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## HAGEN AND THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUALITY IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

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### I

The history of *Nibelungenlied*\* scholarship is a fascinating chapter within the larger scope of Germanic philology.<sup>1</sup> More than any other work of the *Blütezeit* the *Nibelungenlied* has attracted researchers for reasons other than purely aesthetic. Only in the last thirty years has the emphasis of research been shifted to an evaluation of the epic as a literary work.<sup>2</sup> One of the main problems of this modern criticism has been to disentangle the *Nibelungenlied* from its contemporary epic companions, the Arthurian romances, most notably those of Hartmann and Wolfram. As a result the *Nibelungenlied* is compared either expressly or tacitly with the romances and is evaluated in their terms. For many the *Nibelungenlied* is a Christian/courtly work, while for others it is Germanic/heroic, depending upon how many common features the epic is seen by the individual scholar to share with the Arthurian tales.<sup>3</sup> Although these views do not necessarily bring any greater clarification of the meaning of the *Nibelungenlied*, their presence is quite understandable. The Arthurian society, with its emphasis on youth, harmony, and idealized knighthood as well as on deeds of great nobility and compassion, has a far greater attraction for the researcher than the Nibelungen society which is a heady mixture of violence, barbarity, and cruelty, relieved only occasionally by lighter moments of beauty and joy. Further, the resolution of the moral conflicts in the *Nibelungenlied* does not take place in an atmosphere of joy and reconciliation, but rather in one of tragedy and tears.

Faced with this state of affairs, it is small wonder that the epic often suffers by comparison with the optimistic Arthurian romance. Since the idealistic ambience of the romance is taken as the norm, it is difficult not to view the *Nibelungenlied* as being antithetical to the beauty of these other works and their central theme, the dignity of the individual. Such a view, however, imposes upon the work a mode of thought which is alien to the matter of the *Nibelungenlied* in that it emanates from critical reflection not so much upon the *Nibelungenlied* itself but upon other works. This process tends to obscure the intention of the poet and the meaning of his work. If the *Nibelungenlied* does have points in *Monatshefte* Vol. 68, No. 1, 1976

common with the Arthurian romances, they should be elicited by an analysis of the epic itself. Thus the starting point of the investigation should not be the question how does the *Nibelungenlied* reflect the mode of the Arthurian romance, but rather why did some unknown person around 1200 take up a tale which had its ultimate roots in events which took place several hundred years previous and fashion an epic *apparently* so completely out of place, when compared with the creations of his contemporaries.

In recent years one critical approach has appeared which seems best suited to answer this question. It postulates that the poet is making a statement about the social and political conditions of his age, namely about the dominant structure of feudalism.<sup>4</sup> Feudalism is a system of relationships in which individuals are bound together by solemn oaths of loyalty. In different countries it manifested itself in various ways, but the fundamental principle of a pledge of service to someone of a higher station and the acceptance of this pledge is the most common feature.<sup>5</sup> Mixed in with feudal theory of political relationships are also the ancient communal ties of the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus, so that by 1200 the feudal system in Germany had a complex structure influencing all aspects of social and political life. And, as Walter Ullmann has pointed out, it was a system in which the individual was an important factor:

One thing seems clear, and that is that the feudal arrangement, at whatever level it was practiced, of necessity presupposed the responsibility of the individual. It was not just a matter of receiving a command or a law, but it was necessary to employ one's own critical faculties.<sup>6</sup>

To determine if the Nibelungen poet is addressing himself to problems connected with the feudal bond and the roles of the individuals who comprise it, the two major scenes of discord within the *Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried's murder and the combat between Rüdiger and the Burgundians, will be singled out for consideration. In both episodes the conflict between that which is seen to be legal and personal obligation is given prominence and is commented on by the poet. In order to view this conflict at close hand and thereby get a glimpse of the possible purpose of the poet and the meaning of his work, the actions and motives of the major protagonist in both scenes, Hagen, will be analyzed.

This task is somewhat complicated because few figures in German literature have managed to arouse such strong passions in scholars as Hagen of Tronje. Indeed it is not even possible to say that scholarly opinion about Hagen is divided; it is fragmented. Gottfried Weber views Hagen as "dämoniegeladen".<sup>7</sup> Bert Nagel sees in Hagen the Germanic hero, the absolute opposite of the Christian knight.<sup>8</sup> For Hugo Bekker, Hagen remains the reprehensible traitor, all of whose actions originate from his treachery.<sup>9</sup> Bodo Mergell, on the other hand, believes to glimpse Hagen in his final scene with Kriemhild as standing "stellvertretend vor Gott," while David G. Mowatt and Hugh Sacker suggest the possibility that Hagen is a latent homosexual.<sup>10</sup> If, however, the thesis that the poet

wishes to examine the feudal problematic and, further, to comment on his characters' conception of their responsibilities within this relationship is used as the starting point, a less sensational evaluation of Hagen and his actions can be achieved.<sup>11</sup>

## II

At the Burgundian court Hagen functions as the chief vassal of the king, a position which he zealously fulfills. His one concern is to uphold and preserve the honor and integrity of his lord, regardless of the consequences. Hagen has responsibility toward Siegfried only insofar as the latter is a friend and ally of the Burgundians. For Hagen Siegfried is simply a means to an end, that end being the greater honor of his king. Until the quarrel of the queens there is no indication of personal feelings on his part toward Siegfried, neither friendship nor enmity. In all the adventures which the Burgundians undertake until Siegfried's marriage, namely the Saxon War and the wooing expedition to Island, Hagen consistently manipulates to include Siegfried in the plans, ostensibly to insure that nothing goes awry. Once Kriemhild has publicly insulted Brunhild, however, Hagen feels compelled to intervene directly because through this insult the honor of his king has been attacked, and he must act decisively to erase this blot.

It is primarily the murder of Siegfried which has earned Hagen the opprobrium of most critics. Most recently Ursula Mahlendorf and Frank Tobin have attempted to view the problem free of emotional excess and in the light of medieval law.<sup>12</sup> Their basic argument is that the characters of the *Nibelungenlied*, but especially Gunther and Hagen, violate principles both of form and law. Gunther does so by not adhering to proper legal formality when Brunhild lodges her complaint against Kriemhild and later by not convening a court after the *Bahrprobe* (pp. 230–232). Hagen, through his actions, violates the spirit of the law, even if he does abide by the form (pp. 233–235). Gunther, by his support of Hagen both in the murder and the subsequent theft of the treasure, places the entire Burgundian society outside of the law and proper form (pp. 234–235). The authors' view that Siegfried's death and the events leading up to it should be considered as a legal problem is quite correct. However, by concentrating on the expected form surrounding a legal case and by reliance on a later written code of law (*Sachsenspiegel*) they neglect the possibility that according to the law which had force at the time of the *Nibelungenlied*—namely that which the *audience* would consider to have validity—Siegfried's murder was *legal*. Further the poet is not saying that Gunther and Hagen are *ungereht* but rather *ungetriuwe*. The law which had validity at this time, and indeed for centuries thereafter, in spite of written codes, is customary law.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the question should not concern matters of form but rather should be: was Hagen justified, according to customary law, to take the life of Siegfried? The answer must be yes. The ancient

concept of *Blutrache* was a 'legitimate' and viable force throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup> Although the *treuga dei* initiated by the Church and the various proclamations of *Landfrieden* by the emperors attempted to curtail the taking of blood revenge, their general lack of effectiveness is attested to by the fact that the taking of revenge was banned absolutely under all circumstances only in 1495.<sup>15</sup> Also because *Blutrache* is part of Germanic customary law and had, therefore, the force of tradition and communal consensus behind it, it would be favored over any written edict.<sup>16</sup> Further, by feudal times an insult was considered to be a blood offense (*Zacharias*) so that the legal basis for Hagen's action is apparently sound. Grotesque as it may seem, it appears that Hagen acts from the noblest of motives, to avenge the insult done to his queen and, by extension, his king. Indeed Hagen, himself, states the above as the sole reason for his murderous attack on Siegfried on several occasions (864; 873), and most emphatically during his confrontation with Kriemhild when the Burgundians arrive at Etzel's court:

Er sprach: "waz sol des mêre? der rede is nû genuoc.  
ich binz aber Hagene der Sîfriden sluoc,  
den helt ze sînen handen. wie sêre er des engalt  
daz diu vrouwe Kriemhilt die schoenen Prûnhilden schalt! . . . (1790)

But in spite of the authority of custom Hagen is castigated by the poet for faithfully discharging his duties. The murder is decried in the strongest possible terms, as *untriuwe*.<sup>17</sup> By so doing the poet is denying unconditional validity to this feudal practice and is unequivocally saying that the ancient principle of *Blutrache* which had been assimilated within the feudal system is wrong. For although custom demanded Siegfried's death, conscience did not, a fact which Gunther recognized earlier when pressed by Hagen to take revenge:

Dô sprach der künic selbe: "er'n hât uns niht getân  
niwan guot und êre; man sol in leben lân.  
was tuoc ob ich dem recken waere nu gehaz?  
er was uns ie getriuwe und tet vil willeclîche daz." (868)

Here Gunther has the opportunity to act in accordance with a more humane ethos of peace and reconciliation. He has already accepted Siegfried's explanation of innocence (860) and is willing to let matters stand. In the face of his chief advisor, however, Gunther is not strong enough to prevail, to do that which he knows to be right. He sacrifices his friend and ally to the dictates of the law and thereby abdicates his individual responsibilities toward him. While the matter is legally defensible, it is morally wrong. By slaying Siegfried Hagen has fulfilled his obligations to Gunther, yet in the arena of morality he has committed an unjust act, as has Gunther for assenting to the deed. In the murder of Siegfried the poet is not lamenting improper legal procedures but rather an improper moral action permissible within the existing legal and social structure. To stress his view of what the correct behavior in such a situation should be, the

poet returns to the conflict between that which is legally admissable and that which is morally right in “*aventure 37*.”

### III

Just as Hagen has managed to win the disfavor of most critics of the *Nibelungenlied*, Rüdiger of Bechlarn in like measure has won their sympathy.<sup>18</sup> No other character in the work is so universally loved and respected. Rüdiger is the gentle surrogate for Etzel with Kriemhild, and he naively believes that the noble love of his lord will help Siegfried's widow forget her sorrow (1234). His probity is so well known that Gunther allows him to state the purpose of his visit immediately, even though that is not the proper form within the feudal system (1192). Rüdiger is the friend of the Burgundians and especially of Hagen whom he knew when Hagen was a hostage at Etzel's court. He is the gracious host and giftgiver when the Burgundians remain at Bechlarn on their journey to Gran. He is also the proud father who gives his daughter in marriage to Giselher. Thus before the climactic battle Rüdiger stands in close personal bonds with the Burgundians. Added to his later difficulty but not qualitatively altering his relationship is the fact that he also escorts the Burgundians to Gran, imposing the further obligation of safe conduct on him. Completing the picture of Rüdiger's obligations to all parties are his feudal ties to Etzel and Kriemhild, supplemented by the formal oath of protection he swore to Kriemhild while he was at Worms (1258).

Even after the battle has started, Rüdiger, seeking to uphold his feelings of responsibility toward the Burgundians, attempts to remain neutral. Only upon the pleading of Etzel and Kriemhild does he succumb and agree to abide by his feudal duties, in spite of the fact that he knows he will be doing wrong. He will lose his soul (2150), and all his virtues such as *êre*, *triuwe*, and *zuht* will be gone (2153). Rüdiger feels himself torn between two opposing loyalties. Legally, however, Rüdiger should experience no conflict since by entering the battle he is only doing that which is required of him under law, the defense of his lord. Etzel certainly has the right to call on Rüdiger for assistance since, in his view, he has been unjustly attacked. Rüdiger's attempt to renounce his obligations to Etzel through the *diffidatio* (2157) must be viewed as a final desperate act.<sup>19</sup> Etzel refuses to release him from his bond, and Rüdiger cannot now abandon his lord in this moment of gravity. To do so would be to his everlasting dishonor. In like manner are his later statements concerning his obligations to the Burgundians as his guests and relations through marriage (2159–2161) to be seen, feeble attempts to avoid the inevitable. For in such a case his feudal responsibilities override any others he may have, even according to one source, blood kin, something the Burgundians were not.<sup>20</sup>

Rüdiger is clearly in an impossible situation, morally. His king holds him to his feudal obligations, and the Burgundians refuse to relinquish him from their

ties of friendship (2179). Like Gunther in Part I, Rüdiger here recognizes that his adherence to law is questionable, and also like Gunther he is unable to assert his individuality and make the correct moral decision. What the proper mode of behavior should have been is to be shown by what appears to be the most unlikely of persons, Hagen. For as Rüdiger sorrowfully prepares to do battle, Hagen calls to him and bids that they should talk some more (2193). Further he complains that the shield which Gotelind gave him has been destroyed and he appeals to Rüdiger to give him his own shield (2195). Rüdiger willingly does so with the wish that Hagen return with it to Worms (2196). This simple exchange has given Rüdiger one last chance to evidence his noble nature, and the effect it has on Hagen is striking. For after he has received the shield from Rüdiger, he laments:

“Sô wê mir dirre maere”, sprach aber Hagene.  
 “wir heten ander swaere sô vil ze tragene:  
 sul wir mit friunden strîten, daz sî got gekleit.” (2200, 1–3)

He goes on to say:

“Nu lôn’ ich iu der gâbe, vil edel Ruedegêr  
 swie halt gein iu gebâren dise recken hêr,  
 daz nimmer iuch gerüeret in strîte hie mîn hant,  
 ob ir si alle slüeget die von Burgonden lant.” (2201)

With this statement Hagen has discarded, for this encounter, his feudal *triuwe* to his lords.<sup>21</sup> In essence, then, Hagen is being *ungetriuwe* toward his kings, and can no longer be considered the perfect vassal. Hagen, who killed Siegfried to preserve the honor of his lord, now chooses to disregard his feudal obligation in favor of his personal one to Rüdiger when the threat of physical danger is much more immediate than in the previous episode. Astonishing as this turn in events may seem at first glance, the Nibelungen poet has been slowly preparing the way for the replacement of *der grimme Hagene* by Hagen, *trôst der Nibelunge*.<sup>22</sup> This process of “rehabilitation” begins as the Burgundians are riding out from Worms toward Gran. The poet says of him, “er was den Nibelungen ein helflicher trôst” (1526, 2). This appellation is later repeated by Dietrich von Bern as the warriors arrive at Etzel’s court (1726, 4). He has been specially greeted by Rüdiger and his wife, and Etzel, once he recognizes his old friend, cannot see anything sinister about him (1754). Clearly, then, the poet wishes to move away from Hagen, the slayer of Siegfried, and his *untriuwe* and emphasize now his good qualities. For it is precisely this new side of Hagen, his noble nature, which the poet chooses to accent when he has Hagen discard his vassal loyalty in favor of his friendship with Rüdiger.

In this scene the poet has utilized the character of Hagen to the best possible advantage. For by having Hagen make the decision to do what, under the circumstances, is morally right but legally improper, he has left no doubt as

to his attitude toward the responsibilities of individuals within the feudal system. The bond of friendship which united Gunther and Siegfried and Rüdiger and the Burgundians has more moral weight than the legal considerations in those instances when the cause to break the former is unjust. In the eyes of the poet no provocation is sufficient for blood revenge. Thus Hagen's insistence that Siegfried be killed and that the law be followed leads to his condemnation. In "âventiure 37" when he acts in an unlawful manner he is not criticized by the poet, not even by his king! Rüdiger, on the other hand, expresses his certain knowledge that what he is doing goes against morality to the extent that his soul will be lost. In both instances the individuals who had the possibility to avert tragedy, Gunther and Rüdiger, were not strong enough to assert their individuality. Hagen, on the one occasion on which he experiences this conflict, betrays no uncertainty and acts without hesitation. His action is not enough to undo all the forces which have been set in motion, but it is sufficient to give Rüdiger a chance to engage in the battle with some measure of honor and, more importantly, shows the members of the feudal audience that in instances of moral conflict it is possible to go against law and custom and still retain one's honor and worth as an individual.

The stress on individual moral decision leads to a new evaluation of the *Nibelungenlied* and illustrates that the epic is not such an anomaly within the courtly period, but rather has the great theme of the individual in common with the Arthurian romances. But unlike the romances in which the individual is set apart from his society and achieves his own higher, more intimate calling, the individual in the *Nibelungenlied* is seen as an integral part of his society. And for that society to function, to be considered a just and moral organization, it is the duty of each member to behave in a moral and responsible manner, not merely for his own good but for that of society as a whole. The poet is not working within an idealized atmosphere with ideal heroes, but rather he operates within a definable political structure which threatens, in his view, to hinder the moral decision-making ability of the individual on occasions. His goal is to allow the feudal system and its adherents the opportunity to achieve their potential. By taking the matter of the ancient legends of Siegfried and the Nibelungen and by restructuring it to apply to the contemporary situation of the feudal system, the Nibelungen poet has presented his audience not with an antiquarian conceit but either consciously or unconsciously follows in the tradition of the ancient singers who sought not only to entertain but also to edify their listeners with their songs.

\*The basis of this study is ms. B. All quotations and stanza numbers are taken from the Karl Bartsch edition of *Das Nibelungenlied*, ed. Helmut deBoor, 17th ed. (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus Verlag, 1963).

<sup>1</sup>Most recently presented in: Werner Hoffmann, *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldendichtung* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1974), pp. 69–76.



<sup>2</sup>See: Francis G. Gentry, "Trends in *Nibelungenlied* Research since 1949: A Critical Review," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 7 (1974), 125–139.

<sup>3</sup>See among others: Friedrich Maurer, *Leid, Studien zur Bedeutungs- und Problemgeschichte besonders in den großen Epen der staufischen Zeit*, 3rd ed. (Bern & München: Francke Verlag, 1964), pp. 13–38; Bodo Mergell, "Nibelungenlied und höfischer Roman," *Euphorion*, 45 (1950), 305–336; Bert Nagel, *Das Nibelungenlied. Stoff, Form, Ethos* (Frankfurt/M: Hirschgraben Verlag, 1965); Walter Johannes Schröder, "Das *Nibelungenlied*. Versuch einer Deutung," *PBB* (Halle), 76 (1954/55), 56–156; Gottfried Weber, *Das Nibelungenlied. Problem und Idee* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1963).

Of the above Maurer and Schröder view the *Nibelungenlied* as being basically Germanic/heroic, while Nagel and Mergell lean toward the Christian/courtly interpretation. Weber believes that the Nibelungen poet was seeking a new concept "eines germanisch-heldisch-christlichen Gott-Mensch-Welt-Bildes." (p. 194).

<sup>4</sup>See Gentry, 136–139.

<sup>5</sup>Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), I, pp. 145–162; F.L. Ganshof, *Feudalism*, 3d ed., trans. Philip Grierson (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 72–75.

<sup>6</sup>Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 65.

<sup>7</sup>Weber, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup>Nagel, p. 268.

<sup>9</sup>Hugo Bekker, *Das Nibelungenlied: A Literary Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 124–126, 133, 135–136.

<sup>10</sup>Mergell, pp. 322–323; David Mowatt & Hugh Sacker, *The Nibelungenlied: An Interpretative Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 92.

<sup>11</sup>Hoffmann, pp. 84–85.

<sup>12</sup>Ursula Mahlendorf & Frank Tobin, "Legality and Formality in the *Nibelungenlied*," *Monatshefte*, 66 (1974), pp. 225–238.

<sup>13</sup>Ullmann, pp. 59–60; Fritz Kern, *Recht und Verfassung im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965), p. 32; Heinrich Brunner, *Grundzüge der deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, 3d ed. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup>Rainer Zacharias, "Die Blutrache im deutschen Mittelalter," *ZfdA*, 91 (1962), 167–201, here, 182–188.

<sup>15</sup>Brunner, pp. 164–165.

<sup>16</sup>Ullmann, pp. 59–60; Kern, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup>Stanzas: 876, 1–2; 915, 4; 988, 3–4; 1074, 1–2; 971, 4; 887, 3; 911, 4; 916, 1–2.

<sup>18</sup>The literature on Rüdiger and his dilemma generally accepts the fact that the poet wished to portray Rüdiger as a decent honorable man. The reader is directed to a recent study by Jochen Splett in which the various theories about Rüdiger are critically treated: *Rüdiger von Bechlarn* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 1968). A less charitable view of Rüdiger is held by Weber who refers to him as a "höfischer Ehrgeizling" (p. 99) and a "Kulturchrist" (p. 94). A similar, but less radical, view has been recently offered by Hugo Bekker, "Rüdiger von Bechlarn and Dietrich von Bern," *Monatshefte*, 66 (1974), pp. 239–253.

<sup>19</sup>deBoor, FN 2157; Peter Wapnewski, "Rüdigers Schild: Zur 37. Aventure des *Nibelungenliedes*," *Euphorion*, 54 (1960), 380–410, here, 390.

<sup>20</sup>Bloch, I, p. 234.

<sup>21</sup>The significance of this action has been passed over by scholars with the exception of Peter Wapnewski, pp. 396–398 and Hoffmann, pp. 84–85.

<sup>22</sup>For a fuller presentation of the change in Hagen's character see: Francis G. Gentry, *Triuwe and Vriunt in the Nibelungenlied* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Verlag, 1975), pp. 77–79.