Female Agency in the *Nibelungenlied*

A comparative analysis of agency in the characters of Kriemhild and Brunhild

Bachelor Thesis Literary Studies

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Abstract

This thesis explores female agency in the *Nibelungenlied* by analysing the characters of Kriemhild and Brunhild. Their respective agency is linked to their constitution and enactment of emotion, such as grief, shame and revenge. Kriemhild's and Brunhild's agency changes throughout the epic. Brunhild's agency decreases as the epic progresses, while Kriemhild's agency grows. This research shows how the change in agency of both Kriemhild and Brunhild is connected to their respective diversion from and adaption to courtly society. Through close reading and broader readings of the narrative, this development is connected to a rise in female agency in epic society, and a reduction of female agency in courtly circles.

This thesis argues that female agency is connected to displays of epic and courtly elements in the *Nibelungenlied.* These displays are in turn connected to the performance and enactment of emotion. This argument is articulated through a discussion of the characters and character development of Kriemhild and Brunhild. Through the discussion of female agency in this High Medieval epic, this thesis on the one hand aims to gain a better understanding of both epic and courtly society through their representation in the *Nibelungenlied*. On the other hand, this research aims to show the relevance of the *Nibelungenlied* in contemporary academic debates on politics of the female.

Keywords

The *Nibelungenlied*; Kriemhild; Brunhild; female agency; gender boundaries; performativity; emotion; revenge; epic; heroic; courtly; courtly love; *ordo*; *inordinatio*

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Introduction

Love and revenge are two grand, connected themes that underlie many narratives today, be that in real life or in the world of books and films. Another very relevant topic at present is female agency and the underlying debate on gender roles and equality. A literary source that – contrary to first impressions – quite prominently displays female agency in connection to love and revenge is the Germanic epic the *Nibelungenlied.* Composed around 1200, the epic is situated in a courtly environment, while also displaying elements more appropriate in the 'epic' society of the distant past that the poet places the *Nibelungenlied* in. There are thirty-six known manuscripts and manuscript fragments containing – part of – the *Nibelungenlied,* of which eleven contain the full epic (van Vredendaal xxv). The three oldest manuscripts, categorised by philologist Karl Lachmann as A, B and C, all stem from the early (B & C) to late (A) thirteenth century. Overall, B is in most articles taken as the dominant manuscript, as it is significantly different in content from C, but similar to A, while earlier in date (van Vredendaal xxv). There are various translations of the *Nibelungenlied* – such as the translation by Ursula Schulze in Middle High German and New High German, Jaap van Vredendaal in Dutch and Burton Raffel in English. This thesis considers the differences between the various manuscripts, but takes the translation in Middle High German by Ursula Schulze as primary source. When further explanation or translation is required, quotations are accompanied by the Dutch translation of the *Nibelungenlied* by Jaap van Vredendaal.[1]

[1] *Das Nibelungenlied* in Ursula Schulze's edition based on manuscript C as found in the Badische Landesbibliothek in Karlsruhe. Van Vredendaal's edition closely resembles the Middle High German translation by Schulze, and as this is a Dutch thesis – though written in English – it can further clarify the Middle High German. The Dutch edition is therefore the accompanying translation. See also "Note on Primary Literature" in the appendix.

As mentioned above, the *Nibelungenlied* exhibits typical courtly elements such as courtly love and chivalric tournaments, but also shows older heroic elements such as supernatural strength and magical objects. These heroic elements probably originate in the oral origin of the *Nibelungenlied* (van Vredendaal xii). The contemporary courtly culture of the *Nibelungen* poet is projected onto this older story matter, but several notions of 'the epic' still shine through. Where courtly society portrays proper order in the *Nibelungenlied,* epic society represents a place of chaos – but also freedom, as we will see in a discussion of Kriemhild and Brunhild. Courtly society is strongly associated with terms such as courtly love, chivalry and proper conduct and order in light of Christianity (Innes 80, 91-2). This order places women firmly below men. Epic society reflects a pagan heroic warrior *ethos* (77). Epic literature often features elements of the supernatural, and women play a much more active and pivotal role (81). In this thesis, female agency is connected to displays of epic and courtly elements and society in the *Nibelungenlied.*

The epic starts and ends with one woman: Kriemhild. Her love for Siegfried and her revenge on his murderers shape the plot. Additionally, the emotional change from love to revenge also changes her character. As a female narrative character, Kriemhild goes through different stages: she starts as a maiden, becomes a wife, a mother, a widow and a queen. Brunhild is Kriemhild's opponent, and as such also plays an important role in the epic. Although Brunhild's narrative identity is similarly shaped by the different stages of life she passes through, the change of temper the reader encounters in Brunhild is different, perhaps even opposite to that of Kriemhild.

Whereas Kriemhild begins as courtly maiden, behaving according to her place in society, Brunhild is a virgin queen, ruling her own kingdom and behaving according to the rules made and implemented by the head of state; herself. At the beginning of the epic, Kriemhild is the epitome of a courtly damsel, while Brunhild is the epitome of an epic warrior

queen.[2] At the end of the epic, however, Kriemhild has made the transition from courtly lady to warrior queen. This can for instance be seen in Kriemhild's marriage to Etzel – which brings her authority and the loyalty of men – and her personal execution of power. Brunhild, on the other hand, loses her power after she is tricked into a marriage with Gunther, and thereby also loses the power to act on her own behalf. Where Kriemhild's character changes from 'courtly' to 'epic', Brunhild's character passes through the same change in reverse. The crux of this opposition lies in the way both women deal with emotion and how their emotional state motivates their actions. Though several scholars recognize the discrepancy in the *Nibelungenlied* caused by the conglomerate of courtly and epic literary elements (Bekker 165, Gentry 5, Price 350, Thorp 476) and/or the power of emotion in shaping – most often – Kriemhild's path (Henry 75, Lienert 486, Wideburg 205, Starkey 256), the two have not been previously linked together in a discussion of female agency in the *Nibelungenlied*.

Theoretical Framework and Research Method

The theoretical framework for this thesis is largely based on literary theories on poststructuralism, and specifically feminism and gender studies, which means this thesis offers a modern perspective on social and political mechanisms contained in the *Nibelungenlied.* This modern perspective shows the relevance of the *Nibelungenlied* today and illuminates pasts and practices that might not be so dark and far away as one would

[2] For the definition of a courtly damsel, I consider Laura Wideburg's dissertation *Kriemhild: Demon – Hero – Woman* and April Henry's dissertation *The Female Lament: Agency and Gender in Medieval German Literature*. They draw amongst others on female characters in medieval romances, such as Enide in Hartmann's *Erec.* The image of the epic warrior queen is established from Paul Innes book *Epic* – specifically chapter three: "From the Heroic towards Romance and Allegory" – and on the point of emotion from Sif Rikhardsdottir's article "Translating Emotion: Vocalisation and Embodiment in *Yvain* and *Ívens Saga*." These claims are further substantiated in the concerning chapters.

expect. Through close reading, passages constituting female agency, performances of emotion, and societal conduct can be explained and interpreted in the broader narrative of the *Nibelungenlied.*

In *Literary Theory: the Basics,* Hans Bertens describes poststructuralism as deconstructing binary oppositions (123), which not only oppose male versus female, but also for instance wilful versus submissive, and reason versus emotion. Feminist theory as articulated by Judith Butler strives to blur binary opposition. Her argument focusses on the construction of gender roles – how one should behave according to their gender – (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 4) and political agency – the ability of the 'agent' to wield power in the public sphere – together with performativity as a theory of agency – the way identity is performed to adhere to or break with accepted gender roles (Butler, Preface 1999 xxiii/iv). Gender issues are primarily visible in the *Nibelungenlied* when female actors acquire or lose personal and political agency – the power to execute one's own plan – which will be will be alluded to as 'female agency'.[3]

Structure of the Thesis

By combining these literary theories with close reading, I will create and compare character analyses of Kriemhild and Brunhild to shed new light on the important role these women play inside and outside the *Nibelungenlied,* and the way the narrator portrays a clash of the epic

[3] Female agency here means the power to execute one's own plan both in the private and the public sphere. This includes military force or the possibility of female violence. The main concern of various male characters – specifically Hagen – in the *Nibelungenlied* is the possibility of female characters to command an army by acquiring a large amount of money and/or the loyalty of men (e.g. stanzas 1142 and 1144). The *Nibelungenlied* also alludes several times to the danger of a man being killed by a woman, as this could encourage women to forget their place (e.g. stanzas 453 and 2433-37). See also 'Structure and Summary of the *Nibelungenlied*' in the appendix.

with the courtly by opposing them. The first chapter of this thesis discusses the character and character development of Kriemhild by looking specifically at her dreams, the way she expresses emotion – specifically grief – and the execution of her vengeance, with attention to the narrator's perspective. Chapter two analyses Brunhild's character through her display of power and agency, the breaking of her power, and her defence of courtly social order in her dispute with Kriemhild. Chapter three further discusses the relationship between Kriemhild and Brunhild, how their agency relates to financial (in)dependence, and how their agency and place in society relates to the nature of the *Nibelungenlied* as a whole. Female agency is presented in the *Nibelungenlied* in several ways, and is enacted in both accepted and challenged female spaces.[4] Nevertheless, in the end Kriemhild is condemned by her relatives, her own husband and courtly society as a whole because of her transgression of gender boundaries. However varied the manuscripts are, the *Nibelungenlied* ultimately portrays the failed acceptance of female agency, preferring the character of Brunhild, who slowly disappears into the background, to the vengeful Kriemhild – although this might also be interpreted as social criticism.

Research Question

Following this line of reasoning, the research question guiding this thesis is: How do the characters of Kriemhild and Brunhild develop on the point of female agency and how does

[4] With accepted or challenged female space I mean the possibility for a woman to enact power in her physical, direct surroundings. For example, Brunhild is queen of Iceland. The fact that she is an unmarried ruler without a man in a higher position than her, means female rule – or the enactment of female power – is accepted. Kriemhild marries Etzel to gain agency and to one day avenge her grief. It is impossible for her to take revenge in Worms, because the court of the Burgundians is a challenged female space that does not allow such female agency.

this connect to the representation of both courtly and epic society in the *Nibelungenlied*? Connected is the important sub-question: What is the role of emotion in the development of the plot and the change in temperament of both Kriemhild and Brunhild?

Chapter 1. Kriemhild: from Courtly Damsel to Epic Queen

In the first stanza of the *Nibelungenlied,* we learn five things about Kriemhild. She lives in Burgundy, she is of noble birth, she exceeds all in beauty, her name is Kriemhild, and last but not least: many knights will lose their lives because of her (2).[5] The narrator alludes to Kriemhild's doomed role in the plot throughout the *Nibelungenlied.* At first, the character of Kriemhild does not seem to resonate with this violent foreshadowing, but as her hate towards Hagen intensifies, her plan to take revenge on the 'Nibelungen' – referring to the new owners of the treasure of the Nibelungen; the Burgundians – slowly unfolds. In the final battle, army after army is destroyed *because* of Kriemhild, the narrator argues. But why this emphasis on Kriemhild's blame, right from the first stanza? This chapter will show that it is not just Kriemhild's revenge that drives the plot, but also a gendered perspective formed by the narrator and the reaction of Kriemhild's surroundings. They portray Kriemhild as the black sheep – a role that in the end, Kriemhild chooses to honour.

Katherine Starkey emphasizes the importance of power dynamics and the performative display of emotions in the *Nibelungenlied* in recognizing and asserting political power (256), which is visible in the public as well as in the personal sphere. Kriemhild's narrative identity and the different roles that define her are strongly connected to this. Close reading passages of important foreshadowing and fragments of grief and violence can explain Kriemhild's acquirement and performance of power. Overall, we see Kriemhild gaining power up to the point she loses her life as a result of her violent transgression of gender boundaries. Her pleading for help turns into actively promising reward to her helpers, her question for loyalty becomes a demand, and even her call to arms develops into personal execution. This growth

[5] Primary citations or paraphrases are accompanied by the number of the stanza and – if necessary – the line(s). The source that is referred to is the edition of the *Nibelungenlied* by Ursula Schulze in Middle High German. Longer quotations are also accompanied by the Dutch translation of the *Nibelungenlied* by Jaap van Vredendaal.

in agency is related to the different roles Kriemhild enacts throughout the plot. Critical moments showing female agency often correspond to a change in Kriemhild's personal sphere that not only affects her role as woman in medieval courtly society, but also demonstrate how she chooses to adhere to or differ from that role.

Courtly Love and Patriarchal Society

The narrator first portrays Kriemhild as a courtly damsel. He calls her a noble girl, that is still unacquainted with love (16). She is pure and noble, and her beauty reflects this:

> Diu ir unmazen schoene was vil witen chunt,
> und ir vil hochgemüete zuo der selben stunt
> an der junchfrowen so manic helt ervant.
> Ez ladete vil der geste in daz Guntheres lant. (45)

> *Zij was om haar schoonheid wijd en zijn vermaard.*
> *Ook viel de jonkvrouw op door haar aard.*
> *Helden uit den vreemde die dat hadden vernomen,*
> *Waren daarom al vaak naar Gunthers land gekomen. (43)*

Siegfried is one of the heroes that undertakes the journey to Burgundy to ask for Kriemhild's hand. Because of her beauty and her good upbringing, she is the epitome of the courtly lady. At the beginning of the epic, this is what identifies her. Laura Wideburg reflects on Kriemhild's beauty and its function in courtly literature and society on the point of "the young knight [who] is moved to improve his life" (22) to be able to win the love of the idealized and idolized lady. She states that "[i]n this respect, female beauty is used not for the benefit of the

woman herself, but for the benefit of the man who gazes upon her, and for those who know how to use this ideal for their own purposes" (22). Reflecting on Wideburg, excessive female beauty like that of Kriemhild transforms the 'bearer' or that beauty into an abstract ideal, like honour, love, and loyalty. Ideals, however, are both unattainable and inanimate.

The male gaze Wideburg acknowledges, is also the gaze of the patriarchal society Kriemhild lives in, and which confines her to a subservient role. In this context, it is not surprizing that Kriemhild's agency is first only located in her dreams. Hans-Jürgen Bachorski states that "[i]n the dream sequences of the *Nibelungenlied*, the narrator makes Kriemhild his mouthpiece for the epic function of prognostication" (110). Besides direct commentary, the narrator also uses the form of the dream to foretell fate. Jerold Frakes adds to this that the dreams do not only have a predictive function, but that they also foreshadow the structure of the plot and a rise in Kriemhild's agency. In his analysis of the three dreams foreshadowing Siegfried's death, he argues, amongst other things, that the dreams reflect "a transcendence of the courtly code – from a purely courtly image to its inversion to its transcendence in an elemental image of destruction" (187). The first image of two eagles attacking a falcon – a common metaphor in courtly literature – ultimately transforms into two mountains burying Siegfried. Kriemhild dreams her first dream at the beginning of the epic:

> In disen hohen eren troumte Chriemhilde,
> wie is zügeeinen valchen, starch, schoen und wilde,
> den ir zwene arn erchrummen. daz si daz muoste sehen,
> ir enkunde in dirre werlde leider nimmer geschehen. (12)

> *In die luisterrijke sfeer droomde Kriemhilde*
> *hoe zij een valk africhtte, een sterke, mooie en wilde,*

Maar twee adelaars verscheurden hem nadien.

Niets ter wereld was erger dan dit te moeten zien. (11)

Only much later, just before Siegfried leaves for the hunt, the dream from the beginning of the epic reappears in two different, increasingly violent forms:

Si sprach zuo dem recken: ‘lat iwer jagen sin.
mir troumte hinte leide, wie iuch zwei wildiu swin
jagent uber heide. da wurden bluomen rot.
daz ich so sere weine, daz tuot mir armem wibe not. (929)

‘Neyna, here Sivrit, ja vurht ich dinen val.
mir truomte hinte leide, wie ob dir zetal
vielen zwene berge, ich ensach dich nimmer me.
wiltu nu von mir scheiden, daz tuot mir inneklichen we.’ (932)

Ze sprak tot de krijger: ‘Zie af van de jacht.
Twee wilde zwijnen, zo droomde ik vannacht,
jaagden op de heide en bloemen kleurden rood.
Ik heb reden tot huilen, want mijn angst is groot. (919)

‘Nee, heer Siegfried, echt, ik vrees dat je zult sterven.
In een bange droom vannacht zag ik hoe twee bergen
jou geheel bedolven. Nooit zag ik je weer.
Als je van me weggaat, doet mijn hart me zeer.’ (921)

The dreams also portray a downward movement – from the air, to the ground, to underground (181) – alluding to a dark image of destruction. The inner narrative perceived by Frakes becomes realized in Kriemhild's slow disentanglement from courtly society and consecutive downward movement from a courtly ideal to a 'vengeful devil' (2431.4).

Political Decisions and Personal Motives

The situation around Siegfried's death is turbulent and very emotional for Kriemhild.[6] Different scenes and actions follow each other in rapid tempo. First, Kriemhild tries to protect Hagen by telling and showing him Siegfried's weak spot. Then, her trust is broken by her own relatives, both by Hagen as Gunther, and later also by Gernoot and Giselher, in their insistence on putting Siegfried's death aside and on her acceptance of Etzel's marriage proposal. She is confronted with Siegfried's body and Hagen's blame multiple times, and is not able to escape. Although there are comfort and a son waiting in Xanten, her situation lacks the protection provided by relatives. And so Kriemhild stays in Burgundy, even after Siegfried's burial. The position of widow is remarkably different from that of wife. Though close to her relatives, Kriemhild has gained more independence: she has her own court, both in terms of place and retinue, and – for some time – possesses the treasure of the Nibelungen, which brings her wealth and, because of her generosity, also loyalty. Though Kriemhild's ability to act on her own behalf grows with widowhood, she does not have the desire to reappear in courtly social life. Rather, she chooses to remain isolated, struck by grief.

Kriemhild's first reaction to Siegfried's death fits the *topos* of the female lament in romances, and follows a ritualized set of rules (Henry 73): she faints and is unable to speak,

[6] See 'Structure and Summary of the *Nibelungenlied*' in the appendix. The direct events after Siegfried's murder – the discovery of Siegfried's body and his funeral – are described in stanzas 1000-1069.

she cries out in utter despair, and bleeds from the mouth. She also immediately casts the blame:

> Do seich si zuo der erden, daz si niht ensprach.
> die schoenen freudelosen ligen man do sach.
> der edeln frowen jamer wart unmazen groz.
> do erschre si nach unchrefte, daz al diu kemenate erdoz.
>
> Do sprach ir gesinde: ‘waz ob ez ist ein gast?’
> daz bluot ir uzem munde von hercen jsmer brast.
> si sprach: ‘ez ist Sivrit, der min vil lieber man.
> ez hat geraten Prunhilt, daz ez hat Hagene getan.’ (1021-2)
>
> *Daar zeeg zij ter aarde en vond geen woorden meer.*
> *Beroofd van levensvreugde lag Kriemhilde terneer*
> *Zodra ze weer bijkwam, klonk haar jammerklacht luid.*
> *De kemenade weergalmde, zo schreeuwde ze het uit.*
>
> *Toen zeiden de dienaren: ‘Wat als het een onbekende is?’*
> *Bloed kwam uit haar mond van louter droefenis.*
> *Ze zei: ‘Het is Siegfried, mijn allerliefste man.*
> *Brunhilde heeft het bedacht, Hagen heeft het gedaan!’ (1006-7)*

Though Kriemhild at first follows this normative code of grieving, she deviates from it in her plan to avenge her grief (Henry 73). By internalizing her grief, it becomes the motivating

force behind Kriemhild's vengeance, and by exploiting her grief, it becomes her means of taking revenge. In her article on the portrayal and embodiment of emotion in Icelandic sagas and French romances, Sif Rikhardsdottir juxtaposes the 'epic' world of feuds, where emotion is subdued and turned into action, to the 'courtly' world of romance, where emotion is displayed and performed on the body (172). In Kriemhild, we perceive a change from the performance of grief in a courtly environment to the instrumentalization of grief to enact her own revenge in the pagan, epic society of Etzel's land.

Embodying Revenge and Transgressing Boundaries

Kriemhild's vengeance can only be realized if she acquires power and has enough loyal vassals. Kriemhild knows that she has no hope of actualizing her revenge, until Rudegeer brings her Etzel's marriage proposal. Kriemhild doubts before accepting the proposal, because of the damage it could do to her image in courtly society, as Etzel is a heathen (1272). Paganism is an epic feature (Innes 77), and Kriemhild's acceptance of his proposal symbolizes her first true steps into the 'epic'. Though Kriemhild is and remains a Christian woman, she accepts Etzel's paganism because it enables her to take revenge on Siegfried's murderers. She only accepts Etzel's proposal after Rudegeer swears to compensate what was done to her (Wideburg 69):

> Si sprach: 'so swert mir, Rüedegeer, swaz mir iemen tuot,
> daz ir mir sit der naehste, der reche miniu leit.'
> do sprach der marcgrave: 'des bin ich, frowe, bereit.' (1279.2-4)

> *'Beloof mij onder ede, wat iemand mij ook doet,*
> *Dat u de eerste bent die verhaal haalt voor mijn leed.'*

De marktgraaf antwoordde: 'Vrouwe, ik zweer u die eed.' (1254.2-4)

This example shows that Kriemhild is no longer an innocent and pure courtly damsel, but rather a master at deception. Kriemhild manages to win the loyalty and love of Etzel's subjects and she manipulates Etzel, masquerading her vengeance as a feast – a metaphor that will come back time and again until the end of the epic.

She is now only an outward shell of courtly conduct, but a very active agent within: "Daz si daz rechen möhte, des wunschtes alle tage" (1423.1).[7] Even in the most private sphere, Kriemhild keeps thinking about her vengeance.

Do si eines nahtes bei dem kunige lac,
mit armen umbevanen, als er vil dicke pflac
die edelen frowen triuten, si was im so der lip,
do gedahte an ir vinde daz vil herliche wip. (1427)

Toen ze 's nachts in bed lag, naast haar echtgenoot,
en hij de edele vrouwe in zijn armen sloot
om haar te beminnen – ze waren samen één
dacht ze aan haar vijanden, de schone koningin. (1397)

Kriemhild keeps her eagerness for revenge hidden. She constructs and executes her plan within the rules of society, still abiding the rules of social conduct for women: she relies on the loyalty of her men and appeals to their honour. Walter Haug comments on Kriemhild's behaviour: "So wird den die höfische Form zum Trug, zum Deckmantel und Vehikel der

[7] In the Dutch translation: "Het plan dat in haar rijpte, beheerste haar geheel" (1393.1).

Rache" (16). And indeed, Kriemhild uses her role as courtly woman to execute her revenge. When the Burgundians have arrived, Kriemhild keeps devising new plans when others fail, and her pleas for justice only become stronger. However, Kriemhild's weeping and pleading are not passive displays of emotion, but political performances. Internally, she has overstepped all societal and inherent gender boundaries long before she kills Hagen: she uses her own son as bait (1963) and is willing to sacrifice all her loved ones to attain her goal. When Hagen is finally imprisoned, bound before her, Kriemhild lets go of all pretence and fully steps outside the traditional image of the courtly lady. She literally enacts the Dutch proverb 'het heft in eigen handen nemen' and kills Hagen with Siegfried's sword. April Henry states that in her transgression of gender boundaries, Kriemhild "threatens and transgresses the mores and foundations of the courtly, chivalrous society as a whole" (117-8). And indeed, the moment after Kriemhild commits murder with her own hands, the threat to the ideal of a courtly lady and feudal society as a whole has to be eliminated. Kriemhild has truly ventured into a different realm.

Kriemhild's epic side reveals itself in opposition with the courtly values she grew up with. Where at first her passive beauty was praised, now her active fighting is feared. Where the young Kriemhild does not question her position beneath her brothers, this Kriemhild is not afraid to take their lives. And lastly, where the child did not question the courtly order of Creation as intended by God, the mature woman rules a pagan kingdom and wields an epic sword with supernatural powers (Wideburg 189). These signs of the heroic and the epic are also visible in Brunhild, and chapter two will discuss the context of these epic notions and their implementation in Brunhild's court and character. Unlike Brunhild, Kriemhild's violence is a token of her wickedness. Kriemhild, carrying Gunther's head like a trophy and taking Hagen's head with one blow,[8] has not turned into a female heroine. Rather, her display

[8] See stanzas 2429-33, and 'Structure and Summary of the *Nibelungenlied*'.

of epic agency turns her in the eyes of the male characters around her – representatives of courtly society – into an unnatural, female demon ("valendinne" 2431.4, Wideburg 194-5). Her transgression has turned a courtly setting into an epic battlefield.

Chapter 2. Brunhild: from Warrior Queen to Subversive Wife

Where Siegfried falls in love with the beautiful and pure Kriemhild, Gunther finds the woman he wants in the stately and powerful Brunhild, queen of Iceland. From the beginning, Brunhild is approached by Gunther and his men as a trophy, a valuable prize to be won. But the first strophe considering Brunhild in the *Nibelungenlied* does not introduce her as a gentle, noble girl, like Kriemhild:

> Ez was ein kuniginne gesezzen uber se,
> Ir geliche enheine man wesse ninder me.
> Diu was unmazen schoene, vil michel was ir chraft.
> Si schoz mit snellen degenen umbe minne den schaft. (329)

> *Er was een koningin. Zij voerde de heerschappij*
> *over een land overzee. Niemand was zoals zij.*
> *Ze viel op door schoonheid en door kracht nog meer.*
> *Wie haar wilde vrijen, daagde ze uit met haar speer. (324)*

It is striking and significant that Brunhild is not introduced by her name, but by her function, as the ruling queen of Iceland. Moreover, her physical power – which she uses to challenge and defeat her suitors – surpasses her beauty. Brunhild's kingship and supernatural strength identify her as a character belonging to the realm of the heroic and the epic, rather than the courtly world of the Burgundians. Brunhild's power – political as well as physical – is important specifically because it will be lost when she becomes Gunther's – or anyone's – wife. Indeed, after Brunhild's loss of power, she becomes an example of courtly society in her concerns about proper order and conduct. So much so, that where Kriemhild in her attempts to

gain power increasingly predominates the plot, Brunhild slowly disappears into the background. But how exactly did this epic outsider become an advocate for courtly conduct? We will see that agency and politics of power are at the centre of this question.

The *Nibelungen* poet tells us that because of the quarrel of two women – Kriemhild and Brunhild – many lives will be lost (884.4). Though Brunhild is not explicitly blamed for the downfall of the Burgundians, her hurt pride and honour are the reasons Hagen murders Siegfried:

> Er [Hagen] vragte, waz ir waere, weinende er si [Brunhild] vant.
> do sagtes im, diu maere. er lobt ir sa zehant,
> daz er erarnen muose der Chriemhilde man,
> oder ern wolde nimmer dar umbe vrolich gestan. (872)

> *Hij vroeg haar wat er was, toen hij haar in tranen vond.*
> *Ze deed hem haar verhaal. Hij beloofde haar terstond*
> *dat het Kriemhildes man duur zou komen te staan.*
> *Zo niet, dan was het met Hagens levensvreugde gedaan. (861)*

Again, emotions can be seen as driving the plot. In her discussion of performatives, Kathryn Starkey argues that Brunhild's smile – when she is not yet won and still ruling queen in Iceland – is a political statement, which shows her superiority over the receivers of the smile (namely Hagen, Dankwart and the three Burgundian kings; Gunther, Gernoot and Giselher), and the situation itself (160).[9] After Gunther wins Brunhild by trickery, however, Brunhild's

[9] See stanzas 444 & 445, where Hagen asserts that the Burgundians would humble Brunhild if they had their swords and armour, after which Brunhild returns their weapons with a scornful smile.

smiling turns into crying – an emotion that also constitutes political power. By looking at Brunhild's behaviour in different roles, and close reading these emotional moments, it becomes clear that agency and the enactment of emotion are inseparable in a discussion of Brunhild's political power in different settings.

Kingship and Supernatural Strength

The *Nibelungenlied* finds antecedents in various songs of the *Edda* and in a prose version called the *Völsungensaga*, both composed around the same time as the prose version of the *Nibelungenlied* (van Vredendaal xii). In chapter three of his book *Epic*, Paul Innes discusses the transition "from the heroic towards romance and allegory" (66) – which is also the title of the chapter. Innes specifically indicates the similarity between the Norse and Icelandic sagas (like the *Völsungensaga)* and – for instance Celtic – epics. Sagas and epics are often set in a pagan past (74), and both display elements of the supernatural (81) and a heroic warrior *ethos* (77-8). They are concerned with lineage (82), and women often play a pivotal role (81). Most important, however, is the almost sacral nature of kingship (87). In short, Iceland is strongly connected to the heroic culture portrayed in its epic narratives. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Brunhild is queen of the country of sagas, and an embodiment of its heroic, epic culture.

Brunhild's heroic warrior *ethos*, her supernatural strength and her high view of kingship are united in the three trials to which Brunhild challenges every suitor. While Gunther is willing to overcome every obstacle to win Brunhild for her beauty – thereby adhering to the ideal of courtly love – Brunhild tests her suitors to ensure that only the strongest wins. Modesty – a courtly quality, connected to courtly love – does not seem to be one of Brunhild's concerns. When she appears for the trials, her clothes are so sheer that "von porten lieht gewerhte daz sachnman schinen daran" (438.4).[10] For Brunhild, her identity is not

[10] In the Dutch translation: "de blanke teint van haar huid schemerde er doorheen" (432.4).

constructed by her outward appearance. Rather, the true requirements for kingship lie in being above all in strength and righteousness.

In the same way that Kriemhild's beauty guarantees her courtly nature, Brunhild's strength is a testimony of her kingship and right to rule (Bekker 71). This is why Brunhild at first assumes it is Siegfried who has come to woe her. He is strong, has an epic reputation, and is at home in Iceland's heroic culture. When the Burgundians arrive in Iceland, Hagen is not willing to hand off his weapons at the Icelanders' request. Siegfried reprimandes him: "do begunde in Sivrit da von diu rehten maere sagen" (415.4).[11] Both Brunhild and Siegfried have the right to rule according to the epic notions of kingship. Hugo Bekker states that "the right to kingship depends on physical prowess, and it is the awareness of possessing this power that lends each of them his self-assurance" (72). Brunhild's smile and other performative acts – such as returning their weapons to the Burgundians at the start of the trials (457) – are outward displays of her right to rule, and they confirm the political agency of this epic queen.

Marriage and Subjection

Gunther wins the trials with the help of Siegfried's supernatural strength and magical attributes. The deception nullifies the purpose of the trials, which is to find a king worthier of kingship than Brunhild is herself. Brunhild's supernatural strength will be broken when 'the power' of her virginity is taken away. She tests her suitors because if they win, Brunhild can rest assured that even when she has to lose her power, she has lost it to a husband with even greater strength. Though Gunther's outward display is kingly and noble, Brunhild did not recognize him as king without his regalia when they first met; she greeted Siegfried before him (428-9). In Hugo Bekker's words, Brunhild "finds it impossible to believe in his [Gunther's] real superiority" (76). Brunhild's face becomes red with anger when she sees that

[11] In the Dutch translation: "Siegfried zei hem toen hoe men zich hier moest gedragen" (404.4).

Gunther has won (463.3), and this somatic response is beyond her control. But her words show no emotion:

> ‘vil balde get her naher, ir mage und mine man,
> ir sult dem kunech Gunther alle wesen undertan.’ (477.3-4)
>
> *‘Kom snel naderbij, verwanten en getrouwen!*
> *Jullie allen moeten Gunther als je koning beschouwen.’ (464.3-4)*

Sif Rikhardsdottir argues that in the sagas, we see “a presumed cultural preference for emotional suppression or concealment” (167). The way Brunhild expresses her emotion after she has lost shows her saga-like, epic nature.

When Brunhild sees Siegfried and Kriemhild together after they are wed, she cries as a direct, somatic response to what she perceives as a serious wrongdoing:

> ‘umbe deine swester ist mir so grimme leit,
> di sich ich sizzen nahn dem eigen holden din.
> daz muoz mich immer riwen, und sol si also verstozen sin.’ (625.2-4)
>
> *‘Het is om je zuster dat mijn hart wordt geplaagd.*
> *Het is jouw lijfeigene naast wie ik haar zie zitten.*
> *Dat is een vernedering waarin ik me niet kan schikken. (617.2-4)*

When Gunther tells her to be silent, Brunhild drops the matter until their wedding night. She angrily states that she will remain a virgin until she knows the truth (640.3-4) and the narrator

tells us that though Gunther has won Brunhild as queen, "ez was noch vil unnahen, e daz si wurde sin wip" (636.4).[12] Even when her kingship has already been taken away, Brunhild's strength still protects her as woman and allows her to act. After her ring and girdle have been removed, signs of her kingship and virginity, Brunhild loses her power. The *Nibelungen* poet equates the loss of Brunhild's power with the victory of courtly love, and in extension, of chivalrous society: "hey, waz ir von der minne ir vil grozen chrefte entweich!" (690.4).[13] Though this might be an ironical note, it conveys that Brunhild is now politically and personally dependent on Gunther as his wife. Brunhild's main objective is now to live according to that status, and to keep Gunther's position – and hers in extension – as high as possible.

Defending Ordo *and Following the Rules*

Laura Wideburg discusses the concepts of *ordo* and *inordinatio* in the *Nibelungenlied* in the light of Kriemhild's demonization. She explains the concept of *ordo* thus:

> […'] *ordo* is divine: 'the courtly *ordo* participates in the universal *ordo* of creation.' One definite way to recognize *ordo* is through adherence to the strict roles that separate men from women. […] In other words, *ordo* for the female implies silence and obedience to the male who is over her. (190-1)

Brunhild is at first an example of *inordinatio,* as she rules without a man over her. After Gunther has won her both as queen (in the trials) and as woman (in bed), however, Brunhild

[12] In the Dutch translation: "het duurde lang eer hij haar als vrouw zou winnen" (628.4).

[13] In the Dutch translation: "Gunther had haar met zijn minne beroofd van al haar kracht" (679.4).

accepts her place and even "defends the *ordo* against the *inordinatio* of Kriemhild" (191). Brunhild cannot accept Kriemhild's behaviour towards her and her husband:

> Nu daht ouch alle cite daz Guntheres wip:
> 'wie treit et also hohe Chriemhilt den lip,
> nu ist doch unser eigen Sivrit ir man?
> daz er uns niht endienet, des wolde ich gerne ein ende han.' (731)

> *Intussen werd Brunhilde door één gedachte gekweld:*
> *'Waarom heeft Kriemhilde zo'n hoge dunk van zichzelf?*
> *Haar man is ons als horige immers ondergeschikt.*
> *Hij heeft al sinds tijden geen diensten voor ons verricht.' (721)*

When Kriemhild dares to state that *her* husband should rule Gunther's land, Kriemhild in Brunhild's eyes turns the *ordo* around: if Gunther's vassal would rule his lord, both Gunther and Brunhild would become the subordinated. It is in Brunhild's favour to defend courtly *ordo*, as she is now part of it and even at the top of courtly society. With the same determination with which Brunhild challenged her suitors, she now adheres to courtly conduct and hierarchy.

Though Brunhild's determination might be the same, her place is very different. When Brunhild is dishonoured by Kriemhild's claim that Siegfried had her first and proof thereof in the shape of Brunhild's ring and belt,[14] she weeps and calls for her husband. Brunhild does

[14] See stanzas 853-8. Kriemhild counters Brunhild's claim that Siegfried is Gunther's vassal by stating that Siegfried slept with Brunhild before Gunther did. She shows Brunhild's stolen ring and belt as proof. As this

not subdue her emotions, nor does she act on her own behalf. Her tears have political value in the sense that they are enacted, but in a strictly courtly and public setting (Henry 15). After the argument, Gunther and Siegfried maintain the claim that nothing has happened between Siegfried and Brunhild – which clashes with Kriemhild's claim and proof. The men decide the official version of the 'truth', but Brunhild knows she has been lied to, and has not married the strongest after all (Bekker 78). Her delight in Kriemhild's pain after Siegfried's murder points to the losses Brunhild has suffered herself in terms of power, honour and agency. After Siegfried's funeral, Brunhild's name is mentioned a mere five times.[15] She appears in person once more – here she is not even called by name – to lie with her husband before he leaves for Etzel's land (1548.3-4). This disappearance from the stage stands in sharp contrast with the self-confident female actor we met in Iceland, but is in complete accordance with the female role in the *ordo* of courtly culture.

scene occurs before the church, Brunhild is humiliated in a very public way. See also 'Structure and Summary of the *Nibelungenlied*' in the appendix.

[15] Both in the German translation by Ursula Schulze and the Dutch translation by Jaap van Vredendaal.

Chapter 3. Female Agency in the *Nibelungenlied:* Comparing Opposites

Kriemhild and Brunhild, the two leading ladies of the *Nibelungenlied,* are both sisters and enemies. They both travel far, and neither of them for love. Brunhild has to leave her kingdom against her will – which is to not marry at all (425) – to become the wife of Gunther, and queen of the Burgundians. After Siegfried's death, Kriemhild is strongly advised to accept Etzel's marriage proposal, and she does so in order to gain more agency. Both women are 'shipped off', but while Brunhild accepts her loss in coming with the Burgundians, Kriemhild turns her grief into action and starts to fight when she leaves Burgundy. The Burgundian culture is portrayed from the start of the epic as the best example of courtly culture, and Worms as the finest court:

> Von des hofes ere und von ir witen chraft,
> von ir vil hohen werdekeit und von ir ritterschaft,
> der die herren pflagen mit freuden al ir leben,
> des enchunde iu ze ware niemen gar ein ende geben. (11)

> *Van de faam van het hof en zijn vérreikende macht,*
> *van de hoge waardigheid en de ridderlijke pracht,*
> *van alles wat de heren genoten tijdens hun leven:*
> *daarvan kan niemand u een getrouwe indruk geven. (10)*

The power, dignity and beauty of the court are beyond grasp. As the ideal court, it meets and transcends courtly values. It represents *ordo*, a divine concept (Wideburg 190) and is thus raised to a divine status itself. The people in this court, however, turn out to be nothing but

human. The difficulties of living according to courtly ideals show themselves in passages of clashing loyalties and disputes on status and wealth, especially concerning women.

The previous chapters have established Kriemhild and Brunhild as – originally – representatives of their society. They are an image of their culture. Brunhild's adaption to courtly society evolves around the suppression and taming of violence: Brunhild is defeated two times – in the Icelandic games and in the second bedroom scene – and both times hinge on Brunhild's supernatural strength and physical violence, and the suppression and subsequent breaking thereof. On the other hand, Kriemhild's adaption to epic culture is associated with the rise and ultimately the realization of violence. After Siegfried's murder, Kriemhild's performance of grief turns into the instrumentalization of grief to enact her revenge on his murderers – ultimately leading to the execution of Hagen by her own hand. The ability to enact violence, and thus show strength and power in what seems to be an exclusively masculine way – from a courtly perspective – represents the agency of both Kriemhild and Brunhild. This chapter compares the agency of Kriemhild and Brunhild in two different situations: in their direct dispute at court and in passages concerning their financial (in)dependence. Lastly, the attempts of courtly society to reduce female agency in the *Nibelungenlied* are linked to a larger discussion on the nature of the *Nibelungenlied* and its criticism on courtly culture and problems of the time of composition.

The Turning Point: A Battle of Words

Kriemhild and Brunhild are not enemies from the start. On the contrary, the first meeting of Brunhild with Kriemhild and her mother Ute is most affectional:

Do sprach gezogenliche	Chriemhilt diu chuniginne:
'ir sult zuo disen landen	groz willechomen sin

mir und miner muoter unde allen, die wir han.'
dar nach wart von den vrowen mit truten chussen niht verlan. (594)

Kriemhilde, de jonge vrouw, zei welopgevoed:
'Welkom in onze landen en ontvang onze groet,
van mij en mijn moeder en onze vriendenschaar,
van al onze getrouwen.' Brunhilde neeg voor haar neer. (585)

Kriemhild and Ute, as Brunhild's sister and mother in law, are now her family. When she arrives in Burgundy, Brunhild has resigned herself to her current situation. Even before she is married, she already wears the Burgundian crown:

Gerihtet wart gesidele; der chunic wolde gan
ze tische mit den gesten. do sach man bi im stan
die schoenen Prunhilden, chrone si do truoch
in des chuniges lande. diu was spaehe und rich genuoch. (608)

Men bracht de plaatsen in orde, want de koning wilde
Aan tafel met de gasten. Daar zag men Brunhilde
Aan zijn zijde staan, terwijl zij de kroon al droeg
In het land van de koning. Ja, ze was machtig genoeg. (601)

This satisfaction with her position is threatened after Kriemhild marries Siegfried, a man Brunhild perceives as much lower in status. Brunhild's first reaction is not the one she presents in the argument much later, where she asserts that Kriemhild thinks too highly of

herself. On the contrary, Brunhild is at first concerned for her sister in law: she cries in compassion for Kriemhild and the humiliation she must feel (623). Brunhild perceives this as such a serious wrongdoing that in she refuses to sleep with Gunther before she knows how this could happen, and in a violent fight on their wedding night, she pins him to the wall (641-2). But after the second bed-scene. Brunhild's strength is broken, and what she wants – "ich wil noch magt beliben, ir sult wol wizzen daz" (640.3)[16] – is no longer of consequence. Brunhild no longer has the agency to act on her emotion, and she accepts that Kriemhild is now Siegfried's wife. Brunhild's view of Kriemhild has shifted, but Kriemhild does not adapt to the place Brunhild assigns her. This place of social standing is based on Brunhild's perception of Siegfried as vassal, and implies that, however pitiful, Kriemhild is now lowered to the same social status: that of an unfree servant (830.2, 838.1, 846.4). The dispute on status escalates to a point where the only solution for the problem is the erasure of its source: Siegfried. Siegfried's murder should have tied off the loose end concerning his ambivalent status, but instead allows for further unravelling in the form of Kriemhild's revenge.

Brunhild and Kriemhild are watching the chivalrous games together with their women. Kriemhild states that Burgundy should be ruled by the strongest man:

> Do sprach diu frowe Chriemhilt; 'ich han einen man,
> Daz elliu disiu riche zuo sinen henden solden stan.' (824.3-4)

> *'Mijn man is zo geweldig', zei Kriemhilde, de schone,*
> *'dat heel dit koninkrijk hem toe zou moeten komen.' (812.3-4)*

[16] In the Dutch translation: "Ik wil maagd blijven tot ik weet hoe het zit" (632.3).

This is the political view of kingship that Brunhild upheld as queen of Iceland. All Brunhild can bring against this claim is the fact that courtly society has labelled Siegfried as vassal, and a vassal can never outrank a king. Brunhild does not comment on Siegfried's strength, but she patiently explains her point to Kriemhild, perhaps in the conviction that she will finally learn and keep her place. Instead, Kriemhild not only asserts that Siegfried will never do the duties of a vassal, but even states that she will show the retinue of both kings that she dares to enter the church before the Burgundian queen (835). Beyond proving Siegfried's kingship, Kriemhild wants to show her superiority over Brunhild:

> Ich wil selbe wesn edeler danne iemen habe bechant
> deheine kuniginne, diu chrone ie her getruoch.'
> du huop sich under den frowen grozes nides genuoch.
>
> Do sprach aber Prunhilt: 'wiltu niht eigen sin,
> so muostu dich scheiden von den frowen min
> mit dinem ingesinde, da wir zem munster gan.'
> 'entriwen,' sprach do Chriemhilt, 'daz sol warden getan.' (837.2-4, 838)
>
> *Ik wil belangrijker zijn, hoger in rang en stand*
> *dan enige koningin die hier de kroon bezat.'*
> *Tussen de twee vrouwen groeide de vijandschap.*
>
> *Brunhilde reageerde: 'Ben je niet onvrij,*
> *dan hoor je met je vrouwen niet in deze rij.*
> *Scheid je af van mijn gevolg, als wij ter kerke gaan!'*

Kriemhilde zei: 'Dat doe ik, daar kun je van op aan!' (826.2-4, 827)

The two separate retinues meet before the church. Kriemhild arrives magnificently dressed and more beautiful than ever – which in the courtly setting of Worms is a token of her status. Brunhild, filled with hatred (846.2), tells Kriemhild publicly that no matter her royal appearance, "ja sol vor kunigrs wibe nimmer eigen diu gegan!" (846.4).[17] Now that even a public statement cannot change Brunhild's mind on Siegfried's and Kriemhild's status, Kriemhild decides to use Brunhild's own words against her and calls her a "chebse" (847.4).[18]

Hugo Bekker comments on the use of what he calls the *Eigenmann* motif and states that "it is now Kriemhild who in angry irony keeps referring to Siegfried's alleged subservience after she has flung into Brunhild's face the accusation of her intimacy a decade ago with an *Eigenmann*" (92).[19] Brunhild cannot ask for proof of Kriemhild's accusation until after the church service. Kriemhild's proof does not just substantiate her claim, but also carries a symbolic meaning: Brunhild's belt and ring – symbols of her former power – have been taken by Siegfried and are handed over to and worn by Kriemhild.[20] These objects of power symbolize the shift in agency of both Brunhild and Kriemhild. Siegfried's murder is the result of Brunhild's sorrow and humiliation, but it is not carried out by her in the way that Kriemhild later takes active revenge on her husband's murderers. Where Brunhild's complaint to Gunther is quickly smoothened and then ignored, marking her retreat from the

[17] In the Dutch translation: "Een dienstmaagd moet een koningin altijd voor laten gaan!" (835.4).

[18] Often written as "Kebse" (847 Neuhochdeutsch), meaning "vazallenhoer" (836.4).

[19] The *Eigenmann* motif – in other words 'vassal motif' – refers to every instance Siegfried is portrayed as or called a vassal. See Hugo Bekker, *The* Nibelungenlied: *A Literary Analysis* chapter five: "Brunhild: the *Eigenmann* Motif."

[20] See stanzas 854-8, and 'Structure and Summary of the *Nibelungenlied*' in the appendix.

plot, Kriemhild's wearing of these symbols of power represents the growth in agency that has already occurred as queen in Siegfried's lands, and the growth that is yet to come.

Financial Dependence and the Ability to Act

Women's wealth in the *Nibelungenlied* is seen as a dangerous concept, and women's share or inheritance of money as a hazardous right. Both Kriemhild and Brunhild have to deal with financial dependence, which limits their ability to act politically. Kriemhild is kept financially dependent by both Siegfried and her relatives. After her marriage to Siegfried, she demands her share of the kingdom – translated in wealth – to take with her to the Netherlands, but Siegfried objects and speaks for Kriemhild to her brothers: "ja tuot diu wine min des teil wol ze rate, den ir ir woldet gebn" (703.4-704.1).[21] With financial independence out of the question, Kriemhild turns to men-power as a source of protection and loyalty in a strange country:

> Do sprach diu frowe Chriemhilt: 'habt ir der erbe rat,
> umbe Buregonden degene ez so lihte niene stat;
> sine muge ein chunich gerne füeren in sin lant.
> ja sol si mit mir teilen miner lieben bruoder hant.' (705)

> *Maar Kriemhilde zei: 'Met mijn erfdeel is het gedaan;*
> *Met Bourgondens strijders zal dat zo licht niet gaan.*
> *Die mag elke koning naar zijn land meenemen.*
> *Ik wil dat mijn lieve broers de vazallen met mij delen.' (693)*

[21] In the Dutch translation: "Weet u, mijn lieve schat ziet af van het erfdeel dat u haar wilde geven" (691.4-692.1).

The courtly damsel becomes subject to her husband, and Kriemhild and all her belongings become part of Siegfried. As wife of Siegfried, Kriemhild no longer 'exists' as individual. Brunhild is also kept financially dependent, or rather made to be so, which can be seen at the end of the eighth *aventiure*, when Dankwart distributes her property. Laura Wideburg emphasizes how the loss of Brunhild's wealth resembles the distribution of money and objects of value at funerals:

> Wealth may be given in abundance while a person is alive to demonstrate their generous disposition, but losing all the wealth shows that for the Burgundians, Brünhild as an individual is as good as dead. […] Brünhild's wealth in her own hands is a threat that must be defused. Without her wealth, Brünhild has little power in her own name. (83-4)

Brunhild travels to Burgundy with enough wealth to save face, but not to form any threat. When her ring and belt are stolen by Siegfried, the last symbols of her power – also financial power, as the lavishness of the belt suggests – are taken away. Brunhild's loss of financial independence represents the complete loss of her independence and individuality as Gunther's wife.

Kriemhild gets the opportunity to regain her personal independence after Siegfried's death, which is possible through financial aid in the form of the Nibelungen-treasure. Even after Hagen sinks the treasure,[22] Kriemhild retains a small part that is still an enormous

[22] The character representing the hostile male perspective on female wealth is – in most cases – Hagen. He is the one that answers Brunhild when she objects to the over-abundant way Dankwart distributes her wealth in Iceland (527-8), he objects to Kriemhild receiving the Nibelungen-treasure as inheritance, and drowns the treasure in the Rhine (1144-52). Later, Hagen is the only one that objects to Etzel's proposal to Kriemhild (1227).

amount of gold. Hagen insists on withholding this part as well, but in the consternation, Kriemhild's women secretly take the small amount they can lay hands on:

> Da vor in aller wile erfullet zwelf schrin
> des aller besten goldes, da zinder mohte sin,
> heten noch ir meide. daz fuorte man von dan
> mit der chuniginne; daz ander muosin si da lan. (1303)

> *Intussen hadden de meisjes van Kriemhilde al*
> *Een deel van de schat gepakt, twaalf kisten vol*
> *Met het allerbeste goud. Dat werd meegenomen,*
> *Evenals talrijke sieraden die van pas zouden komen. (1277)*

Though Kriemhild has to scheme to acquire wealth and loyalty as Etzel's wife, she is able to execute her revenge. Stephanie Pafenberg states that Siegfried's death "evokes in Kriemhild the desire not just for private revenge or personal pain, but also for revenge for the widow's loss of political power and financial independence" (qtd. in Henry 73). When she confronts Hagen in the last *aventiure,* Kriemhild equates the murder of Siegfried with the loss of the treasure, and she executes Hagen for both the personal and the political losses she suffered by his hand (2425-33). Private emotion and public political power are not separate motivations or instances, but together offer a more complete understanding of the origins and intentions of Kriemhild's revenge.

The Nibelungenlied*: Epic or Romance?*

In the sagas the *Nibelungenlied* originates from, there is no strong connection between Siegfried's death and the downfall of the Burgundians (Vredendaal xii). These events are

connected in the *Nibelungenlied* through Kriemhild's revenge. Paul Innes argues that the *Nibelungenlied* is not an epic saga, but a courtly romance (84). He asserts that the name 'epic' simply comes from its literary form, and not from its content, which portrays a culture similar to that of the courtly romances (84). Burgundian culture – the courtly society which forms the framework for the epic – has moved on from the barbaric and uncultured times of epic society: that which came before. In this perspective, it is not surprising that Brunhild's assimilation to chivalrous, courtly culture is portrayed as a good thing, as a rise in status, while Kriemhild's passage into a heroic, epic culture of violence and revenge is portrayed as a downfall and negative motion.

Though contemporary courtly culture has been projected onto old story matter in a way that connects events as seen in for instance the sagas, and functions as the overarching image of proper society, the epic still shines through. The *Nibelungen* poet depicts both courtly and epic culture, and the conglomerate and clash of these different cultures in the *Nibelungenlied* seem to function as social criticism. This can be perceived in, for instance, the irony in descriptions of courtly scenes. As seen in the reception scene above and in numerous other moments, the poet continuously uses the superlative style, even when the context shows it to be false. An example can be found in Hagen. This character, who commits crimes to decrease female agency and whose death finalizes the downfall of the Burgundians, is in the end labelled as "der aller beste degen" (2434.2).[23] However much the actions of chivalrous knights clash with the ideals of courtly society, both are not just 'good', but 'the best'. Through its ambiguous depiction of women transgressing gender boundaries, and its display of epic culture, the *Nibelungenlied* shows itself to be more than a courtly romance. A final

[23] In the Dutch translation: "de allerbeste held" (2371.2).

argument might be found in the final phrase of the *Nibelungenlied*: “daz ist der Nibelunge liet” (2440.4).[24] This epic is not named after a mythical people without reason.

[24] In the Dutch translation: “Dit was het lot van de Nibelungen” (2376.4).

Conclusion

This thesis has analysed female agency in the characters of Kriemhild and Brunhild in terms of their representation of either a courtly society or an epic society. While Brunhild's adaption from an epic, heroic image to an image of the courtly lady is regarded as positive by the *Nibelungen* poet and the male characters, Kriemhild's adaption from the epitome of the courtly lady to a violent heroic/epic queen is regarded in most negative terms. The portrayal of both Kriemhild and Brunhild is ambiguous in the sense that the *Nibelungen* poet offers culture criticism through irony and the presence of epic culture opposing courtly society. Although the *Nibelungenlied* was composed in its written form in the twelfth century, and the story is set in a contemporary courtly society, epic elements are abundant. We met Brunhild in the shape of the epic warrior queen, and we have seen Kriemhild die in that same shape. The epic place of violence and chaos – the complete opposite of the courtly ideal of *ordo* – is found in the leading ladies of the *Nibelungenlied.*

This thesis has connected the fall back into epic culture or rise into courtly society to a rise and fall in agency for the characters of Kriemhild and Brunhild in the *Nibelungenlied.* Chapter one first established Kriemhild as the epitome of a courtly damsel. A discussion of Kriemhild's dreams shows a foreshadowing of her rise in agency and her fall into chaos. Kriemhild internalizes her grief and thereby deviates from the courtly *topos* of the performance of grief. Kriemhild's enactment of her revenge is connected to the transgression of gender roles and the violation of courtly values. Kriemhild's violent transgression places her in the realm of the epic, and is associated with a rise in agency.

Chapter two first established Brunhild as the epitome of the heroic warrior queen. Where Kriemhild gains power in her married state, Brunhild's power lies in her virginity. She is queen of Iceland, an epic realm, but is defeated in her come-try-and-win-me-husband-games by trickery and has to leave to be queen of a courtly society. When Brunhild has lost

her ‘virgin power’, she no longer acts on her own behalf. Kriemhild wins a direct confrontation between the two women, but Brunhild’s performance of pain and helplessness encourages Hagen to take revenge on Siegfried. Though Brunhild’s performance of emotion leads to Siegfried’s murder and Kriemhild’s revenge, Brunhild herself disappears into the background, signalling her full adaption to courtly society, but also a dramatic decline in agency.

Chapter three discussed the direct confrontation between Kriemhild and Brunhild, the importance of financial independence in order for women to act in a political way, and shortly commented on the nature of the *Nibelungenlied* as a whole. Kriemhild and Brunhild become enemies when they question each other’s political position. This position is strongly connected to their husbands, and in extension to their wealth. Female wealth, female social position and female agency are all connected together in the characters of Kriemhild and Brunhild: women on the margins of courtly society, or inside the epic realm, have access to more wealth, more freedom, and more agency. Within courtly constrictions, social standing and financial possibilities are dependent on the social standing and financial possibilities of men, and female agency is largely lost in this dependence.

This thesis does not comment on the transition from a heroic to a feudal society or on further historical and cultural context. Although such an investigation can offer valuable new insights, this sociohistorical approach lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Other very interesting points of research that could complement this thesis on female agency and epic culture in the *Nibelungenlied,* are the concepts of liminality and liminal space. First articulated by Arnold van Gennep in his work on rites of passage, liminality occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage in which the subject is ‘standing on a threshold’, and liminal space is the place of ‘crossing over’ between the old and the new way of formulating identity, community and tradition. Although again beyond the scope of this thesis, research on how

liminality manifests itself in the *Nibelungenlied* – by looking at Kriemhild and Brunhild or other characters – can help shape a better understanding of the *Nibelungenlied* and offer new interpretations on the epic and its context. The approaches suggested above would position very relevant concepts and constructions today in a shared past, as has been attempted in this thesis.

Appendix

Structure and Summary of the Nibelungenlied

The *Nibelungenied* is a story about the downfall of the Burgundians. This downfall is the result of actions driven by emotions of love, shame and revenge, and of clashing loyalties. The epic originates from the twelfth century, the heyday of *Minnesang,* Middle High German poetry on courtly love. It is based on historical figures from the fifth and sixth century: Gunther refers to Gundahari, the king of the Burgundians; Etzel refers to Attila, leader of the Huns; and Dietrich refers to Theoderik the Great, king of the Ostrogots (Van Vredendaal ix). The *Nibelungenlied* connects various characters from different sagas together – as seen in the *Edda* and the *Völsungen saga* – even though the historical figures some of these characters are based on, did not live at the same time. This synchronization is typical for the genre of the epic (ix). In terms of poetic form, the epic is written in stanzas of four lines, the so called 'Nibelungenstrophe'. The Nibelungenstrophe is composed of four 'Langverzen' in a clear cadenza of stressed and unstressed syllables (Wieners, "Die Nibelungenstrophe"). Each line can be cut into two parts, which is the case in Ursula Schulze's translation into Middle High German, that I have used in the quotes.

The *Nibelungenlied* starts with the introduction of Kriemhild, and the Burgundians. She dreams of a falcon that is attacked, which refers to Siegfried. Siegfried is introduced next, and his upbringing and will to fight for his land are praised. Siegfried hears of Kriemhild's beauty, and travels to Burgundy to win her as wife, first by force, but later by proving his bravery and friendship in helping the Burgundians fight the Saxons and Danes. Siegfried's reward is a personal 'meet and greet' with Kriemhild, whom he has loved even before he saw her. In exchange for Kriemhild's hand, Siegfried accompanies the Burgundians to Iceland to help Gunther win Brunhild. Meeting the Burgundians, Brunhild greets Siegfried first and thus mistakenly appoints him the leader of the group, but Siegfried shifts the focus to Gunther.

Brunhild asserts that if Siegfried is Gunther's vassal, and if Gunther wins the trials, she will become his wife. Brunhild appears in splendid armour for the trials, and her shield, her spear and the rock she throws are so heavy they can barely be carried by numerous men. The Burgundians fear her strength, but Siegfried has brought his magic cloak which rends him invisible. Siegfried passes Brunhild's tests, while Gunther appears the victor. Brunhild's army assembles at her castle, and in fear of an attack, Siegfried travels to Nibelungenland to gather an army himself. The 'guests' are introduced as Gunther's men. The threat is gone, and the men want to return to Burgundy. Brunhild's wealth is distributed and her land is given into custody to her uncle, and the men and Brunhild sail back to Worms. Kriemhild and her mother Ute welcome Brunhild at the bank of the Rhine. Brunhild and Gunther are married, but before diner is started, Siegfried keeps Gunther to his promise. Siegfried and Kriemhild are wed before entering the great hall. Brunhild sees Kriemhild sitting next Siegfried, and perceives this as a wrongdoing and states she will remain a virgin until she understands the situation. At their wedding night, she ties Gunther to the wall, and he barely gets away with his life. Meanwhile, Siegfried and Kriemhild have a splendid wedding night. Siegfried helps Gunther overcome Brunhild in the second bed scene, and takes her ring and belt before he leaves and lets Gunther take his place. When Siegfried and Kriemhild prepare to leave for Xanten, Kriemhild's claim to part of Burgundy's wealth is not honoured. Eventually, she receives a share of the vassals, though less than she deserves.

Years go by, but Brunhild cannot let go of Kriemhild's proud behaviour while she is less in status (as far as Brunhild knows). Gunther eventually invites Siegfried and Kriemhild to Worms. When Brunhild and Kriemhild are watching jousting games with their women, a conflict arises between the two women. Kriemhild asserts that Siegfried's strength is so great, even Gunther's land should be ruled by him. Brunhild counters this argument by confronting Kriemhild with her and Siegfried's lesser status, as Siegfried is Gunther's vassal – and not

even a good one, as he does not meet the requirements. Kriemhild states she will prove her status by daring to enter church before the queen. When Brunhild waits before the church, Kriemhild arrives in full regalia to hurt Brunhild. Brunhild calls her a servant in public, and for that insult, Kriemhild repays her by calling Brunhild a 'chebse', or 'vassal whore', stating that Siegfried, whom Brunhild calls a vassal, has slept with her before Gunther. She then enters the church before Brunhild, leaving her behind crying. After the service, Brunhild demands proof from Kriemhild, who shows her the ring and belt Siegfried gave her after he took them from Brunhild. Brunhild is defeated and dishonoured, and confronts Gunther with the issue in tears. He lets Siegfried come, who swears he did not sleep with Brunhild, and the matter is – as far as the men are concerned – resolved. However, Brunhild is inconsolable, and when Hagen finds her crying, he vows to take revenge on Siegfried. He persuades Gunther to have Siegfried murdered, and together they fake an attack by the Saxons and Danes. Siegfried states he will fight with the Burgundians, and pretending he wants to protect Siegfried, Hagen persuades Kriemhild to reveal Siegfried's weak spot to him, which Kriemhild sows in Siegfried's clothes. The attack is cancelled, and instead the men go hunting. Kriemhild tries to stop Siegfried from going, relating her dreams to him, but he does not take her fears into account. Siegfried proves an excellent hunter. Hagen arranged for the wine to be taken elsewhere, and when the men return to camp, Gunther, Hagen and Siegfried eventually decide to quench their thirst at a well higher in the mountains. Siegfried arrives at the well first, but waits for Gunther and Hagen. When Siegfried drinks, Hagen pierces him with his spear. Kriemhild's valet finds a dead knight in front of her door, and when he tells Kriemhild, she knows immediately it is Siegfried. She lets Sigmund, Siegfried's father know, but prevents a confrontation between Sigmund and his knights and the Burgundians. At Siegfried's funeral, Kriemhild makes her relatives stand next to Siegfried's body. When Hagen stands next to it, Siegfried's wounds start bleeding, signalling he is the murderer. After the funeral – which

lasts three days – Sigmund asks Kriemhild to travel back to Xanten with him, where her son still resides. Kriemhild refuses to come with him, and withdraws to her own court in Worms, where she does not cease to grieve.

Three and a half years later, Kriemhild still griefs over her husbands death. Hagen tells Gunther he should reconcile with Kriemhild, in order to persuade her to bring her *morgengabe* (inheritance) – which is the treasure of the Nibelungs – to Worms. Kriemhild reconciles with Gunther eventually and has her relatives bring the treasure to Worms, where she proceeds to distribute it to all who come to her. Hagen fears Kriemhild will use the treasure to destroy the Burgundians, and takes hold of the keys to the treasure rooms. Against protests, Hagen sinks the treasure in the Rhine. Though Kriemhild's brothers Gunther, Gernoot and Giselher – who has remained loyal to Kriemhild – disapprove of the act, Hagen faces no consequences. Etzel, the king of Hungary, has recently lost his wife, and although he is a heathen, he decides to propose to the Christian Kriemhild. Rudegeer brings this proposal to Kriemhild, but she is still grieving for Siegfried's death and is afraid she will be dishonoured if she marries a heathen. However, she comes to see the benefits of marrying Etzel, as Etzel has a great name and a marriage would bring her great wealth. After Rudegeer promises he will compensate what was done to her, she decides to marry Etzel. All her relatives approve, except Hagen. When she tries to leave with the remainder of the Nibelungen treasure, he even confiscates that and it is distributed by Gernoot. Meanwhile, her servants pack twelve chests of the finest gold. The group first travels to Rudegeer's castle, and from there continue to Etzel's land. The wedding feast lasts eighteen days, and Kriemhild restores her honour by giving freely what she has. As Etzel's wife, she continues this practice. After seven years, Etzel and Kriemhild welcome a son. After thirteen years, when she notices no one prevents her anything and she has enough men and kings at her command, Kriemhild decides it is time to enact her revenge. She forms a plan – which after some time completely

consumes her – and persuades Etzel to invite the Burgundians for a feast. Kriemhild provides the messengers with specific directions. The messengers travel past Rudegeer's castle, and he tells them to convey his greeting. Rudegeer also pledges loyalty to Brunhild. The messengers convey the invitation and other messages to Gunther, and he states he will decide after seven days. All are excited to go, except Hagen, who predicts it will fare badly for the Burgundians. The three kings still decide to travel to Hungary, and Hagen accompanies them, but brings an army of trusted men, and his brother Dankwart and close friend Volker, a noble fiddler. Ute, Kriemhild's mother, tries to prevent the men from going, telling them about her dream, but the men disregard her fear. The group travels to Etzel, but encounters some issues along the way. A dangerous river has to be crossed – which Hagen manages, but where nymphs also predict his and the Burgundians' downfall – and due to the death of the ferryman Hagen killed to cross the river, the Burgundians – or Nibelungs, as they are called now – are attacked by the armies of two powerful men, Gelfraad and Else. The Burgundians eventually arrive at Rudegeer's land, where Giselher marries Rudegeer's daughter, and in response to this deed, Rudegeer pledges his loyalty to the Burgundian kings.

Dietrich sees the Burgundians arrive at Etzel's castle, which troubles him. He greets the Burgundians and tells them of Kriemhild's never-ending grief. Kriemhild greets her brothers with a false smile, but only kisses Giselher. She immediately asks after the Nibelungen treasure, but Hagen asserts they have not brought any gifts, and the treasure is still at the bottom of the Rhine. Later, this leads to a quarrel between Kriemhild and Hagen. Hagen and Volker wait on a bench in public before they are received. Kriemhild walks by in her regalia, but instead of rising, Hagen puts his sword – which he took from Siegfried – on his knee. Kriemhild confronts Hagen with Siegfried's murder and her pain, but though Hagen openly admits his blame, he does not repent. Kriemhild orders her men to attack Hagen and Volker, but out of fear for the two men, they do not charge. The Burgundians arrive at Etzel's

feast unharmed. When they retire into their sleeping quarters, even Giselher states that Kriemhild will kill them all. Volker and Hagen keep watch during the night, and prevent Kriemhild's men from attacking the Burgundians in their sleep. The next day, the feast continues. Kriemhild's men are now not in favour of attacking the Burgundians, and Kriemhild searches for other ways to start a fight. She has her son Ortlieb brought to the banquet hall, where Hagen insults him and Etzel. Meanwhile, Blödel attacks Dankwart and his men in the inn. Dankwart survives and makes his way into the banquet hall, where he relates what has happened. Hagen draws his sword and kills Ortlieb, severing his head. He then turns on the rest of the Huns, starting the fight in the hall. Dietrich by trickery arranges for Etzel and Kriemhild to leave the hall, together with him and his men. Rudegeer and his men leave as well, but the other Huns left behind are all killed.

The Burgundians make the hall their stronghold, and Hagen insults Etzel and Kriemhild from inside. Iring offers to fight Hagen twice. The first time, he manages to cut Hagen, but the second time, Hagen deals Iring a deathly blow. Before he dies, Iring states no one should fight Hagen, or they will lose their lives. Kriemhild contrives another plan, and sets fire to the hall. Hagen tells the Burgundians to drink from the blood of the fallen knights, as it will save them from dehydration. With their backs against the wall, kicking the fire out in the pools of blood, six hundred men survive the fire. The Huns attack at Kriemhild's command, but the Burgundians withstand it through the night. A knight offends Rudegeer, and Rudegeer kills him, which enlarges Etzel's dishonour. Because of Kriemhild's and Etzel's pleas, Rudegeer goes to the hall to fight the Burgundians. Both Rudegeer and the Burgundians fight reluctantly, but in the end, both Gernoot and Rudegeer lose their lives to each other. Dietrich is most upset when he hears Etzel's lament and is informed about Rudegeer's death. He and his men ask the Burgundians to give Rudegeer's body, but they refuse. Only then Dietrich and his men attack the Burgundians. Volker, Dankwart and

Giselher are killed by Dietrich's men, and Dietrich himself binds Hagen and Gunther. Dietrich begs Kriemhild to take mercy on Gunther and Hagen, and she promises she will let them live. Kriemhild imprisons them, and confronts Hagen again. She asks him to repay what he has taken from her, or in other words, to return the Nibelungen treasure. Hagen states that he will never reveal its location as long as one of the Burgundian kings is still alive. Kriemhild then order Gunther to be beheaded, and holds the head before Hagen. He still refuses, and Kriemhild takes his – Siegfried's – sword, and cuts his head off. Etzel is perplexed, and mourns Hagen's death, but Hildebrand – one of Dietrich's men – in anger kills Kriemhild. She screams in fear, but falls to earth in pieces. The poet asserts that suffering is in the end always the reward for love, and that this is the fate of the Nibelungs as well.

Note on Primary Literature

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis relies on German and Dutch translations of the *Nibelungenlied.* This complicates the research, as the various manuscripts – most importantly A, B and C – are not discussed on their own or taken as direct source. However, this thesis offers a new insight in the relation between medieval society and female agency, and the role of emotion – specifically performative emotion – in the constitution of agency. This thesis draws on excellent translations of the *Nibelungenlied* to constitute its claims, and both editions support the overarching argument of this thesis.

The bilingual translation by Ursula Schulze in Middle High German and New High German is regarded as an outstanding translation and is built on extensive research. It is a translation of manuscript C (Handscrift C der Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe, or Karlsruher Handschrift). This manuscript holds a special place among the three main manuscripts, as it was written around the same time a manuscript B, but is different in content. The most noticeable difference with manuscript B is that C is longer: it holds 2439

stanzas, whereas B holds 2376. The additional stanzas are used to explicate certain ambiguities, such as words that have dual meaning – in manuscript C the word ‘man’ in the discussion between Kriemhild and Brunhild as seen in manuscript B is replaced by ‘Eigenman’ (Schulze 790) – to clarify the story as much as possible.

The Dutch translation of the *Nibelungenlied* by Jaap van Vredendaal is based on the St. Gallen manuscript, which is Manuscript B. As mentioned in the introduction, B is the most common source for academic work on the *Nibelungenlied* – though the debate on the origins of the *Nibelungenlied* and order of the manuscripts is of course concerned with both B and C, and is still ongoing. The main argument of this thesis is based on a reading of the Dutch translation, and therefore discusses primary material found in manuscript B, in line with most academic research. However, because German is the original language in which the *Nibelungenlied* was composed, I read and consulted the Middle High German edition by Schulze to verify the arguments and to stay close to the original language and meaning. Van Vredendaal’s edition closely resembles the Middle High German translation by Schulze. Although both editions are based on different manuscripts, the passages and episodes relevant for the reading of the *Nibelungenlied* provided in this thesis are found in both translations. In addition, as I am a Dutch student writing a thesis for a Dutch university, the translation by Jaap van Vredendaal can further clarify the Middle High German.

In short, this thesis is based on translations of the *Nibelungenlied* that both remain close to their source and feature the same passages that are quoted in this thesis. There is no discrepancy between the Middle High German and the Dutch translation as used in this thesis, as the arguments depend on passages that are present in both editions.

Note on Front-Page Image

The front page image is a picture of an old postcard. The postcard depicts a painting by Heinrich Hofmann, which portrays Kriemhild showing her ring – Brunhild’s ring – to

Brunhild. The image was found on www.oldthing.de – a site that sells antiquary objects – via this link: www.oldthing.de/Kuenstler-AK-Heinrich-Hoffmann-Nibelungen-Sage-Kriemhild-zeigt-Brunhild-ihren-Ring-0028224048.

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