
weitberühmten König Gibaldus Hof.¹⁰²

Siegfried goes to Worms in order to become a 'Kavalier', something which is very matter-of-factly presented to the reader. This is very different from the motivation given in the *Nibelungenlied*, and almost seems to contradict the medieval Siegfried. Becoming a 'Kavalier', as if it is something one is simply taught, seems to lack the spirit of adventure possessed by the Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied*. It is as if after having left home, he is wandering in search of something, which leads him here to Worms.

From this point onwards, the story no longer follows the tradition of the *Nibelungenlied*, but rather that of the *Thidrikssaga*, a part of the Dietrich of Bern-cycle. The *Thidrikssaga* emerged in the middle of the thirteenth century, and although a product of the influence of the *Nibelungenlied*, never attained the same level of popularity. In Von dem gehörnten Siegfried, there are similarities with the *Thidrikssaga*. These are minor ones, such

¹⁰²Die Völsungen-saga, 247.

as the numerical significance of the days taken to travel to rescue Florigunda, and that Siegfried goes without food and drink during most of this journey, hence the repetition of the hunger theme. The author of this text also uses a little-known manuscript which emerged after the *Nibelungenlied*, called manuscript "m" or the 'Darmstädter Aventurenenverzeichnis', in which Kriemhild is kidnapped by a dragon. This is an episode which does not occur in the *Nibelungenlied* at all, and is here manipulated into fitting this story. It is in this version the main event, and one has to wonder why the author did not simply use the traditional elements of either the *Nibelungensaga* or the *Völsungensaga*. Perhaps he felt he could breath new life into the figure of Siegfried by recreating him. The episode in which he rescues Florigunda (Kriemhild) certainly provides another means by which Siegfried is able to exert his physical strength, seen in his battle with the giant and multitude of dragons. Another difference is found here as well - the central dragon of the *Nibelungenlied* is not the only or most important one here. Instead, the dragon which kidnaps Florigunda is the central one, and several others appear at the end, likely to impress or frighten the reader.

After the rescue of Florigunda, the text begins to resemble the *Nibelungenlied* again, and she and Siegfried return home. However, before leaving, the dwarf Egwaldus tells Siegfried the fate of his future and actually foreshadows the rest of the tale;

...so sollt du wissen, daß du ein schönes Weib, die du itzo noch als Jungfrau heimführest, nur acht Jahr haben wirst, alsdann wird dir dein Leben mörderlicherweise genommen werden. Aber dein Weib wird deinen Tod schmäählich rächen, und wird mancher braver Held darum ins Gras beißen müssen, doch wird deinem Weibe der Krieg auch zuletzt den Tod

antun.¹⁰³

This also effects the treatment of the treasure, which Siegfried disposes of;

Der Ritter gedachte, weil ich nur acht Jahr leben soll, was
nutzt mir derselbe, und ritten beide miteinander fort und
kamen an den Rhein.¹⁰⁴

In the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen sinks the treasure to keep it from Kriemhild. The second half of the poem is her struggle to regain it. Here, Siegfried seems to find it a burden to keep, although one can conceive of many ways a treasure could be used over the period of eight years. Siegfried has an air of resignation, and does not even ask Egwaldus how his death will occur or the name of the person responsible for it. In a sense, he heroically accepts his death, but it too has not been given any motivation at this point.

After Siegfried's return home, the author includes a scene from Sir Philip Sidney's novel Arcadia, which was published in the sixteenth century. It describes the exploits of two characters, Jorcus and Zivelles, who face each other in combat. As with the early references to King Arthur and the Round Table, this scene is also used for the benefit of the reader. Although it is likely intended to entertain the reader, the humour almost seems to mock the very heroic tradition from which the other sources emerge, and therefore seems quite out of place.

The final scene of Von dem gehörnten Siegfried comes full circle back to the *Nibelungenlied*. Unfortunately, the structure of the conclusion shows a complete disregard for the structure and motivation of the medieval text. In the *Nibelungenlied*, the division

¹⁰³Eine wunderschöne Historie, p.274.

¹⁰⁴Eine wunderschöne Historie, 278.

between halves is fairly equal, the first part being Siegfried's life and death and the second Kriemhild's revenge. In Von dem gehörnten Siegfried, the author summarizes the second half of the medieval epic into a smaller episode. In fact, it concludes within a few pages. In it, Siegfried and Florigunda live happily and have a son. One day, while hunting with Hagen and Florigunda's brothers, Siegfried stops by a river to rest. While leaning over to wash his face, Siegfried is attacked from behind by Hagenwald (Hagen), who spears him in the back. Florigunda becomes ill with sorrow. Once recovered (two lines later), she takes the news of Siegfried's death to his father, who then prepares an army to take revenge on his son's murderer. During this battle, many men lose their lives. Even the figure of Zivelles is briefly mentioned, brought by the author out of the context of Sidney's novel and into the events of this story. Ultimately, the same punishment is given to Hagenwald as was inflicted on Siegfried. In addition to the difference in the structuring of the two halves, it is also interesting to note that unlike the situation in the *Nibelungenlied*, in which Kriemhild is solely responsible for the deaths of many men, here it is left to Siegfried's father to bring together an army in order to avenge his son. The figure of Florigunda is not given the same importance structurally or in relation to the other characters as Kriemhild is in the medieval version.

This final point is perhaps the greatest cause for negative comment on the part of critics. There is a distinct lack of coherence among the parts used to compose this work. Heinz Ritter-Schaumberg, in Sigfrid ohne Tarnkappe, writes that only a few things were taken from each source and this contributes to the contradictions found among them.¹⁰⁵ This

¹⁰⁵Heinz Ritter-Schaumberg, Siegfried ohne Tarnkappe (F.A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung; München, 1990), p.186.

careless composition results in a structure which does not reflect the substance on which it is based, primarily the *Nibelungenlied*.

The characters are also carelessly composed, and no longer reflect the very ethical climate from which they emerge. Ritter-Schaumburg also argues that even the deeds of Siegfried and Dietrich become mixed and “phantastisch”, and that this may even suggest that the author may have had knowledge of the *Thidrikssaga* only indirectly. As well, Kriemhild/Florigunda is no longer a figure of importance. Margaret Schlauch, in Medieval Narrative: a Book of Translations, writes that she is portrayed as a “märchen princess whose chief function is to be rescued from a dragon.”¹⁰⁶ Unlike Kriemhild, there is nothing particular about her except that she is present as a sort of thematic element.

3.3 The Role of The Hero

The role of the hero is also an important issue when comparing two pieces of literature. Considering the expanse of time between both versions of the Siegfried tale, it becomes clear that there should be a difference in the treatment of characters. Again, the following arguments will be presented in a comparative fashion.

One must begin such a comparison by examining what is meant by the term ‘heroic’. We tend to think of a hero as someone who is praised for outstanding feats of courage and bravery. The real question is, ‘what *kind* of hero is this character’? The problem here is not whether he is courageous or brave - we can safely assume that by holding the title of ‘knight’,

¹⁰⁶Schlauch, Margaret: Medieval Narrative: a Book of Translations (Gordian Press; New York, 1969), p.203.

as Siegfried does, these qualities may be taken for granted. The determination of a heroic character, the aspects which make him different from other characters, lies in his motivation to perform such deeds. The element of motivation will prove to be a key factor in the comparative study between the heroic figures found in the *Nibelungenlied* and Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried.

The feat itself is also of great importance. It is the realm in which the hero acts. Lukacs writes of the tragic hero, "...the outside world is only the occasion for the soul to find itself, for the hero to become a hero..."¹⁰⁷ Although the characters discussed here are not 'tragic' in the literary sense, what Lukacs writes about the 'outside world' still applies. The actions of the hero are outward manifestations of his inner self - they define him within the framework of events. The substance of this 'inner self' is the important element here.

In the case of the knightly figure, such as the ones in question here, these actions are most often found in the form of an adventure. Epic heroes, writes Lukacs, "...live through a whole variety of adventures, but the fact that they will pass the test, both inwardly and outwardly, is never in doubt..."¹⁰⁸ He calls this the 'inner security' of the epic hero, which in a sense contributes to his passivity: "...the adventures that fill and embellish his life are the form taken by the objective and extensive totality of the world; he himself is only the luminous centre around which this unfolded totality revolves, the inwardly most immobile point of the world's rhythmic movement."¹⁰⁹ In reading the *Nibelungenlied*, one is given the impression

¹⁰⁷George Lukacs, The Theory of the Novel (Germany: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1963) 87.

¹⁰⁸Lukacs 89.

¹⁰⁹Lukacs 89.

that Siegfried will not fail in his deeds; the reader is simply an observer of the clever and courageous feats performed by this character. Important events, such as the winning of the hoard and the slaying of the dragon, are narrated by a secondary character. In this way, the reader is made to accept this figure as already having proved his heroism in the performance of such deeds. Subsequently, one never doubts his abilities in forthcoming episodes, such as Siegfried's involvement in the battle against the Saxons and the winning of Brunhild as a bride for Gunther. Siegfried never falters, and is always the image of a heroic knight, loyal and courageous. Yet in this sense, he has little to accomplish. His inner self and outer actions correspond. What, then, does he give to the poem? He does not die in a struggle against injustice, as was suggested in his reasons for leaving the security of his parents. He does not battle for a cause, and in his death find some form of redemption. The way in which his death unfolds is quite significant. He is portrayed as a victim of jealousy, who is killed in his prime by the sinister figure of Hagen. He is not the tragic hero, who is somehow responsible for his death. And in this he is a character who does not grow or change internally - he remains the same person through his life in the poem. There is a certain consolation in his death by recognizing that it was not his fault. As readers, we are meant to see this. And we are also meant to put trust in him precisely because of his predictability as a character. Again, one must ask, 'what does he give to the poem'? The answer must be that Siegfried represents the image of knightly ethics, a character whose speech and actions suggest heroism in its outward form - and we are given no reason to doubt his inner heroic nature. The reader here is an observer of this heroism, but a trusting one. Since we can rely on this character, we cannot help but feel drawn to him.

The question of the role of the hero in Von dem gehörnten Siegfried shows a drastic change in the treatment of the figure of Siegfried. This is first seen in his desire to go out into the world; unlike the medieval Siegfried, this character gives no reason for leaving the security of home - he lacks the inner drive to fight injustice or win love as does his counterpart. One can see this in his impatience to leave - once gone, he wanders into a wood, reminded of his hunger for food. The heroic aspects of the episode with the smith, as seen in the *Völsungensaga*, have disappeared. Heroism here is brute force, indicated by Siegfried's abuse of the smith. There is also a sense of aimlessness, seen in his confusion during this episode - one minute he is brutalizing the smith, and the next he welcomes him again as his master. In this he seems more childlike than heroic. He lacks any inner direction, and events which were once significant to the tradition of this heroic tale are more coincidence than anything. The episode with the smith does not even produce a sword, the very symbol of heroism. In the slaying of the dragon, his ears are deaf to the birds overheard, and any connection with natural world around him is lost. After each significant event, Siegfried is reminded of his hunger and thirst, something which renders the event itself less meaningful. He saves the frightened princess by slaying the terrifying dragon, and then moments later sits down with her to eat. Lukacs writes of the novel hero, "...the novel hero's passivity is not a necessity; it characterises the hero's relationship to his soul and to the outside world. The novel hero does not have to be passive: that is why his passivity has a specific psychological and sociological nature..."¹¹⁰ Somehow the beloved figure of Siegfried has lost that inner direction

¹¹⁰Lukacs 89.

which characterises the 'heroic'. He is disconnected from the world, and becomes a subject of the world unfolding around him. And as readers, we lose all sense of this heroism, and subsequently cannot feel the respect for this character that the tradition of this figure calls for. This very aspect destroys the foundations from which it has emerged, and makes a mockery of aspects which were once viewed as heroic.

Small mention of the figure of Kriemhild is not sufficient here - her role is far too important to be dismissed. The structure of the poem's two parts, Siegfried's death and the revenge of Kriemhild, are what Bernard F. Huppé refers to as an 'oddity' in epic poetry¹¹¹ - the death of the hero occurring in the middle of the poem instead of at the end as one might expect. A death at the end of the poem would imply some sort of sacrifice or redemption for the heroic character. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried's death is not found in a valiant struggle for justice, but rather is the result of treachery on the part of Hagen. There is no room here for redemption or symbolic meaning - as the audience, we can only understand that his death was not a tragic flaw, or something brought about by his own fault. Redemption must be brought about somehow in order for the poem to have closure, and this is the very function of the figure of Kriemhild. In a sense, her blind and lustful revenge at the end of the poem - one we know she is planning from her marriage to Etzel onwards - places emphasis on Siegfried's innocence in his own demise. Now seen in the role of avenger, one could argue that she is both structurally and perhaps even symbolically more significant than the figure of Siegfried. One must base this argument, should it be deemed valid at all, only on her role

¹¹¹In "The Concepts of Hero in Early Middle Ages" (New York: State University of New York Press, 1975) 22.

within the poem's structure and not on the terrible revenge she orchestrates at the end - this is not a character judgement, but rather a question of function. Structurally, she emerges where Siegfried resigns. He dies before giving much to the concept of the hero within the poem, and by taking revenge for his death, she attempts to give some meaning to the loss of such a great man. Is the act of revenge heroic? Huppé writes that the lack of revenge on behalf of one's kinsman "suggests a deliberate negation of the heroic possibilities."¹¹² Kriemhild *must* seek revenge for her husband's death, both because her relationship to Siegfried necessitates it and because the structure of the poem does as well. Taking the place of the heroic figure, Kriemhild's character is now elevated above that of love interest, and her actions bring with them a symbolic meaning. Driven by the desperate need to regain what has been taken from her, she attempts to resolve the 'heroic' aspect suggested by the act of revenge as Huppé describes it. The ultimate tragedy lies in the fact that she fails. At the end of the poem, many people die at her hand and she is killed as well. The fabulous treasure, clearly a symbol of her slain husband, is never found - and neither is any form of redemption in her husband's death. Hence the sad note the poem ends on;

Die Blüte der Helden war da gelegen tot.
 Die Leute fühlten alle Jammer und Not.
 Mit Leid war beendet des Königs Festlichkeit,
 wie die Freude gerne am Ende sich wandelt in Leid.¹¹³

But she is given the chance to try, and this need to act in the world makes up for what fails to appear in Siegfried. Krimhild changes and grows as a character, despite the nature of her

¹¹²Huppé 4.

¹¹³"Das Nibelungenlied", stanza 2449.

misplaced actions. We see in Kriemhild a character who tries to follow in the footsteps of another, and although she ultimately fails, she seems somehow redeemed in her attempts. Unlike Siegfried, her success is never guaranteed, and the ominous tone of the second half of the poem continuously suggests this.

In conclusion, one can see clearly a distinct difference in the treatment of the heroic figures in these two works. Although the character of Siegfried in Von dem gehörnten Siegfried contradicts the heroic elements found in the *Nibelungenlied*, at the same time it provides the reader with an example of the decline of the heroic tradition during this period. One has to wonder about the aim of the author in creating a work so different than the sources from which it springs. It does provide elements of entertainment, and this could lead one to believe that he tailored this story for the tastes of a reading public he knew would not criticize its inconsistencies. As entertainment, Von dem gehörnten Siegfried is amusing to read. As a work of literature, it fails to sustain the elements from which it originates.

4. COMPOSITION AND ASPECTS OF WAGNER'S *RING DES NIBELUNGEN*

Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* is arguably the most complex and thorough rendition of the Nibelungen-myth, re-working its various sources and infusing them with new meaning and direction. The following chapter will look at various aspects of the work, including excerpts from several of Wagner's letters to friends and family. The historical context of the period will first be examined, as it will provide important insight into the elements that contributed to the development of the work. The structuring of the sources will then be discussed, in order to provide a clear outline of Wagner's dramatic composition. Next will follow a look at various symbols and motifs within the opera. And finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the heroic roles within the drama. The aim is to examine various aspects - the work itself is of such grandeur as to make impossible to cover all areas of importance within one chapter. The primary focus then, in keeping with the spirit of this thesis as a whole, will be to look at how the myth and legend of the *Nibelungen* have developed and changed in Wagner's work.

4.1 Nineteenth-Century Germany

The Germany of Wagner's time was one of great political and social unrest, key factors in the Revolution of 1848. Indications of the possibility of revolt itself were visible several years prior to its explosion. Rapid industrialization promoted the greatest social

change, as the *Handwerkers* fought against the effects of the advance of modern technology. Their discontent rose as the status of their importance declined. Unemployment and poverty increased amongst the journeymen and apprentices, and their standard of living was made worse by larger numbers of people moving from countryside into towns. There was also great discord amongst the people still living rurally. The expansion of landowners reduced the peasants to laborers. Where there were fewer large estates there was also less money, and peasants were often too poor to work independently from the landowners. The rapid growth of Germany's population between 1816 and 1848 also contributed to the discontent and poor quality of life, as it increased from twenty-four to thirty six million. The famine of 1847 was a result of substantial loss in potato crops, a situation that further deteriorated the following year with the loss of grain harvests. Prices went up, making life almost unbearable. Some peasants emigrated, while the majority fled to towns where they had no choice but to join the ranks of the other unemployed workers. Industry also declined after 1846, and the closure of many factories left an even larger part of the population unemployed. Restlessness led to minor outbursts across the country - revolution loomed ahead.

Germany's political situation was no better. The struggle to unify the nation had long since frustrated both its people and politicians. The Revolution that swept across Europe began in France, with the struggle for sovereignty. But Germany's problems were different - efforts to establish a constitution and elected assembly had proven so far to be fruitless and frustrating. In May of 1848, representatives met in Frankfurt in a failed attempt to establish such a foundation for the unification of the country. The political situation worsened. The following year, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia was offered the imperial crown and the

chance to rule the divided nation, an offer that he promptly refused. The King's refusal crushed the possibility of reform once again, and stirred the spirit of revolution that lay in the hearts of the people. Prussian troops were called out as a precaution, which proved to be a wise measure. The people's revolt in Dresden lasted five days, beginning on April 30, the last few days of which resulted in the destruction of many important structures - even the opera house was burned to the ground - as well as the arrest of many prominent literary and political figures, including Wagner's close friend August Röckel. Their known association drove Wagner to flee Dresden in fear of his own arrest, a warrant for which was issued only two weeks after the riots first broke out. He traveled first to Chemnitz, then to Weimar. Aided by Liszt, he fled to Zurich.

Little is known of Wagner's own participation in the revolt, but revolution had clearly been on his mind for some time.¹¹⁴ He also protested the state of art in the hands of bourgeois society in letters, and called for the removal of theater from the hands of the court in order to resurrect it to its full potential.¹¹⁵ His calls for reform were firmly rooted in the years before the Dresden riots, and were echoed by his friends and contemporaries. This coming revolution of the people had long since stirred his own sense of nationalism. In the days prior to the dissolution of the assembly at Frankfurt, Wagner gave a speech entitled *Republican*

¹¹⁴ See for example Wagner's letter to Franz Joseph Wigard, written in Dresden, on 19 May 1848. In this letter, Wagner discusses his ideas for reform to be done before a successful constitution can be drawn. See Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, ed. By Millington and Spencer (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987).

¹¹⁵ An example of which to be found in his letter to Ernst Kossak, written 23 November 1847. Ibid.

Tendencies and the Monarchy, addressed to the left-wing political association Vaterlandsverein. Wagner's message to the aristocracy was to give up their rights, citing that money and power as the source of all human misery.

Wagner's exile would prove to be an important turning point in both his music and political life. Ronald Taylor, author of Richard Wagner: His Life, Art and Thought, writes that until his exile Wagner may have despised society and its relation to art, but nonetheless he worked and prospered within it. But Wagner's departure from his native home, argues Taylor, was the point at which he also distances himself from the outer world of music making.¹¹⁶ In *A Communication to my Friends*, Wagner writes that he turned his back on the world he had once been an active member of, a sentiment which clearly illustrates his own long-standing sense of revolt against the social confines whose hands were strangling his art. In fact, it would be a number of years before Wagner would re-emerge wholeheartedly again into the world of music and performance he now turned his back against. But as Taylor also points out, Wagner's sense of revolt was now paired with a new vision - that of building something up from the ruins which lay before him. In a letter written one month prior to the outburst of the Dresden riots, Wagner writes with the same sense of intolerance found in his speech to the Vaterlandsverein, but this time his words are flooded by what Taylor describes as "enthusiasm for the socialist utopia of his dreams";¹¹⁷

From its root up will I destroy the order of things in which ye live, for it is sprung from sin, its flower is misery and its fruit is crime; but the harvest is.

¹¹⁶See Ronald Taylor, Richard Wagner: His Life, Art and Thought (London: Paul Elek Limited, 1979) 98.

¹¹⁷Taylor 90.

ripe, and I am the reaper. I will destroy each phantom that has rule o'er the living, of matter over spirit; I will break the power of the mighty, of law, of property. Be his own will the lord of man, his own desire his only law, his strength his own possession, *for the only Holiness is the free man, and naught higher there is than he.*¹¹⁸

In Wagner's voice we find also the message of the *Ring*, if not the essence of the conflict between the characters of both Siegfried and Wotan. The necessity for the destruction of the old to make way for a new order had found its way into Wagner's political thoughts, and was already taking root in one of his greatest musical masterpieces.

It is difficult to determine exactly when Wagner decided to write the drama based on the Nibelungs. In 1851, Wagner wrote a letter to Theodor Uhlig describing his vision of a 'three dramas, with a three-act prelude'.¹¹⁹ Drama is precisely what one must call the work at this point, for although the poem was written in the span of four years, it would take an additional twenty-one for the final music notes to be recorded on paper. The subject matter of this work had long since been a main focus of the Romantics, whose interest in the Middle Ages also meant an interest in the forms of epic and lyric poetry. Its revival began in the years before Wagner's birth. A manuscript of the medieval poem emerged in 1755, and was subsequently published. Its importance grew as it drew comparisons with the epics of Homer. Its reading public grew larger with the onset of Romanticism, and its idealized view of the Middle Ages reflected the dream for some semblance of unity in Germany. The text was eventually turned into modern German, another factor which brought it into more homes and

¹¹⁸ Wagner, *The Revolution*. In Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn's Wagner on Music and Drama (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1964) 72.

¹¹⁹ Letter to Uhlig, 11 November 1851. See Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, 230.

even placed it on the curriculum of schools for a period of time.

The primary literature from which it was drawn also emerged. The *Snorra Edda* was produced in two different editions in 1812 and 1818, and Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen had also produced translations of the *Thidreks* and *Völsungensaga* by 1815. As previously discussed in chapter three, the *Lied von Hürnen Siegfried* was published in modern German in 1811, and the re-emergence of Volksbuch entitled *Eine wunderschöne Historie von dem gehörnten Siegfried* happened later in the 1840's. A complete version of the translated *Poetic Edda* was not produced until 1851. In his autobiography, Wagner writes that he started toiling with the idea of Germanic mythology as the basis for his new opera as a way to remove himself from the substance routinely explored on the stage. Regardless of the move in a new direction, Wagner did not pursue the matter with great fervor at the outset, and work progressed slowly. His initial worry was that the subject matter itself was of proportions not suitable or at least properly attainable on stage. Perhaps it was the complexity of the intricate stories represented within the structure of the sources, or even more so the grandeur of the divine mythological substance itself, something which would require great pains to represent in the form of drama on stage.

Wagner writes in *Mein Leben* that he began reading Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* in 1843, a work which challenged his understanding of Germanic and Norse religion and culture and brought him to a deep understanding of myth and legend. Although this text would provide Wagner with a stimulating look at many of the elements surrounding the Nibelungen-tale, it was actually his research for a completely different project which would instigate a closer look into the myth as the potential for a dramatic work. While doing

research for a drama based on the figure of Barbarossa, Wagner thought to have found a connection between the family lines of the Stauffers and the Nibelungs. He delved further into the possibility, and sought to make this connection between the historical characters and mythology in an essay entitled *Die Wibelungen. Weltgeschichte aus der Sage*, written in the summer of 1848. He abandoned his work on Barbarossa upon realizing the potential of the subject-matter which lay before him, and by the early fall of the same year Wagner had written a prose version of the myth, entitled *Der Nibelungen-Mythus. Entwurf zu einem Drama*. Only a few short weeks later he would complete the drama *Siegfried's Tod*, the first venture into what would become arguably his greatest work.

Wagner's vision of the myth started with precisely that - one small work of drama. He wrote in Liszt in July 1850¹²⁰ that he had no real intentions of completing and performing the piece, but had changed his mind some few months later, writing to Ernst Benedikt Kietz that he now had serious intentions of putting the piece to music.¹²¹ But even Wagner sensed that his subject matter reached beyond the confines of the drama, a discrepancy likely to be found between the grandeur of the subject-matter and the space allowable by one small dramatic work. His suspicions were verified when a friend, Edward Devrient, approached Wagner on the matter. Devrient pointed out that the piece tried to encompass too much material - those aspects of the myth which were not represented by the action of the drama were alluded to, something which did not do justice to the complexity of its subject and also likely confused an audience unfamiliar with the original myth. He wrote in a letter to Uhlig, "...all that

¹²⁰ See Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, 211.

¹²¹ Selected Letters, 216.

remained of the vast overall context - which alone can give the characters their enormous, striking significance - was epic narration and a retelling of events on a purely conceptual level."¹²² In order to create balance within the work, Wagner sought to elaborate. But three years would pass before he would return to the piece, during which time Wagner busied himself with many projects. His mood during the composition varied, writing to Liszt in February of 1851,

With the arrival of spring I then hope to begin work on the composition of Siegfried and stick continuously to the task in hand. -

I might add that my love of life is not great. It is very quiet and lonely here - and I often think of myself as having died and been forgotten.¹²³

By May of the same year, Wagner was struck with a new enthusiasm, writing in a letter to Uhlig,

...throughout the whole of this past winter I have been plagued by an idea which finally took possession of me in a sudden flash of inspiration, so much so that I now intend carrying it out. Have I not already written to you concerning a non-serious subject? It was the one about the lad who leaves home "to learn fear" and who is so stupid that he never learns what it is. Imagine my shock when I suddenly discovered that the lad in question is none other than - young Siegfried who wins the hoard and awakens Brünnhilde! - The matter is now resolved. Next month I shall do the text for "young Siegfried", for which I am now collecting my thoughts. In July I shall tackle the music, - and I have such shameless confidence in the warmth of the subject-matter and in my own endurance...¹²⁴

It would not be until long after his exile to Zurich that he completed the draft of *Der junge Siegfried*, which detailed the early life of his hero. The importance of this second piece is immense, as its seed represents the very movement towards detailing the myth as a 'whole'.

¹²² Selected Letters, 232.

¹²³ Selected Letters, 221.

¹²⁴ Selected Letters, 223.

Wagner wrote in the same letter to Uhlig of the importance of *Der junge Siegfried* in relation to his audience;

“Young Siegfried” has the enormous advantage of conveying the important myth to an audience by means of actions on stage, just as children are taught fairy-tales. It will all imprint itself graphically by means of sharply defined physical images, it will all be understood, - so that by the time they hear the more serious “Siegfried’s death”, the audience will know all the things that are taken for granted or simply hinted at there...¹²⁵

But by November, Wagner began to realize the need to elaborate even further;

In order, therefore, to render “Siegfried’s death” feasible, I wrote “Young Siegfried”: but the more imposing a structure the whole thing assumed, the more it was bound to dawn on me, as I began the scenico-musical realization of “Young Siegfried”, that all I had done was to increase the need for a clearer presentation *to the senses* of the whole of the overall context. I now see that, in order to be fully understood from the stage, I must present the entire myth in visual terms.¹²⁶

In November of the same year he would also write to Liszt of the need to elaborate the structure of the myth, but with a clearer vision of its purpose;

According to my newly acquired and innermost conviction, however, a work of art - and hence the basic drama - can only make its rightful impression if the poetic intent is fully presented to the senses in every one of its important moments; and *I* least of all can afford to sin against this insight which I now recognize as true. In order to be perfectly understood, I must therefore communicate my entire myth, in its deepest and widest significance, with total artistic clarity; no part of it should have to be supplied by the audience’s having to think about it or reflect on it; every unbiased human feeling must be able to grasp the whole through its organs of artistic perception, because only then can it properly absorb the *least detail*.¹²⁷

Wagner was building up his own myth, and doing so by moving backwards - he started by

¹²⁵ Selected Letters, 223.

¹²⁶ Selected Letters, 232-233.

¹²⁷ Selected Letters, 237.

writing of his hero's death, and worked his way in reverse until he reached back far enough to trace Siegfried's divine lineage. The other two parts, *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold*, were both completed by the autumn of the following year.

Wagner's abandonment of his work on the Barbarossa piece also signifies a change in his artistic pursuits - a movement away from historical subjects in favor of mythological ones. In *A Communication to my Friends*, Wagner discusses his choice between Barbarossa and Siegfried. It is clear that he longed to connect with his native home by means of exploring the lore of its past; "As though to get down to its root, I sank myself into the primal element of home, that meets us in the legends of a past which attracts us the more warmly as the present repels us with its hostile chill."¹²⁸ In reaching further back than the legends of the Middle Ages, into myth itself, Wagner searched for his ideal of man. He writes,

What here I saw, was no longer the figure of conventional history, whose garment claims our interest more than does the actual shape inside; but the real naked man, in whom I might spy each throbbing of his pulses, each stir within his mighty muscles, in uncramped, freest motion: the type of the true *human being*.¹²⁹

Despite the above criticism, Wagner believed he could find his ideal hero in history as well. But the more he worked on the sketch for his piece on Barbarossa, the more he felt the confines of the historical subject-matter. The historical hero and his actions were always in relation to the world around him - depicting Barbarossa's life meant staying within the historical structure of recorded events, and recreating them in the very context from which

¹²⁸From *A Communication to my Friends*. In Wagner on Music and Drama, ed. By Goldman and Sprichorn (New York; E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964) 264.

¹²⁹Goldman and Sprichorn 264.

they arose. Such artistic restrictions left Wagner in discontent. The hero he sought to create from ideal man could not thrive within the borders of historical subject-matter, at least not without straying from history itself. The *Nibelungenlied* itself sought to place the mythological Siegfried into semi-historical terms, and it was not until Wagner looked into the earlier source of the medieval rendition that he felt a real affinity for the hero. There, he writes, was already to be found his perfect hero.

4.2 The Structure of Sources

Wagner's reconstruction of the Siegfried-story and its sources results in a very complex treatment of the various versions of the tale. He drew upon five primary sources; the *Poetic Edda*, the *Völsungensaga*, the *Prose Edda*, the medieval *Nibelungenlied*, and the *Thiðrekssaga*. Many of these were to be found in Wagner's personal library at his Dresden residence.¹³⁰ He had purchased four different editions of the medieval poem, as well as accumulated various important critical works on the subject. Among his *Edda*-sources include both Rüh's and Majer's translations, with some minor differences occurring in each of the editions.¹³¹ In Minna's library was also to be found a copy of the Grimm brother's *Die Lieder der alten Edda*, a text paralleling the Old Icelandic with its German translation, and which also includes a condensed prose version. Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* also greatly

¹³⁰For a very complete description of Wagner's *Nibelungen*-related sources, see Elizabeth Magee, Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs (New York: Claredon Press, 1990) chapter 1-2.

¹³¹Majer's edition focuses on the 'mythological', and he even eliminates several 'heroic' scenes in one of the poems. See Magee 29.

influenced Wagner, and despite the challenge reading it gave him, grappling with it also gave Wagner the insight into early Germanic and Teutonic culture and tradition which he greatly sought and which likely deepened his affinity with the subject matter he had become so drawn to. Wagner was also in possession of a collection of several shorter and less prominent works, such as *Der Rosengarten*, *Das Hildebrandlied*, and *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*. In the earliest stages of Wagner's venture into the subject, neither the *Völsungensaga* nor the *Thidrekssaga* were to be found in Wagner's library - these he borrowed from the Dresden public lending library.

As previously mentioned, Wagner avoided using the *Nibelungenlied* as a primary source for his work on the subject. Nancy Bevinga, author of Kingdom on the Rhine: History, Myth and Legend in Wagner's Ring, suggests that perhaps this is due to a lack of interest in the figure of Siegfried who "...stems not from a mysterious background but from a glittering medieval court."¹³² In addition, it has become clear that Wagner was not looking to reproduce anything, but rather to create something new, and thus the historical aspect of the medieval treatment of the myth simply would not do as a primary source. He needed to go even further back, to trace its very origins.

In his autobiography, Wagner himself cites the *Völsungensaga* as his primary source, but more for its content and less for its structure. The *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsungensaga* are very similar, but the latter is more detailed.¹³³ From both sources, Wagner structured the

¹³²Nancy Bevinga, Kingdom on the Rhine: History, Myth and Legend in Wagner's Ring (Essex: Anton Press, 1982) 35.

¹³³See chapter 1 of thesis for a more detailed discussion of both works.

action of his drama. The *Poetic Edda* details the life of the young Sigurd, who is raised by Regin the dwarf (Wagner's Mime), and slays the dragon. He then awakens a sleeping valkyrie named Sigrdrifa, who has been put into a deep sleep by Odin as punishment for supporting the wrong man in battle. Siegfried then sets off in the direction of a chieftain's court. There he meets and falls in love with Brynhild, and gives her a golden ring. He then sets off for a second court, where he is entrapped into marrying a different woman, Gudrun. Siegfried swears an oath of brotherhood with her siblings, a feature common to all of the versions of the myth, and helps to win Brynhild for Gudrun's brother by changing his own appearance. In anger of betrayal, Brynhild and one of Gudrun's younger brothers plot to kill Siegfried. Unlike Wagner and the medieval version, the murder here takes place in the marriage bed. Brynhild asks that their bodies be burned together, and then commits suicide. The *Völsungensaga* gives a similar account, but is more detailed.¹³⁴ The winning of Brynhild and the quarrel itself have been elaborated. The motivation for the quarrel is also slightly different than the medieval version, but is quite similar to Wagner's; in the *Völsungensaga*, the insult has more to do with personal status than with political, and Brynhild is offended because she vowed only to marry the bravest of men. This version also presents a new element - the magic potion, which removes Siegfried's memory, and is a scene borrowed from Wagner. The medieval *Nibelungenlied*, the source drawn least upon in comparison to the others, is placed in the setting of medieval feudal society. This is the only source in which Siegfried actually knows his parents, Siegmund and Sieglinde. As previously mentioned, the quarrel here

¹³⁴See chapter one for a more detailed look at their differences.

between the two women is political in nature. The myth has here been placed in the context of a Christian society - the quarrel itself takes place in front of a church, and is here also the most dramatic of all the sources, including Wagner. The medieval version places little emphasis on the mythological elements, such as the lack of Siegfried's divine heritage, his slaying of the dragon, and the advice of the woodbird. This is very much the opposite of what Wagner attempts, instead searching beyond the confines of a historical setting in order to find the very basis of the myth itself. By exploring the early myth in great detail and avoiding the medieval version, Wagner successfully managed to avoid what he feared most - the simple narration of events within a dramatic setting.

4.3 Wagner's Treatment of Symbols and Themes

The use of symbolism in the *Ring* is both intricate and quite fundamental to the depth of Wagner's vision. One could argue that it plays an even deeper and more important role than in the earlier sources discussed in previous chapters. Why? - dramatic genius. Both the *Edda* and the *Völsungensaga* may be seen as attempts to preserve and record the myths and legends. The medieval *Nibelungenlied* may be a dramatic rendition of the same subject-matter, but its primary focus is on the setting of the feudal society which it was written to please. Wagner does neither. He does not seek to preserve anything, but rather to re-create. And unlike the poet of the medieval version, Wagner does not look to set his drama in his own time in order to draw his audience closer to its action. The recognition of the audience, self-recognition really, must be found in the characters themselves, in their genius as

archetypes. This is further aided by the use of important symbols, which when set in the framework of the action, find their significance alongside the characters. These symbols are indeed drawn from the myths and legends which serve as the basis for the *Ring*, but the following analysis will aim to show how they achieve greater importance than in their counterparts.

a. Four symbols of power - the ring, Tarnhelm, Wotan's spear, and Nothung

The golden ring and the Tarnhelm are two objects forged from the dragon's treasure. On the subject of treasure, Wagner wrote in a letter to Röckel, "This Nibelung hoard constitutes an uncommonly crucial element in the work: crimes of every description are associated with it."¹³⁵ And its influence is certainly present throughout the opera, the ring forged from the gold being its primary symbol. In another letter to Uhlig, Wagner recognizes the potential of its symbolism as the central motif to the opera;

...in itself this gold is only a glittering trinket in the watery depths...but another power resides within it which can be coaxed from it only by *the man who renounces love*. - (here you have the structural motif which leads up to Siegfried's death: imagine the wealth of consequences!).¹³⁶

What gives it its power is the renunciation of love itself, the denial of life's purest emotion. The Tarnhelm, although another of the treasure's riches, is not central to the action of the drama in the same sense as the ring. It makes its appearance only a few times, and is used as a symbol of transition, transforming its wearer from one form into another. In regard to Siegfried's use of the Tarnhelm, it is also a tool of deception, the consequences of which

¹³⁵Selected Letters, 228.

¹³⁶Selected Letters, 223.

result in his death.

The spear and the sword are both symbols of power. The spear is a physical manifestation of Wotan's power, carved by his own hands from the ash-tree. The runic inscriptions on it also make it a representation of the oath under which the action of the drama's problem unfolds. The sword also represents power, but more specifically force. It too was made by Wotan, but is meant as the symbol of the hero who brandishes it. The forging of the sword is an important moment in the opera. Mime realizes that he does not have the power to forge the sword, and must let Siegfried do so. Siegfried's breaking of the anvil is also important, for not only does it prove his success in joining its pieces, but symbolically it is also a measure of his manhood.¹³⁷

All four of these symbols represent the misuse of power. The ring, wrested away from its rightful owner, is sought after by many as a means to power. The Tarnhelm is used as a trick to overcome a woman, one who had given up divinity in order to welcome true earthly love. The spear represents the contractual agreement by which Wotan sought to rule over the gods - the very oath, which when combined with the power of the ring, resulted in the very problem of the drama. The sword is the final example of the misuse of power. In the case of its ownership by Siegmund, it is used to protect the incestuous love which, in addition to being an offence against nature, also breaks the sacred vow of marriage. Siegfried does not use the sword as a way to protect himself as does his father, but rather it is symbolic of his

¹³⁷ See Robert Donington, Wagner's Ring and its Symbols: the Music and the Myth (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) 185: "...a triumphant demonstration that Siegfried has indeed forged his manhood keen and strong."

strength, and he instinctively uses it to conquer anything in his path.

b. The linden tree

The linden tree is another element borrowed from earlier sources. Spencer, in the 'Glossary of Names' of his edition of the *Ring*, writes that its "heart-shaped leaves traditionally symbolize love."¹³⁸ He associates therefore the name of the tree and its meaning to the second half of Sieglinde's name, as she is a gentle character whose love for Siegmund and the resulting birth of their child are central elements of the action of the drama. Although it does not play an active role in the opera, the linden tree remains linked to one of its central actions - the slaying of the dragon, an act whose own symbolism may be interpreted as the growth from child to man. This part of the scene which revolves around the linden tree represents the first part of that transition - childhood. In the forest, Siegfried finds himself alone, contemplating his own existence while resting beneath the tree. Here we see a gentler side to this character, as he thinks of his lost mother;

Sterben die Menschenmütter
an ihren Söhnen
alle dahin?
Traurig wäre das, traun!--
Ach! möcht' ich Sohn
meine Mutter sehen!--
Meine - Mutter!-
Ein Menschenweib!-¹³⁹

Siegfried then fashions the flute, and tries to communicate with the birds in the tree above

¹³⁸Stewart Spencer, in the introduction to *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen: A Companion* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1993) 375.

¹³⁹"Siegfried", Act II. In *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen: A Companion* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1993) 238.

him. There is a childlike quality to this scene, and Siegfried's loneliness is important for many reasons. Donington writes, "The infant's longing for its mother is the start of all our longing, and is an *ingredient* in our adult making."¹⁴⁰ The above passage is also reminiscent of Siegfried's birth in the *Völsungensaga*, where he bends down to kiss his dying mother. But his loneliness comes not only from his separation from his mother, but also from society itself. Having grown up in the wilderness and far removed from society, Siegfried is preparing for more than just a transition - his upcoming encounter with the dragon will also prepare him to enter that world from which he has been kept for so long. In returning to the linden tree itself, it is perhaps more significantly connected to the importance of Siegfried's harmony with nature. Ewans writes that Siegfried's moments of contemplation beneath the tree are "part of the process by which Siegfried gradually comes to attain a harmony with nature which makes him worthy to break the Wanderer's spear and pass through the fire to Brünhild."¹⁴¹ In other words, it is part of that process which builds him up - the slaying of the dragon and tasting of its blood will complete his connection to nature. Siegfried's loneliness is mirrored by his solitude in the forest, and his time spent under the linden tree leading up to his confrontation with the dragon are his last moments of childhood. These are also the last moments he will spend in solitude from the world.

c. The dragon

Siegfried's longing for his mother and his attempts to communicate with the birds of

¹⁴⁰Donington 191.

¹⁴¹Micheal Ewans, Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and the Oresteai (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) 67.

the forest illustrate his longing for companionship. His approach to the dragon also reflects this, and even shows his naivety as well;

Haha! Da hätte mein Lied
 mir 'was liebes erblasen!
 Du wär'st mir ein saub'rer Gesell!¹⁴²

Siegfried approaches the dragon with the same fearlessness he showed towards the bear - he is looking simply for companionship, which he thinks he has found in the form of a playmate. Generally speaking, it makes good sense to interpret the slaying of the dragon as some sort of transitional phase - it is a test. What is proven by the test of the dragon in the case of Wagner's Siegfried? Can we look to the same scenario in the medieval poem and find a parallel significance? Although the episode is recounted by Hagen in the medieval version of the myth, its role in the tale is to illustrate the hero's 'coming of age', or passage from ambitious youth to heroic figure. If one were familiar with the original myth, one would recall and interpret the slaying of the dragon in such terms.

But Wagner uses the episode with different intentions, yet at the same time relying on the aspect of transition. Siegfried is still in a sense the young boy who leaves home in search of adventure. But power is not power unless it is proven, or recognized for its potential, in this case by the act of slaying the dragon. True power lies here in the act of destruction. The slaying of the dragon does not so much transform him from boy to man, but rather is the first great feat he performs in which we see his superior strength and use of force against nature. The dragon is not quite something 'natural', but certainly it represents a sort of 'evil' nature,

¹⁴²"Siegfried", Act 2.

that which is frightening. But Siegfried feels no fear, something which would arouse our respect for his strength - it is at this point that we know he is indeed the greatest hero, the only hero, which can penetrate the ring of fire around the sleeping valkyrie. It remains for the rest of the drama to show that his heroic fearlessness will also be his downfall. The drinking of the dragon's blood takes the symbolism one step further; it represents the complete conquering of the animal, and also represents the final step towards a complete harmony with nature. By conquering 'evil' nature, Siegfried symbolically makes way for 'good' nature - represented by the woodbird. Here in this harmony Siegfried is finally able to understand the woodbird, who reveals to him the location of the treasure.

In relationship to the linden tree, it would be logical that the slaying of the dragon should represent the second part of the previously mentioned moment of transition for our hero; having seen his child-like longing for his mother and playful attempt to communicate with the birds, one is expecting to see a transition after he has performed the act of killing the dragon. It is a moment of preparation, as previously quoted by Ewans. The slaying of the dragon allows Siegfried his first moment of heroism, and the semblance of recognition of his own potential, which in turn prepares him for the test set by Brünnhilde. It also seals his fate. Here we see an example of how two symbolic elements, the linden tree and the dragon, may be closely linked, the result of which actually transcends the action itself.

d. The treasure

If the slaying of the dragon is on one hand representative of Siegfried's coming to power, then the treasure could be interpreted as a physical manifestation of destructive influence. It is directly related to the 'test' motif in the slaying of the dragon - it is a reward

for succeeding. As with Alberich's curse, the treasure is a theme which is present throughout the opera. Treasure is interpreted by Bevenga on two levels; as a transition from history into saga, and as a motive for Siegfried's murder. Of the first she writes, "the notion of acquiring vast riches is an attractive one, and when history became saga an abstract or complex concept such as political advancement could be translated into the simpler, and even more fascinating, idea of acquisition of a treasure."¹⁴³ This is clearly more applicable to the medieval version of the myth, in which political advancement plays a much larger role in the action. In terms of symbolism, the second interpretation is more relevant to the question at hand. The treasure, she argues, is power. This association is found throughout the *Ring*, whose very message is the abuse of power, and it is this association which increases the significance of this symbol when it is used as a motive for Siegfried's murder.

e. Nature and the power of womanhood

The aspect of femininity and the power of womanhood are important themes in the *Ring*. Ewans draws attention to the goddess figures in the opera - nature, he observes, is also female.¹⁴⁴ One is reminded of Siegfried's longing for his mother while in the solitude of the forest, again a connection between the harmony of nature and Siegfried's contemplations beneath the linden tree; his longing for his mother is somehow connected with achieving that harmony. But Ewans argues the importance of the female figures from two completely different perspectives. First, the female figures are protectors and guardians. The Rheindaughters guard the precious gold. As with nature, they are not perfection, failing to

¹⁴³Bevenga 80.

¹⁴⁴Ewans 91.

protect it properly. In fact, it is their own actions which compel the theft of the gold. Erda, the woodbird and the Norns possess knowledge and wisdom. Secondly, the power of male gods is limited by the presence of their female counterparts. For example, when Wotan realizes that he is indeed bound by treaties, he calls upon Erda to help him. And it is Sieglinde who nurtures and gives shelter to Siegmund. The woodbird is a female personification of nature, and it is through her that Siegfried understands what to do after slaying the dragon. The heroes of the dramatic action may be primarily male, but many of the supporting characters are female. They do more than simply fill in the mythological elements of the early sources - they help to illustrate the very problems of the characters. Wotan and his relationship with Fricka provide a good example. Despite his resolution to oppose her, Fricka is able to make Wotan promise not to defend Siegmund. In forcing him to submit to her she forces the problem out into the open. Their argument serves to illustrate the severity of Wotan's offence against nature, and she swears him to an oath that he will let destiny take its course and rectify the problem.

f. Curses and warnings

The most important curse is the central focus of *Das Rheingold* - the one Alberich places on the gold. His curse affects everyone who touches the ring, and the curse follows the action of the entire opera and it also seals the fate of the characters. We know from the moment his curse is placed that the conclusion of the drama can only be destruction of some sort. Ewans writes that the reason his curse is so effective is because Alberich fulfilled the

requirements placed before him by the Rhinemaidens - the renunciation of love.¹⁴⁵ But Donington argues that the curse actually has a positive aspect; “The positive meaning of Alberich’s curse is that whatever element in the psyche is due for transformation will not be allowed to linger obstructively but will die in order to be reborn in its transformed condition.”¹⁴⁶ An example of this transformation may be seen in Brünnhilde’s awakening to find love, and subsequently giving up her any divine existence she had beforehand.

Warnings are also abundant in the opera. Wagner makes use of both the *Edda* and *Völsungensaga*, seen in the figures of Erda and the three Norns. Their warnings are wisdom and advice - the problem is that they are often ignored. Had Wotan listened to Erda in the first place, he would have understood the implication of his actions - ignoring her is part of what ignites the problem of the drama.

g. Love

In the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, Wellgunde says, “was nur lebt will lieben”.¹⁴⁷ There are several types of love in the *Ring*. Freia, as the goddess of love, is also the owner of the magical apples which give eternal life to the gods. Bartering her like property could only be disastrous. Ewans writes, “the gods lives depend on possessing love”¹⁴⁸ - in other words, their existence depends on her gift of apples. Here character is an element taken from the Norse saga, where the apples procure prosperity and life. The relationship between Hunding and Sieglinde indicates love as property and ownership, for he suspiciously warns

¹⁴⁵Ewans 106.

¹⁴⁶Donington 194.

¹⁴⁷“Das Rheingold”, scene one.

¹⁴⁸Ewans 96.

Siegmund, "Sacred is my hearth: - / may my house be sacred to you!"¹⁴⁹ The incestuous love between her and Siegmund is not true love either, for it could only be preserved by the use of power and violence.¹⁵⁰ And it brings nothing but misery, for Wotan cannot escape the offence against nature, and must lose Siegmund as a result. This dilemma also illustrates the conflict between power and love - despite his ambition to rule, he never renounces love completely as does Alberich. Another interesting aspect mentioned by Ewans involves the relationship between nature and love. Nature, he writes, actually 'bends' for love, as seen in the storms which give way to springtime during the courtship between Siegmund and Sieglinde.

But the relationship between Siegfried and Brünnhilde is perhaps one of the most important illustrations of the power of love, for it was not until Siegfried crossed the flames to waken her that he felt the first stirrings of fear. Wagner writes of Siegfried's fear in a letter to Röckel, explaining his hero is incapable of experiencing fear because "...he only ever sees things as they are."¹⁵¹ Outward actions, such as the slaying of the dragon, are simply that - external. They possess symbolism, something to be recognized internally, but his immediate and impulsive nature does not allow him to grasp it. Love, on the other hand, is strictly internal - it finds itself manifest in the external world, here in the shape of a woman. Love, stronger than any other external experience, is the only thing which can bring fear to the unwavering hero. One must remember the emphasis on his childhood with Mime - he was

¹⁴⁹Die Walkuere", act one.

¹⁵⁰Ewans 125.

¹⁵¹ Selected letters, 228.

deprived of love, and therefore had never felt fear. Brünnhilde's virginity stands for purity, in as much as love itself, that which she gives herself over to, is also the purest of emotions. Unlike Siegmund, who fought against nature to love Sieglinde, Siegfried's love for Brünnhilde is the most natural of emotions.

4.4 The Role of the Heroic Figures

Being responsible for one's own actions is a central theme in the *Ring*, especially with regard to the characters of both Wotan and Siegfried. The question of blame is best approached by comparing both these figures in an attempt to answer the question, 'who is responsible for the downfall of the old order'?

Wotan is the central figure to the opera as a whole, and everything that happens is somehow connected to him. He also instigates the beginning of the end, so to speak. Wotan builds Valhalla as a place from which to govern the gods. In order to do so, he enters a bargain with the giants, one which he really had no intention of fulfilling - why else would he offer a goddess as payment, especially when she holds the magical apples which give eternal youth to the gods? Wotan did not reflect about the possible consequences of pledging something he never really intended to give up, or perhaps he simply brushed those consequences aside - this is the action of a being who puts too great a confidence in his own might, one who never worries about his own omnipotence. Instead of listening to his wife's warnings, Wotan basks in the glory of the completed hall, and dreams of the power and fame it will bring him. These desires are further complicated when word of the ring and its power are revealed by the return of Loge. The more he hears of its powers, the more Wotan wants

to possess it. But he is forced by his contractual obligations to give it up as payment for Walhalla - even despite Erda's warning. The rest of the opera comprises his efforts to regain what was lost - not in returning the ring to the Rhinemaidens, but rather trying to restore himself. Wotan's greed is what begins the decline. But his refusal to consider the implications of his actions also contributes - he may not have been under an oath to the Rhinemaidens, but by his powerful position he had the ability and the obligation to correct the situation.

Wotan confesses all to Brünnhilde, and even tells her of his foiled plan to procure a 'free' hero. Wotan is convinced that the only way he can save himself is to get the ring back; not being able to do so himself, he needs a hero free of his divine intervention and guidance to act of his behalf. Fricka shows him the error of his ways. Siegmund is not 'free' at all - in fact, Wotan has guided him to Sieglinde and promised him the sword as well. Wotan's dream of redemption is crushed. Furthermore, he now must pay for his offence against nature; Fricka reminds him that the union of the twins is incestuous and breaks the sacred pact of marriage. She forces him to admit that Siegmund has done nothing more than act on his behalf, making truly an 'unfree' hero. Ultimately, Siegmund was the answer to Wotan's fear. Realizing his mistake, he reluctantly agrees to let fate take its course. Again, his greed has cost him, and he must lose the hero he so wanted to protect.

Siegfried is the result of the union of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Unlike his father, he always acts impulsively and does not reflect on the consequences of those actions. He is unlike Wotan, who chooses to ignore possible consequences for his actions - for Siegfried, impulsiveness is something innate, not a choice. This is clearly seen throughout the opera, in instances such as the murder of Mime; Siegfried represents power, but without a conscience.

Wotan approaches Siegfried disguised as the Wanderer. Siegfried's lack of respect also shows his impulsive nature;

So lang' ich lebe
stand mir ein Alter
stets im Wege.¹⁵²

He has no idea of the identity of the stranger, nor does he really care, and in his usual manner tries to bully him for information. As with Siegmund, Wotan interferes, this time trying to direct Siegfried away from discovering Brünnhilde. Again, he is trying to save himself, for he knows whoever rescues her will also render him powerless. Yet he also warns Siegfried;

Ein Licht-Meer
umleuchtet dein Haupt:
bald frißt und zehrt dich
zündendes Feuer:-
zurück denn, rasendes Kind!¹⁵³

Siegfried ignores Wotan's warnings. But what role does Siegfried really play in regard to the final scenes of the opera? Does he bear any of the guilt for the destruction of the realm of the gods? Carl Dahlhaus, author of Richard Wagner's Music Dramas, argues that the aspects of Siegfried's nature which were meant to direct him to glory are also the very qualities which bring about his end, and subsequently the destruction of Walhalla.¹⁵⁴ He writes, "in order to break the carapace of contracts and laws that at one and the same time upholds and confines Wotan's power, Siegfried must be the instinctive, unreflecting hero who obeys nothing but

¹⁵²"Siegfried", act three.

¹⁵³"Siegfried", act three.

¹⁵⁴Carl Dahlhaus, Richard Wagner's Music Dramas (New York: Cambridge University Press) 91.

his own impulses.”¹⁵⁵ Thinking back to Siegfried’s encounter with the Rhinemaidens, Dahlhaus writes also, “the route that avoids catastrophe leads directly to it...his folly is both a shield and a snare.”¹⁵⁶ Bevenga approaches the question of blame from another perspective. She argues that Siegfried used his power for fraudulent purposes in regard to Brünnhilde, and therefore must pay for his actions. She also writes that he had access to knowledge and truth, which could have made him ‘free’, but he ignored them.¹⁵⁷ I would venture to say that he did not have a choice in ignoring the warnings - as an impulsive and unreflecting heroic figure, Siegfried simply is not able to think on his actions, and therefore is not even capable of ignoring the possibilities of what they may bring. He is also more than just naive - he is actually completely ignorant of his own potential as a hero, of his own self. Siegfried does not reflect on his actions, and therefore never grasps the significance of what he does - for example, the slaying of the dragon. His fearlessness results in the inability to look inwards, to grasp emotion and understanding beyond what is immediate. His so-called ‘freedom’ lies not in knowledge, but rather in instinct. He lacks knowledge of all sorts - it is up to the woodbird and later Hagen to tell him how to use the treasure he has claimed. Wagner also allows Siegfried to make the very mistake that Wotan did by entering into a contract - he becomes ‘unfree’ by his own act.

But blaming him for the downfall of the gods is unreasonable. Siegfried’s life and death are simply steps in a sequence of events which were set into action long before his own

¹⁵⁵Dahlhaus 91.

¹⁵⁶Dahlhaus 91-92.

¹⁵⁷Bevenga 89-90.

birth - the real tragedy of the work is Wotan's. The only downfall Siegfried can be blamed for is his own - his murder is the result of his naivety, which renders him a pawn in Gunther and Hagen's plan to win Brünnhilde. One downfall is of course dependent on the other - the solution to the problem must go back to its very roots. Wotan has been the instigator, and Siegfried has simply followed the course of fate until brought to the point of rectification. Siegfried's death signals the end of one world in anticipation of a new one, and with it must come the end of his own origins. Recognition of the problem and acceptance of fate are not possible on Siegfried's behalf, for his impulsive and unreflecting nature do not allow it. Furthermore, he is not even aware of the problem itself - this belongs to the figure most central to the opera, Wotan, the one who is its very source. Siegfried's murder is therefore the final step towards the end, and the means by which he dies is also very important. He bears some responsibility in that his character has allowed himself to be in such a position, but the actual taking of his life is an act beyond his own control, something for which he could not have willed. Siegfried's life is in a sense redeemed by its end in murder, for were he to die in Walhalla with Wotan, one would be left with a sense of discord; the flames consuming Walhalla are symbolic of renewal, and the unreflecting hero has no movement inwards as does Wotan, who accepts his fate. In fact, the concept of fate means very little to Siegfried - he is not capable of reflecting on such things. And so, Walhalla must be destroyed for a new beginning to come about. Wotan, who struggles no more, is aware of this and with silent resignation perishes in the flames.

Conclusion

The role of the *Nibelungen*-myth over various periods of German literature shows a complex array of changes to its substance and structure. Maïke Oergel, in The Return of King Arthur and the Nibelungen, describes the function of national literature as the imprint of national culture.¹⁵⁸ In other words, the essence of a people are engraved within the legends and literature which emerge from that culture. The simple endurance of the *Nibelungen*-legend also lends credence to its claim as a 'national myth', seen in its presence as a long-standing subject for poets and authors.

In each period discussed in this thesis, the *Nibelungen*-legend stands as a monument of national literature. The earliest myth was shaped by the experiences of tribes which sought to preserve their heritage and history. Its origins also reflect a standard of living which centers around certain values, primarily honor and loyalty. The medieval version maintains these virtues, but also incorporates the aspect of love, which is raised to equal importance as are the other values - a true reflection of its age in chivalric customs. The baroque *Volksbuch* seems to make a mockery of all the aforementioned, a change in the substance of the legend which indicates a serious decline in the heroic tradition in German literature of that time. In addition to this decline is also the distortion and decrease in the use of the mythological elements of the original myth. Wagner restores these, thus elevating the *Nibelungen*-legend back to its mythological nature.

¹⁵⁸Maïke Oergel, The Return of King Arthur and the Nibelungen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 123.

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