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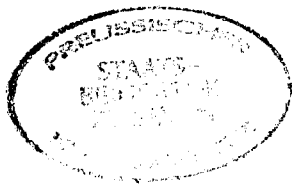
A COMPANION TO THE NIBELUNGENLIED

EDITED BY
WINDER MCCONNELL

CAMDEN HOUSE

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

Will Hasty

From Battlefields to Bedchambers: Conquest in the *Nibelungenlied*

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

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

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

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

³ Bartlett 90.

the power of an army in his mythical strength), but as an adventuring knight with just a few comrades, and the hostile intentions he manifests upon his arrival seem to disappear upon his involvement in the courtly interest of *minne* ("love"). Despite their apparent antagonism or irreconcilability, the interest in conquest and the interest in courtliness are both consistently fostered from the moment of Siegfried's arrival in Worms. This reading of the first part of the *Nibelungenlied* will endeavor to demonstrate that the interest in conquest — in the struggle for supremacy between Siegfried and the Burgundians — is not ended, but rather only temporarily contained and redirected by the *Minne*-relationship of Siegfried and Kriemhild. The murder of Siegfried, which eventually leads to the catastrophic demise of the Burgundians in the second part of the poem, does not depict the failure of courtliness in the face of darker and more compelling forces,⁴ but rather the culmination of a struggle for power that has been largely dependent on courtly forms for its expression.

I

The first two *âventiuren* of the poem, which describe the kingdom of the Burgundians and that of Siegfried's father Siegmund in some detail, underscore the interdependence of armed aggression and courtly splendor. The association of aggression and courtly splendor in these descriptions, particularly in the elaborate portrayal of the festival in which Siegfried is knighted, is made programmatic in the form of a rhyme in the very first strophe of the poem, which links the terms *strîten* and *hochgezîten*.⁵ *Strîten* not only alludes negatively to the catastrophic downfall of the Burgundians at the end of the poem, but also must have had positive associations among noble audiences of the poem as the activity that is necessary to obtain and consolidate the power that finds visible expression and representation in courtly festivals and in the material wealth that is necessary to stage them. The inevitability of *strîten* as an activity that is constitutive of, rather than deleterious to, courtliness is also evident in the manner in which the initial descriptions of the kingdoms of the Burgundians and of Siegmund culminate in Siegfried's arrival in Worms as both a conqueror and a suitor of Kriemhild. The aggression with which Siegfried appears at the court of the Burgundian

⁴ This is basically the argument of Weber, who stresses the significance of courtliness as a system of values that goes beyond costumes and fashion. This system is destroyed, according to Weber, by demonic forces within the characters. See Gottfried Weber, *Das Nibelungenlied: Problem und Idee* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1963).

⁵ Important is the consistent connection in this poem between fighting and courtly splendor, and not whether this particular strophe was a later interpolation.

kings is consistent with these descriptions, which are more than a rich backdrop against which the events of the poem will be played out. During an age in which inequality is an "accepted premiss of almost all social and political thought,"⁶ it seems likely that the juxtaposition of two such powerful realms would have given rise to fundamental questions in the minds of medieval audiences: which of these two realms, about which this tale will revolve, is the more powerful? Can two kingdoms of such immense wealth and power exist without being a threat to one another? Is armed conflict between them not inevitable?

The description of Gunther's kingdom connects the person of Kriemhild and the political power held by the Burgundians by means of the term *pflegen*. The person of Kriemhild is fostered and protected by the Burgundian kings Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher (strophe 4) in the same way that they foster and protect the integrity and power of the realm, *des hoves krefte*.⁷ Kriemhild is both an embodiment of the power wielded by the Burgundians (her beauty corresponding to their power) and, to the extent that she is a beautiful young woman of marriageable age, of its vulnerability: the man who wins the hand of Kriemhild also will win a stake in the Burgundian kingdom, and thus threaten the coherence of the brothers' political power. As in the later bridal quest that wins Brünhild for Gunther, the attempt to win a lady's love, and what amounts to the conquest of a powerful foreign realm, coincide when Siegfried first arrives in Worms. Kriemhild, as is revealed at the outset of the third *âventiure*, is destined to become Siegfried's "undertân" (46,4b), and we soon observe that the subservience denoted by this term involves more than a single marital relationship.

II

Siegfried's motivations upon his arrival in Worms are shaped by the political situation in the realm of his father. He is, on the one hand, a prince who does not wish to wear the crown of his homeland as long as his parents live, even though the people of his realm very much desire to have him as a ruler. If he is to wear a crown before the death of his father, Siegfried must apparently earn it by conquest. This situation suggests Siegfried's future ambition in Worms, even as it implies a status of political inferiority to the

⁶ Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 35.

⁷ Quotations from the *Nibelungenlied* are based on the edition by Karl Bartsch/Helmut de Boor, *Das Nibelungenlied*, 21st revised edition by Roswitha Wisniewski, *Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters* (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1979) and are indicated in parentheses by strophe and verse number. Here: 12,1a.

Burgundians: as a king in the land of his ancestors, Gunther seemingly wields greater power and is of higher standing than Siegfried. Yet we also discover from Hagen, as Siegfried arrives in Worms, that the young hero is in fact already a king, even if he is not yet designated as such, because he has slain the kings Schilbung and Nibelung, along with seven hundred of their *recken* (“warriors”), and brought the land and castles — and, more important, the *hort* — of these kings into his possession (cf. strophes 87–100). One of the many functions of the *hort* is to qualify Siegfried as a conqueror when he first appears before the Burgundian power elite. Amidst the treasures, as we discover later in the poem, is a mysterious object that connects the *hort* to conquest very directly:

Der wunsch der lac darunder, von golde ein rüetelîn.
der daz het erkunnet, der möhte meister sîn
wol in aller werlde über ietzlîchen man. (1124,1–3)

This magic wand is among the possessions of Siegfried when he first appears before Gunther, both as a young prince out to make his own fortune before he assumes his inheritance, and as a powerful king, who could seemingly bring overwhelming power to bear against any opponent. Although riding with only eleven comrades, Siegfried confronts the feared Burgundians both as a man intent on winning the love of a lady, and as an army of one, who states his intention to take all the Burgundians have by force:

“Nu ir sît sô küene, als mir ist geseit,
sone ruoch ich, ist daz iemen liep oder leit:
ich wil an iu ertwingen, swaz ir muget hân:
lant unde bürge, daz sol mir werden undertân.” (110)

At first glance, the interest in conquest seems to disappear when Gernot questions the appropriateness of Siegfried’s hostility within this ostensibly peaceful, courtly setting, and when Siegfried begins to think of his love for Kriemhild. One is thus tempted to assume that Siegfried gives up his ambitions of conquest and adopts a position of subservience to Kriemhild, and through her to Gunther, within the courtly framework of *Minnedienst*, or love service. Yet this assumption fails to grasp everything that happens in this initial episode, for one need not necessarily assume that Siegfried has given up his aggressive claim: the possibility must be considered that the young hero from the Netherlands does not fight Gunther for his lands and castles, because he does not have to. Gunther, perhaps fearing a fight with the mighty Siegfried, gives him what he wants without the fight that the young hero’s provocative words seek:

Dô sprach der wirt des landes: “allez daz wir hân,
geruochet irs nâch êren, daz sî iu undertân,
und sî mit iu geteilet lip unde guot.” (127,1–3)

Otfrid Ehrismann observes that the vast critical literature dealing with this episode has tended to view Siegfried’s behavior either in terms of his attempt to “usurp” Gunther’s power, or in terms of his love for Kriemhild, and that there has been a reluctance to explore the possibility of a single principle underlying these two seemingly different concerns.⁸ Conquest provides such a principle, if we do not assume that Siegfried’s aggressive ambitions have ended when his thoughts turn to Kriemhild, or that Gunther’s courtly concession can be dismissed as the response of a wise and experienced ruler to the unreasonable demands of an impetuous youth. There are good reasons for taking Gunther’s concession much more literally than it is generally understood. During the uneven transition from Siegfried’s initial aggression to courtly forms of interaction, the reactions of some of Gunther’s followers strongly suggest that the conciliatory attitude of the Burgundian kings amounts to acceding shamefully to Siegfried’s demands without resistance. Gernot’s mollifying words, which try to bring Siegfried from his hostile intentions by stating that the Burgundians have no aggressive intentions of their own, provoke the following response from Ortwin, who would clearly prefer to take up the gauntlet Siegfried has thrown:

Mit grimmigem muote dâ stuonden friwende sîn.
dô was ouch dar under von Metzen Ortwîn.
der sprach: “disiu suone diu ist mir harte leit.
iu hât der starke Sîvrit unverdient widerseit.” (116)

Ortwin and Hagen, although they continue to be provoked by Siegfried, are commanded by Gernot to hold their tongues and to keep their swords in their sheaths. Open conflict, like that with which the poem ends, does not occur at this point, although the words of Gernot suggest that it is conflict on a similar scale that the kings are now attempting to avoid:

“Wie zæme uns mit iu strîten?” sprach aber Gêrnôt.
“swaz helde nu dar under müese ligen tôt,
wir hetens lützel êre und ir vil kleinen frum.” (124, 1–3)

Given Siegfried’s previous victory over the Nibelungs, which has just been reported by Hagen, and the strength of the Burgundians in their later death

⁸ Otfrid Ehrismann, *Nibelungenlied: Epoche — Werk — Wirkung* (Munich: Beck, 1987) 118.

struggle against the forces of Etzel, one might expect nothing less than a confrontation on a scale similar to that between the Huns and the Burgundians (Nibelungs) at the end of the poem if an open battle erupted at this point. Difficult to imagine, given the military qualifications of the antagonists, is a brief altercation in which the vastly superior numbers of the Burgundians would put a quick end to Siegfried's aggression.

No less than three distinct aspects are present in the relationship between Siegfried and the Burgundian kings at the moment when Siegfried's interest in conquest is apparently directed into a courtly interest in the *minne* of Kriemhild. First, Siegfried conducts himself (especially in the Saxon campaign and in the conquest of Brünhild and her land) as if his endeavor to conquer the land of the Burgundians had been successful and he himself were the Burgundian leader, which provides implicit support for what was implied by the protests of Ortwin and Hagen: too much was granted to the conquering Siegfried too fast. The second aspect is associated with subservience rather than sovereignty: Siegfried is cast as the lowly lover of the beautiful Kriemhild within the framework of courtly love service, or *hohe Minne*. Since, as we have seen in the initial *âventiuren*, Gunther looks after his sister as he does the material resources of his lands, Siegfried's love service to Kriemhild amounts to political service to the Burgundian kings. The third aspect of the relationship, circumscribed by the term *vriunt*, is the least consistently developed and most inconstant of all, perhaps because it rests on the possibility of equality in a world made up of domination and subservience. The interplay between these three aspects suggests that Siegfried's ambition of conquest has not been renounced, but rather merely complicated by the introduction of courtly forms of interaction, within which Siegfried's conquest proceeds as an assault on the heart of Kriemhild.

III

The conquest of Kriemhild by Siegfried begins with the Saxon campaign. Like Siegfried, the Saxons openly express their animosity toward Gunther and their intention to conquer his lands. Although the Saxons and Danes deliver the same kind of challenge to Worms that Siegfried did before them, they now have to face the strong young warrior from the Netherlands, whose aggressive energy has been at least temporarily integrated into the power structure of the Burgundian realm, so that it can now serve to counter the kind of external threat it once posed itself. Courtliness (i.e., in the form of *minne*) has thus served to divert aggression originally aimed at the Burgundians toward the Burgundians' enemies. Gunther is doubtful that he will have the time to muster enough men to counter the invasion of the Saxons and Danes and, upon the advice of Hagen, he turns to the young hero who is, as

was established in Hagen's initial description of him and of his exploits, an army of one. In countering the Saxon and Dane threat, in transforming the threatened conquest *by* the Saxons and Danes into a conquest *of* them, Siegfried is motivated by his friendship to Gunther, although the motivating force of friendship at this early stage still seems to be weak. When Siegfried asks the Burgundian king why he is so troubled, Gunther responds that one can divulge one's deepest concerns only to true friends (155). Siegfried, however, overcomes any doubts that Gunther has, or claims to have, about the value of his friendship:

Er sprach zuo dem küneger: "ine han iu niht verseit.
ich sol iu helfen wenden elliu iuwer leit.
welt ir vriwent suochen, der sol ich einer sîn,
unt trouw ez wol volbringen mit êren an daz ende mîn." (156)

The king's response indicates his happiness about Siegfried's willingness to stand for him against the Saxons because of friendship, but it also introduces another motivation that may bind Siegfried more tightly to him:

"Nu lôn' iu got, her Sîvrit, diu rede dunket mich guot.
und ob mir nimmer helfe iuwer ellen getuot,
ich freu mich doch der mære, daz ir mir sît sô holt.
lebe ich deheine wîle, ez wirdet umb iuch wol versolt." (157)

The reward Gunther promises, apparently without conditions, will eventually amount to a payment for services rendered. Although the reward does not yet explicitly have anything to do with Kriemhild, events subsequent to the Saxon campaign strongly suggest that interaction with Kriemhild is the *lôn* ("reward") that Siegfried will receive for his efforts. Thus, political expediency and the courtly interests of love will coincide.

The relationships of equality and of subservience (i.e., service) to Gunther, suggested respectively by the motivations of friendship and of reward, are juxtaposed to a relationship that is suggestive of Siegfried's superiority: when the Burgundians launch their preemptive strike against the Saxons and Danes, they do so with Siegfried as their apparent general. Upon the army's departure from Worms, Siegfried places himself at its head and commands Gunther to remain at home with the women of the court:

"Her künec, sît hie heime", sprach dô Sîvrit,
"sît daz iuwer recken mir wellent volgen mit.
belîbet bî den frouwen und traget hôhen muot.
ich trouwe iu wol behüeten beidiu êre unde guot." (174)

Siegfried's words here might be understood as consistent with his subservience within the framework of *Minnedienst*. The fact that he is willing to spare Gunther *all* of the effort involved in responding to the present military threat can be viewed as an exaggeration of his service to Gunther's power rather than a usurpation upon it. Yet such a usurpation remains implicit: Siegfried adopts the position of the conquering leader at the head of an army that includes the young king Gernot and the warrior Hagen, who might not be expected to defer to any authority other than that of Gunther. The honor and praise celebrated at court, which can only be won in battle, is won by Siegfried, who inevitably prevails in the coming conflicts against the Saxons and Danes and distinguishes himself above all others.

Victory against an external enemy by means of armed conflict marks the first step of an internal, courtly conquest, in which Kriemhild (along with the political power she embodies) will, in the end, become Siegfried's *undertân*. Siegfried is much too rich to accept material rewards from Gunther for his services against the Saxons, so he eventually receives a different kind of *lôn* that maintains the integration of Siegfried into the Burgundian power structure. At the festival in celebration of the Burgundians' victory, Gunther, who knows of Siegfried's love for his sister (cf. 272), finally allows him to meet her in person. That this meeting — which culminates in a kiss that Gunther allows his sister to give Siegfried — should be understood as the reward due to the young hero from the Netherlands, becomes clear in the words of the conquered Danish king Liudegast:

“diss vil hôhen gruozes lît maneger ungesunt
 (des ich vil wol enpfinde) von Sîvrîdes hant.
 got enlâz' in nimmer mêre komen in mîniu kûneges lant.”
 (298,2-4)

Siegfried is not yet as accomplished in courtly love as he is in the activity of conquest, at which he has no peers. It is this discrepancy that results in what seems, from a modern perspective, to be an unlikely and even comical scenario: the mighty Siegfried, who has only recently commanded the armed forces of her brothers' realm, and who strikes fear into the hearts of the stoutest kings and warriors of the world, is transformed according to the conventions of *hohe minne* (the unhappy and unrequited desire for a powerful and distant lady) into an abject, pining lover with no hope of ever winning the favor of his lady, whose beauty, riches, and nobility seem to put her beyond his range (cf. 285). However unlikely such a posture may be in view of Siegfried's social rank and what he has already achieved by conquest, it is more than a pose on the part of Siegfried, just as it is more than a forced employment of an inconsistent literary model by the poem's author. Love is, as has been suggested, a realm in which Siegfried has not yet won the

complete and overwhelming victory to which all his other campaigns have led, although the audience may suspect that he will, despite his initial despair, eventually prevail here as well. By the time the Saxon campaign has been concluded and Siegfried has received his reward for the services he has rendered on behalf — or in the place — of King Gunther, a pattern seems to have become discernible: Siegfried's victory over the external enemies of the Burgundians amounts to an *internal* conquest of Burgundian power within the framework of a *Minnedienst*, or love service, that has transparently political implications. Although Gunther retains some power and controls Siegfried to some extent as long as he can manipulate his sister as a “resource,” one suspects that there will be a fundamental shift in what seems to be a precarious balance of power when the resource is exhausted and Gunther is finally obliged to hand his sister over to Siegfried, thus apparently losing *any* claim to a superior position. Later on, when Siegfried's conquest of Kriemhild is complete, the power that he has in many respects wielded since his arrival in Worms finally provokes a resurgence of the hostility initially manifested by Ortwin and Hagen upon Siegfried's arrival in Worms.

IV

In the campaign to win Brünhild, as in the Burgundian victory over the Saxons and Danes, an external, military conquest charts the progress of an internal, courtly one, in which Siegfried is obtaining and consolidating, by means of love service for Kriemhild, an authority that appeared to be conceded to him upon his arrival in Worms. Gunther has decided to win Brünhild as his bride and is again in need of Siegfried's great strength and cunning in order to overcome the lady's ferocious resistance to all suitors. This resistance combines in the person of Brünhild the figure of the beautiful courtly lady with that of the *vålandinne* (“she-devil”), and in Island the locus of courting with that of a realm to be conquered.⁹ Siegfried tells Gunther he will help, not out of a spirit of friendship (although this may still be implicit), but because the opportunity to conquer Brünhild presents itself simultaneously as an opportunity to win Kriemhild:

“gîstu mir dîne swester, sô wil ich ez tuon,
 die scænen Kriemhilde, ein kûneginne hêr.
 sô ger ich deheines lônes nâch mînen arbeiten mêr.” (333,2-4)

⁹ Here as elsewhere, Ehrismann perceives the broader political significance of the action when he points out that Brünhild's strength symbolizes the power of her land, and that the games between her and Gunther/Siegfried symbolize the defense of this land (Ehrismann 127).

Throughout this entire venture, Siegfried occupies a position of leadership. He not only brings the expedition to its destination, but also devises and executes the plan that will achieve the seemingly impossible goal of winning Brünhild. This plan has two parts: Siegfried, whose prowess is known by everyone in Island (while Gunther is an unknown stranger), *visibly* bolsters Gunther's position by pretending to be his vassal, then *invisibly* enables the Burgundian king to win Brünhild in the contests of strength. In the first part of the plan, within the courtly context of Brünhild's reception of the Burgundians, the status of political subordination that has been implied by Siegfried's love service to Kriemhild becomes a concrete and visible expression of feudal subservience when Siegfried holds Gunther's stirrup (397), a service perhaps corresponding to the *officium stratoris et strepae* mentioned in the *Sachsenspiegel*.¹⁰ While Siegfried is visibly subservient to Gunther, invisibly he is again manifesting the leadership that he has held from the beginning of this expedition. Nothing indicates Siegfried's position of (covert) supremacy more strikingly than the fact that he provides the strength to accomplish the physical contest against Brünhild, while Gunther merely pretends to participate. To onlookers in Island, only Gunther is seen; to the audience, able to understand what is really happening, a different conclusion must be drawn about who, in fact, is conquering Brünhild and her realm. This conquest of Brünhild and her land is completed by what amounts to a re-enactment of Siegfried's conquest of the Nibelungs (cf. 482–506), as if to remind the audience that obtaining dominion over others has been and continues to be one of the poem's central concerns. The arrival of Siegfried and his Nibelungen warriors eliminates the possibility of any further resistance from Island to Burgundian supremacy.

At this point, the element of subservience in Siegfried's relationship to Gunther falls away temporarily, continuing only as a memory in the mind of Brünhild. At the same time, the element of friendship also seems to be temporarily weakened: Gunther has to beg Siegfried to bear news of the Burgundians' good fortune to Worms. The temporary weakening of these two bonds corresponds to a strengthening of the third: upon officially receiving Kriemhild, Siegfried, as a new king in the land of the Burgundians (as which he is designated by Kriemhild in 662), overtly occupies the position of power that he has long held implicitly. The last "service" performed by Siegfried on behalf of Gunther (which is, as always, also a deed he performs for himself), is a continuation and culmination of the conquest of Brünhild (now within the locus of the conjugal bed). Noting Gunther's low spirits following the night in which Brünhild ended his amorous advances by hanging him by a nail in the wall, Siegfried volunteers to help the king avoid

a repetition of this ignominious defeat. By means of this assistance, Siegfried again seems to exercise rights officially pertaining to the Burgundian king and thus to assert his supremacy. While it is clear that Siegfried does not have sexual intercourse with Brünhild, he nevertheless violates her symbolically by taking her ring and belt after he has finally managed to overcome her resistance. A perceptive reading of this episode in terms of a metaphorical, if not literal rape of Brünhild by Siegfried is offered by Frakes.¹¹ Although there seems to be little doubt that it is Gunther who deflowers the weakened Brünhild, it is clearly Siegfried who overcomes her virginal strength. We may therefore say that the connection between Brünhild, Kriemhild, and supremacy in the land of the Burgundians finds yet another expression: Siegfried not only enjoys the embraces of the king's sister, but in this final "service" to Gunther, he also shares a bed with the king's wife, where he has a hand in the loss of her virginity and at the same time seizes objects that are symbolic of her power.¹² Later on, in the crucial episode depicting the railing of the queens before the portal of the Worms cathedral, Kriemhild does not speak without justification when she maintains that it was Siegfried, and not Gunther, who overcame the power of Brünhild's *magetuum*.

When Siegfried returns with his wife to Xanten, a festival is held that surpasses in its splendor the one just held in Worms and, contrary to earlier announced intentions, Siegfried receives his father's crown. The power he has managed to obtain by the strength of his hand over the Nibelungs and over the Burgundians (i.e., in the person of Kriemhild) has thus apparently translated also into the kingship over his own heritable lands. The time that transpires between the previous events in Worms and their later violent culmination, combined with the distance separating Siegfried and his wife from the Burgundians, is suggestive of a harmony that is illusory. Although the Burgundians still command the resources to compete with Siegfried in courtly splendor, it is not surprising that there is at least one powerful person, namely Brünhild, who seems to resent that the price of Siegfried's fame appears to have been paid by the Burgundians. It may be to test the validity of her suspicion, and to collect a debt she feels is owed her, that she begins to press her husband to insist upon a visit from their "vassal" Siegfried: "Swie hôhe rîche wære deheines küniges man, / swaz im gebüte sîn herre, daz sold' er doch niht lân" (728,1–2). The fame of Siegfried, and the resentment of it on the part of Brünhild, indicate that the power struggle between the young hero from the Netherlands and the Burgundian kings has not been concluded, but only temporarily suspended. Brünhild, now the strongest

¹⁰ See Heinze 69.

¹¹ Jerold C. Frakes, *Brides and Doom: Gender, Property, and Power in Medieval German Women's Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994) 121–126.

¹² Ehrismann 134.

advocate of Burgundian supremacy, will be satisfied only by an overt demonstration of a subservience that has not been manifested since Siegfried completed his *Minnedienst*.

Although seemingly contradictory, the respective assumptions of Kriemhild and Brünhild about the current state of power relations in Worms are correct and consistent with earlier events in the poem. Based on the different aspects that have been present in the relationship between Siegfried and Gunther from the beginning, Brünhild has good reason to insist on the subservience of Siegfried, while Kriemhild is no less justified in considering that her husband is equal if not superior to her brothers in power, status, and fame.¹³ At the moment of the queens' confrontation, and subsequent to this confrontation, courtly forms no longer seem to be able, as they were in the beginning, to absorb and redirect aggression toward an external target. The Burgundian kings no longer control a "resource" that binds Siegfried to them in a relatively pacific and constructive way. The relationship between Siegfried and the Burgundians is consequently restructured in terms of overt antagonism. Most of the figures necessary for the murder of Siegfried are drawn quickly into this antagonism, most easily Hagen, with some reluctance Gunther, and eventually even the courtly Gernot and Giselher. Siegfried's flaw, if he has one, is that he continues to count on the value of the element of friendship, and Kriemhild, despite her problems with Brünhild, also seems to build upon the weak foundation of friendship when she reveals to Hagen the spot between Siegfried's shoulders where the otherwise invincible warrior is vulnerable. If friendship can be viewed as a last remnant of courtliness in the relationship between Siegfried and the Burgundians, then courtliness enables the Burgundians to realize a plan by stealth that could not be realized in overt conflict because of Siegfried's mythic invulnerability.

The differing assumptions of Siegfried and the Burgundians find concrete expression in the hunt, which contains remnants of the aborted military conflict against the Saxons that it has seemingly replaced. Siegfried's energies are directed into the courtly aspect of the hunt as an aristocratic diversion, although his supremacy over the Burgundians continues to manifest itself, albeit in a relatively pacific form corresponding to the event in which he understands himself to be involved, in his superior prowess as a hunter. Aggression on his part against the Burgundians even occurs, although only as a jest, when he "attacks" his fellow hunters by releasing a bear into their

¹³ See Siegfried Beyschlag, "Das Motiv der Macht bei Siegfrieds Tod," *GRM* 33 (1951/52): 95–108. Beyschlag also sees the words of Kriemhild in the confrontation between the queens as a "Machtanspruch" (197). A contrast to this view is offered by Ehrismann, who appears to diminish the political significance of Kriemhild's words by attributing them to a momentary, individual lapse on her part, even as he clearly remains aware of the long history of this claim to power (141).

camp, only to demonstrate his mastery again by slaying the animal when the others cannot. The Burgundians Gunther and Hagen rely on the hunt being understood as such by Siegfried, even if it is, from their perspective, something closer to the aborted military campaign. The dual nature of this final event before Siegfried's death — is it a military undertaking or a courtly diversion? — is suggested by the presence on Siegfried's hunting clothes of the mark that Kriemhild had ostensibly placed on the back of the armor he was to wear against the Saxons.¹⁴

What could not be achieved in open conflict, because of Siegfried's great power and strength, is achieved by means of a surprise attack, but with the same result from the perspective of the Burgundians. When Hagen drives a spear through Siegfried's back, as the latter bends down at the fountain to quench his thirst, an end is put to Siegfried's supremacy. Hagen's deed is an act of liberation from the supremacy of Siegfried, and it is cast as such by Hagen himself in his response to Gunther's belated regret about the young hero's fate:

Dô sprach der grimme Hagene: "jane weiz ich, waz ir kleit.
ez hât nu allez ende unser sorge unt unser leit.
wir vinden ir vil wênic, die getürren uns bestân.
wol mich, deich sîner hêrschaft hân ze rate getân." (993)

The killing of Siegfried has freed the Burgundians from Siegfried's supremacy, or *hêrschaft*, and transformed the entire world into a terrain of future conquest. It has brought the *hort* of the Nibelungs to Worms on the Rhine and conferred victory upon Brünhild in her courtly struggle with Kriemhild which, as we have seen, has been a continuation of the broader struggle for power between Siegfried and the Burgundians.

In the second part of the poem, the basic positions remain very similar, even as the figures who occupy them change. Where in the first part of the poem we observe Siegfried and his Nibelungs confronting the Burgundian kings, in the second part we see Hagen (bearing Siegfried's sword) and the Burgundians (Nibelungs) falling aggressively into the lands of Gelpfrat and Else, taking the sword of Eckewart (a transparent symbolic assault on the border region of Etzel's realm that Eckewart is guarding), and behaving with an offensive swagger and arrogance in the land of the Huns that is at least as consistent with the attitude of conquerors as it is with that of guests at a

¹⁴ I am obviously assuming that such discrepancies may not simply be dismissed as the errors of an author who is more or less successfully grappling with different literary traditions (i.e., dismissed in terms of *Stoffgeschichte*). In my view, the literary and cultural significance of this poem cannot and should not be limited to what the author was (not) able to do with his sources.

courtly festival who fear they will be attacked. The Nibelungs, like Siegfried, are victims of a surprise attack (Blöedel attacks Dancwart and his men, while the strongest of the Burgundian force is dining with Etzel), and even as they defend themselves to the death against apparently insurmountable odds, they occupy Etzel's hall, the symbolic center of power in the land of the Huns. Close scrutiny of the second part, were it possible in this context, would indicate that conquest continues to be an interest of the poem, an interest that is only partially obscured by the motivational weight placed on Kriemhild's revenge.

V

The thoroughgoing interest in conquest in the *Nibelungenlied* doubtless contributed to the popularity of this poem among its medieval audiences, most of which would have been familiar not only with the mythical allure, but also with the practical aspects and material benefits of conquest. We have seen that courtliness in the *Nibelungenlied* does not stand apart from this interest in conquest, but rather is another way of giving expression to it. The involvement of courtliness in the violent business of conquest can be no surprise, given that the long history of court societies in Europe is also basically a history of conquest, and not merely the history of the gradual refinement of tastes and curbing of aggression as which courtliness tends to be understood in the interpretation of literature. Courtly forms of interaction in the *Nibelungenlied* cannot serve as a peaceful and innocent refuge to which modern readers and scholars, perhaps motivated by the ideological uses to which this poem has been put, could seek refuge.

Since there would seem to be no instance or principle in this poem that is not in some way connected to the struggle for supremacy, it is no misunderstanding or misappropriation of the poem, but simply a recognition of its interest in conquest, when nineteenth-century discussions of the *Nibelungenlied*, many of which are cited and discussed by Heinze,¹⁵ take a starkly militaristic tone, defining the German character in terms identifiable with conquest. The foundation of the nineteenth-century understanding of the *Nibelungenlied* was laid by Friedrich von der Hagen in the foreword of his 1807 edition of the poem, who managed to link what he viewed as typically German virtues (*Tugenden*), such as loyalty, courage, and honesty, with arrogance, defiance, revenge, and bloodthirstiness, the virtues being made even more prominent in their inextricable connection (*Verschlingung*) with these darker forces. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Vilmar had begun in his popular literary history to focus more exclusively on

loyalty, or *Treue*, as the most significant aspect of the *Nibelungenlied*, identifying it with the uncompromising attitude with which the warrior follows his leader, if necessary to the death.¹⁶ The culmination of the nationalistic reading of the *Nibelungenlied* in terms of conquest may be found in Hermann Göring's *Wehrmachtsappell* in 1943. When Göring likens the efforts of German soldiers to those of the Nibelungs at the court of Etzel, it is clear that it does not matter that the Nibelungs lose in the end — that the secret of conquest remains unknown and perhaps unknowable — just as it does not matter that the *Wehrmacht* is about to lose catastrophically against the Red Army in Stalingrad. What seems to matter is not the eventual outcome, but rather the glory that is to be won in the passionate, single-minded, relentless pursuit of a single thing. It seems historically appropriate to view the interest underlying this attitude — the generally unstated goal behind the dedicated passion of *Treue* — as that of conquest. German nationalists did not err in recognizing this interest in the *Nibelungenlied*. If at all, they erred in identifying it as something specifically German.

¹⁵ See Heinze 98–103.

¹⁶ A. F. C. Vilmar, *Geschichte der deutschen national-literatur* (Marburg: Elwert, 1848) 60–61.