The Nibelungenlied

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

Very little is known about the anonymous author of *The Nibelungenlied*. Scholars speculate that the author was a professional poet-entertainer in an Austrian court, who had probably learned to read and write in an ecclesiastical context. Scholars also posit that he was probably from the region of Passau, Germany, given that his geographical knowledge is sharper in this area than others. Outside of this, the anonymous poet largely remains a mystery.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Scholars believe that the poem's anonymous author was probably from Passau, Bavaria, since his geographical knowledge appears stronger for this area than for other locations in the poem. He would have composed the poem for performance at court somewhere in the Duchy of Austria. It's also believed that Wolfger, Bishop of Passau, was likely the patron for the writing of the poem. The poem's brief mentions of Bishop Pilgrim of Passau reinforce this theory—a historical Bishop Pilgrim, a predecessor of Wolfger's who had been involved in efforts to Christianize Hungary, was being considered for sainthood around the time the poem was written. The poem is also situated within the tradition of chivalric romance that was popular in the High Middle Ages. Chivalric romance often featured wandering knights in search of adventurous quests, which he performed in service to a lady whom he loved from afar. Remnants of earlier folklore, such as the presence of fairies, dragons, and magical abilities, were also common in this literature.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Scandinavian parallels to *The Nibelungenlied* can be found in the anonymous Old Norse *Poetic Edda* and the 13th century Icelandic *Volsunga Saga*. An example of heroic epic from medieval French literature is *The Song of Roland*, based on a battle during the reign of Charlemagne. The medieval epic *Beowulf* is also similar to *The Nibelungenlied* in tone and content; both works are unflinching in their description of gory battles, and both deal with themes of reputation and religion. An example of chivalric romance in Middle English is the 14th century tale, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which bears thematic resemblance to *The Nibelungenlied*, as both works center on chivalry and honor. T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* is a modern satire of medieval literature, alternatingly poking fun and searing criticism at the medieval obsession with brutality, honor, and chivalry—all of which appear in the pages of *The Nibelungenlied*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Nibelungenlied* (*The Song of the Nibelungs*)
- **When Written:** c. 1200
- **Where Written:** Austria
- **When Published:** c. 1200
- **Literary Period:** High Medieval
- **Genre:** Epic poetry
- **Setting:** Worms, Germany (Burgundy), and Hungary
- **Climax:** Hagen vengefully murders Siegfried when he bends over to drink water from a stream.
- **Antagonist:** Hagen
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

An Epic Turning Point. *The Nibelungenlied* was written in Middle High German and draws on oral traditions that trace back to the fifth and sixth centuries among Europe's Germanic-speaking peoples. In harmonizing these traditions into a single literary work, the anonymous poet can be credited with founding the genre of Middle High German epic literature. Subsequent poems in this genre are classified as "post-Nibelungian" and often feature Dietrich, who is a secondary character in *The Nibelungenlied*.

Modern Popularization. Throughout the 19th century, *The Nibelungenlied* was increasingly considered to be the German national epic, even referred to as the "German *Iliad*." Richard Wagner's opera cycle, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (written between 1848 and 1874), helped bring the work to a wider audience, although his composition drew more heavily on older Norse and Icelandic parallels.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Burgundy lives a maiden princess named Kriemhild who is known far and wide for her beauty and charm. Kriemhild is the sister of renowned kings Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher, who rule from Worms beside the Rhine and are served by many proud knights. As a girl, Kriemhild decides to foreswear love, since it usually brings sorrow along with happiness.

Farther down the Rhine, in the Netherlands city of Xanten, a handsome, valorous prince named Siegfried has recently been

knighted. Siegfried hears about Kriemhild and decides he wants to woo her. He also wants to gain lands and castles for himself. He travels to Worms with a band of stalwart companions. When Siegfried arrives in Burgundy, Gunther's vassal, Hagen, recognizes him as the mighty slayer of the Nibelung princes and possessor of their massive treasure. Siegfried is also virtually invincible, having bathed in a dragon's blood.

When the Burgundian kings and their warriors greet Siegfried, he announces his intention to wrest all their possessions from them. The kings persuade him to settle the matter honorably, sharing their riches in common. Siegfried spends the next year in the Burgundian court, secretly pining for Kriemhild, although he has yet to lay eyes on her.

When foreign kings threaten to invade Burgundy, Siegfried offers to go to war on Gunther's behalf. He leads the Burgundian forces to an overwhelming victory and takes many prisoners. Kriemhild, who harbors secret affection for Siegfried, is delighted to learn he is unharmed and victorious. Six weeks after the battle, a massive victory festival ensues, and Kriemhild's brothers, desiring an alliance, arrange for the two to finally meet. Siegfried and Kriemhild spend time together in public throughout the festival, and their love for one another grows.

Meanwhile, Gunther begins to pine for an Icelandic queen named Brunhild, who is both beautiful and incredibly strong—to win her love, a knight must defeat her in three athletic contests, or else lose his head. In exchange for Siegfried's help in these contests, Gunther swears to give him Kriemhild's hand in marriage. The men sail to Iceland, along with Hagen and his brother and fellow vassal, Dancwart. Before they disembark, Siegfried cautions the group that they must let Brunhild believe that he is Gunther's vassal.

Brunhild proves to be a formidable opponent. While Gunther merely goes through the motions, Siegfried puts on his magical invisibility cloak, which gives him extra strength to hurl a javelin, throw a boulder, and leap even farther than Brunhild does. When she thinks Gunther defeats her (not knowing it was Siegfried who accomplished all of those feats), Brunhild is furious, but she agrees to marry him.

When the party arrives back in Burgundy, Siegfried reminds Gunther of his oath, and Siegfried and Kriemhild are duly married. During the marriage feast, Brunhild weeps when she sees Kriemhild sitting next to Siegfried in the seat of honor. When Gunther asks Brunhild what is the matter, she explains that she is grieved to see Kriemhild degraded by marriage to a mere liegeman. Gunther evades the issue, and Brunhild says she won't consummate her marriage with Gunther until she knows the full story. Accordingly, when Gunther tries to take her virginity that night, she flies into a rage, ties him up, and suspends him from a nail on the wall. When Gunther confides his humiliation to Siegfried the next day, Siegfried promises to subdue Gunther's formidable wife for him. Wearing his invisibility cloak, he wrestles Brunhild into submission, though they nearly kill one another in the process. Gunther finally sleeps with his wife, after which Brunhild's vast strength leaves her, and she's just like any ordinary woman. Not long after, Siegfried and Kriemhild return to Siegfried's native Netherlands, where he rules as king for ten years.

All this time, Brunhild continues to fret over Siegfried's marriage to Kriemhild. She begs Gunther to invite them to a midsummer festival, so he dispatches messengers to Xanten. When the messengers return with news of their acceptance, they show off the generous gifts Siegfried gave them, prompting Hagen to jealousy of the Nibelung treasure.

The summer festival starts off happily enough, but one evening, Kriemhild provokes Brunhild with remarks about Siegfried's equality to Gunther, and the two queens begin fighting. Later, she pointedly enters the cathedral before Brunhild, which would be taboo for a liegewoman. In the crowning insult, Kriemhild calls Brunhild Siegfried's paramour, alleging that Siegfried took her virginity, not Gunther. When Brunhild tells Gunther of this charge, he is evasive and lets Siegfried off the hook without a formal oath. Later, when Hagen and the other vassals learn of this, they begin plotting to kill Siegfried, with Hagen arguing that Brunhild's honor is at stake. Gunther reluctantly goes along with them.

After learning offhandedly from Kriemhild that Siegfried has a vulnerable spot between his shoulder-blades, Hagen suggests that the men go on a hunting trip. After an enjoyable day of sport, Siegfried stoops at a spring to take a drink, and Hagen seizes the opportunity to stab him through the vulnerable spot. Siegfried quickly dies.

Back in Worms, Hagen has Siegfried's corpse placed on the threshold of Kriemhild's apartment. When Kriemhild discovers his body, she immediately plunges into wild lament, and, suspecting the truth about what's happened, begins to think of vengeance. At the funeral, Hagen's guilt is proven when he stands next to the bier, causing Siegfried's wounds to miraculously bleed anew.

Three and a half years later, Kriemhild has still not spoken to Gunther because of his role in Hagen's plot, and she refuses to see Hagen. Hagen encourages Gunther to make peace with his sister, suggesting that she might agree to bring the Nibelung treasure, her inheritance, back to Burgundy. He does so, and soon the massive treasure is transported to Worms. When Kriemhild lavishes her treasure on rich and poor, native and foreigner alike, Hagen jealously seizes possession of it and dumps the remainder into the Rhine for safekeeping. The kings let this slide, but Kriemhild nurses resentment all the more.

Thirteen years later, a pagan, widowed, Hungarian king named Etzel becomes interested in taking Kriemhild as his wife. His vassal, Rüdiger, margrave of Pöchlarn in Austria, offers to journey to Worms as Etzel's envoy. When Rüdiger relays the

king's proposal, Kriemhild refuses, saying she cannot love another man and would be disgraced by marriage to a heathen. She can't help coveting Etzel's riches, however, and realizes she might have the power to exact vengeance on Hagen at last. She finally consents and departs Burgundy for foreign lands.

Kriemhild and Etzel celebrate a lavish wedding in Vienna before settling in Etzel's fortress at Etzelnburg. Though she finds him to be even richer than Siegfried, Kriemhild continues to grieve in private for her fallen first husband. Seven years later, she has amassed much power and renown in Hungary and also given birth to a son, Ortlieb. Despite all this, her desire for revenge is unabated, and she still resents being put in a position to marry a heathen. She easily persuades Etzel to invite her kinsmen to a midsummer festival, giving her the opportunity she has desired for many years.

When Gunther's court receives the invitation, Hagen senses a trap, but Giselher shames him into making the journey anyway. During the journey, Hagen encounters some water-fairies who predict the doom of virtually the entire Burgundian entourage in Hungary. The party enjoys the warm hospitality of Rüdiger in Pöchlarn, and he escorts them to Etzelnburg as well.

As soon as the Burgundians enter Etzel's lands, Lord Dietrich rides out to warn them that Kriemhild is still grieving Siegfried's death and means to harm them. Kriemhild welcomes the Burgundians coldly, refuses to greet Hagen, and demands to know the location of the Nibelung treasure. Twice that day, she sends her vassals to attack Hagen, but both times they are intimidated by Hagen and Volker. The next day, Etzel's brother, Lord Bloedelin, instigates savage fighting among the knights. Meanwhile, Kriemhild has Ortlieb brought to the festal table, and when Hagen hears that the Burgundians have been attacked, he swiftly beheads the young boy. A terrible battle ensues, and the Hunnish knights are slaughtered. By evening, 20,000 more Huns have been killed, and the Burgundians ask Etzel for a truce. Kriemhild intervenes, saying she can't show mercy as long as Hagen remains alive. Her brothers refuse to surrender Hagen, so Kriemhild drives them all back inside the hall and sets the building on fire. Six hundred men survive a horrifying night trapped in the hall.

Rüdiger surveys the massacre that has been perpetrated on all sides and finds himself caught between his vow of service to Kriemhild and the ties of hospitality by which he has bound himself to Gunther and his men. With greatest reluctance, he finally takes up his sword against the Burgundians, and after fierce fighting, he and Gernot cut one another down at almost the same moment. Everyone is grief-stricken. When Dietrich hears of it, he sends Hildebrand and his other men to investigate, and Volker provokes them to fight—a battle that ends up taking the lives of all but Hildebrand, Hagen, and Gunther. A grieving Dietrich goes to face Hagen and successfully wounds him, then takes him bound to Kriemhild, who is happy at last. He soon does the same with Gunther, though he advises Kriemhild to spare both warriors' lives.

Kriemhild, however, gets her vengeance at last. She gives Hagen one last chance to return her treasure, then has Gunther beheaded and finally strikes down Hagen with her own hand. Before she can revel in her triumph, she is slain in turn by Hildebrand. Only he, Dietrich, and Etzel remain alive, weeping for their slain kinsmen and vassals, "as joy must ever turn to sorrow in the end."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kriemhild – Kriemhild is a princess of the kingdom of Burgundy, whose family rules from Worms beside the Rhine. She is famously beautiful and charming, desired by many knights, though it transpires that she is also calculating, with a long memory for wrongs and a bottomless capacity for revenge. She is the daughter of Dancrat and Uote and under the charge of her brothers, Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher, the kings of Burgundy. Though she foreswears romance in her youth, hoping to avoid the sorrow that inevitably accompanies love, she begins to cherish Siegfried from afar after he arrives at Worms. She meets him face to face more than a year later, after he defends Burgundy against foreign invaders. Gunther promises Kriemhild to Siegfried in exchange for Siegfried's help in wooing Brunhild, and they duly marry after Siegfried returns from the expedition to Iceland. About ten years after the couple settles in the Netherlands, Kriemhild gives birth to a son, named Gunther. During the festivity at Worms, Kriemhild provokes Brunhild by boasting of Siegfried's royal status and calling Brunhild Siegfried's paramour. Her accusation prompts Hagen to defend Brunhild's honor by slaying Siegfried. Kriemhild, in turn, becomes obsessed with exacting vengeance on Hagen. This desire is only intensified when Hagen takes the Nibelung treasure, Kriemhild's inheritance from Siegfried, and refuses her access to it. After years of stewing on these wrongs, Kriemhild assents to marry Etzel, King of Hungary, because his power and riches may facilitate her hopes for revenge. Several years later, she invites Hagen and her kinsmen to a festival in Hungary, where she instigates a terrible bloodbath, and she finally slays Hagen with her own hand—only to be slain by Hildebrand moments later.

Gunther – A renowned warrior and king of Burgundy, Gunther is the brother of Kriemhild, Gernot, and Giselher and son of Dancrat and Uote. The senior Burgundian King, he rules from Worms beside the Rhine. Though a brave knight, Gunther tends to be dependent on the strength and sway of others, especially Siegfried and Hagen. When Gunther hears about Brunhild, a beautiful but mighty queen, he determines to sail to Iceland to woo her. With help from an invisibility cloak, Siegfried covertly competes in Brunhild's contests on

Gunther's behalf so that Gunther will win her as his wife. After they return to Worms, Gunther is again dependent on Siegfried to subdue his powerful wife, since she at first refuses to sleep with him and ties him up when he attempts to consummate the marriage. After Siegfried successfully subdues her, Brunhild and Gunther live peacefully for ten years. During the festival in Worms, when Kriemhild calls Brunhild Siegfried's paramour (implying that Siegfried, not Gunther, took Brunhild's virginity), Gunther initially lets Siegfried off the hook and is reluctant to enter into a plot against his friend. However, he ultimately defers to Hagen's plan to murder Siegfried in order to protect Brunhild's honor. When he and his men journey to Hungary, Gunther survives most of the fighting, but refuses to surrender Hagen and is eventually beheaded at Kriemhild's orders.

Siegfried – Siegfried is the prince of the Netherlands, son of Siegmund and Sieglind. He is a handsome knight famed for his valiant exploits. He falls in love with Kriemhild from a distance, long before he ever lays eyes on her, and resolves to go to Burgundy to woo her. Among Siegfried's youthful conquests are the princes of Nibelungenland, Schilbung and Nibelung, whom Siegfried slayed and whose massive treasure and kingdom he seized. He also slayed a dragon and bathed in its blood, which makes him virtually invincible. When he arrives at Worms, he declares his intention to seize Burgundy by force, but eventually agrees to share its wealth with Gunther and his brothers. When Liudeger and Liudegast invade, Siegfried offers to fight them on Gunther's behalf and leads Gunther's vassals in victorious battle, earning the Burgundians' trust. At the festival following the battle, Siegfried is finally allowed to meet Kriemhild. When Gunther is determined to woo Iceland's Queen Brunhild, Siegfried sails with him and defeats Brunhild in her contests, wearing his invisibility cloak, so that Gunther appears to be the victor. After they return from Iceland, Gunther fulfills a vow to give him Kriemhild in exchange for his help, and they marry at last. Gunther again asks for his help in subduing a resistant Brunhild in Gunther's bedchamber. After the wedding festivities, Siegfried and Kriemhild return to the Netherlands, where Siegmund grants him the kingdom, and he reigns peacefully for ten years. When they return to Worms for a festival, Brunhild accuses him of having slept with her, and Hagen hatches a plan to avenge Brunhild's honor. Siegfried is accordingly stabbed in the back by Hagen during a hunting trip and quickly dies. The widowed Kriemhild becomes obsessed with revenge.

Brunhild – Brunhild is Queen of Iceland, a maiden renowned not only for her great beauty, but also for strength and athletic ability surpassing that of any man who has tried to win her. She demands that her suitors defeat her in three contests—javelin-throwing, weight-throwing, and leaping—in order to gain her hand. No one has ever succeeded, and those who fail are beheaded. When Gunther hears of Brunhild, he determines to sail to Iceland to woo her. To her fury, Gunther appears to master her in the contests, though it is really Siegfried beneath his invisibility cloak achieving all of the feats. After returning to Worms with the Burgundians, Brunhild is distressed by Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried, thinking Siegfried a mere vassal. She refuses to share Gunther's bed until she understands the truth, and she humiliates him when he tries to consummate their union. The following night, she is physically subdued by Siegfried, again using the magic cloak. After she finally sleeps with Gunther, her strength leaves her, and she is like any other woman. She lives peacefully with Gunther for about ten years, and she has a son, named Siegfried. However, she continues to brood about the other Siegfried's marriage, and she invites him and Kriemhild to a festivity in hopes of finding out the truth. During the festival, Kriemhild tells Brunhild not only that Siegfried is not Gunther's vassal, but that it was actually Siegfried who first slept with her after her marriage to Gunther. When Brunhild reveals the story to Hagen, the betrayal of Siegfried is set in motion. After this point, Brunhild largely fades from the action.

Hagen – Hagen is a vassal of the Burgundian kings Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher. He is known as a particularly fearsome warrior. He is also calculating and acquisitive, always looking for ways to accumulate power and wealth, whatever the cost. He boasts an extensive knowledge of foreign countries and shares details of Siegfried's valiant past when the latter first arrives in Burgundy. As soon as Hagen hears Brunhild's accusations against Siegfried, he begins plotting against him. Hagen crafts an elaborate scheme which culminates in him stabbing Siegfried in the back during a hunting trip. At Siegfried's funeral, Hagen's proximity to the bier causes Siegfried's wounds to bleed anew, proving Hagen's guilt in accordance with folk traditions. He is obsessed with Siegfried's Nibelung treasure, and a few years later, he contrives to have it brought to Burgundy and gains possession of it, dumping it into the Rhine and provoking Kriemhild's wrath all the more. Years later, when the Burgundians are invited to Etzel's and Kriemhild's festival, he resists going at first, but ultimately relents, even though he suspects—and some water-fairies confirm—that Kriemhild is plotting deadly revenge. When the festival becomes a massacre, Hagen survives to the last, then is finally slain by Kriemhild herself.

Etzel – Etzel is the widowed King of Hungary (his character is based on Attila the Hun). Because he is a pagan, he doubts that the Christian Kriemhild will consider marrying him, but hopes that his extravagant wealth might persuade her. Rüdiger, Etzel's vassal, travels to Burgundy to secure Kriemhild's consent, and she returns with him to Hungary to become Etzel's new bride. Etzel seems generally good-natured, gullible, and quite oblivious to what's happening around him—he apparently never suspects Kriemhild's persistent grief and vengefulness, for example, and is persuaded that the Burgundians remain armed out of custom, not fear for their

lives. After his son Ortlieb is slain, however, he desires no mercy for the perpetrators. Nevertheless, he is shocked and grieved to see Kriemhild slay Hagen. With Dietrich and Hildebrand, he is one of the only characters who remains alive at the story's end.

Rüdiger – Rüdiger is the margrave and lord of Pöchlarn, Austria. A vassal of Etzel's, Rüdiger volunteers to act as envoy when Etzel decides to ask the widowed Kriemhild to marry him. Rüdiger is renowned for his open-handed hospitality, generous gifts, and kindness to strangers. When the Burgundians visit his lands en route to Hungary, he allows his daughter to become engaged to Giselher. He escorts the men of Burgundy to Kriemhild's festival and is thereby honor-bound to the foreigners—a tie that catches him in a terrible dilemma when Kriemhild, to whom he is vassal, begs him to fight for her against Hagen. Despairing at his loss of integrity, he finally fights the Burgundians, and he and Gernot slay one another simultaneously, to the lamentations of all involved.

Dietrich – Dietrich is the Lord of the Goths who lives in exile in Etzel's court. He is one of the only characters who seems aware of the long-term effects of people's actions and who ultimately rises above the cascade of violence at Kriemhild's festival. As soon as the party from Burgundy arrives, he rides out to warn them that Kriemhild still grieves Siegfried's death and harbors ill intentions toward her kinsmen. The next day, when Kriemhild appeals to him directly, he outright refuses to take part in her dishonorable scheme. After the fighting begins in earnest, he helps Kriemhild, Etzel, and Rüdiger temporarily escape the fray. Horrified when he later hears that Rüdiger has been slain, he sends Hildebrand, Wolfhart, and his men to investigate, but orders them not to fight. After most of his men are killed, he faces Gunther and Hagen and tries to persuade them to surrender themselves, but is forced to fight both, wounds them, and turns them over to Kriemhild. He appeals to Kriemhild to spare the warriors' lives, but to no avail. With Etzel and Hildebrand, he is one of the only characters to remain alive at the story's end.

Hildebrand – Hildebrand is Dietrich's faithful master-at-arms. When Dietrich learns of Rüdiger's death, he sends Hildebrand and his vassals to investigate, but they are provoked to fight, and Hildebrand slays Volker. Hagen wounds him in revenge. When Kriemhild kills Hagen, Hildebrand immediately slays Kriemhild. He, Dietrich, and Etzel are some of the only surviving characters at the story's end.

Gernot – A renowned warrior and king of Burgundy, Gernot is the brother of Kriemhild, Gunther, and Giselher and son of Dancrat and Uote. He rules from Worms beside the Rhine. When Siegfried arrives in Burgundy, Gernot urges cooperation rather than bloodshed. Years later, however, he readily partakes in Hagen's plot to murder Siegfried to protect Brunhild's honor. In Hungary, Gernot is mortally wounded by Rüdiger, then kills Rüdiger moments later with the sword Rüdiger gifted him.

Giselher – A renowned warrior and king of Burgundy, Giselher is the brother of Kriemhild, Gunther, and Gernot and son of Dancrat and Uote. He rules from Worms beside the Rhine. He is reluctant to enter into Hagen's plot against Siegfried. He and Kriemhild share an especially close bond. En route to Kriemhild's festival in Hungary, he is betrothed to Rüdiger's daughter. However, before he can marry, he is killed by Wolfhart at Etzel's court.

Uote – Uote is the great Queen of Burgundy, wife of Dancrat, and mother of Kriemhild, Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher. She is largely in the background of the poem. She interprets Kriemhild's portentous dream at the beginning of the story and counsels her about love. Years later, before the Burgundian men depart for Hungary, she dreams that they will all be killed.

Ortwin – Ortwin of Metz is nephew of Hagen and Dancwart, a vassal of the Burgundian kings, and serves as King's Seneschal in the Burgundian court. He is hot-blooded and wants to take up arms against Siegfried when the latter first arrives in Burgundy. Years later, he eagerly joins in Hagen's plot against Siegfried.

Volker – Volker of Alzei is a noble lord known as "the minstrel" because he plays the viol. He is Hagen's faithful comrade-in-arms throughout the bloodbath in Etzel's court. On the first night of the festival, he plays lullabies on his fiddle to help the other knights sleep. However, he also wields his fiddle-bow like a sword, making deadly "music." He provokes Dietrich's men into entering the fray and is killed by Hildebrand.

Siegmund – Siegmund is King of the Netherlands, husband of Sieglind and father of Siegfried. Though he has misgivings about his son's plan to woo Kriemhild, he sends him off to Burgundy with due honor. When he returns with his new bride, Siegmund grants him his crown. He accompanies his son and daughter-in-law to Burgundy for the festival where Siegfried is killed, and he returns to the Netherlands alone.

Sieglind – Sieglind is Queen of the Netherlands, wife of Siegmund and mother of Siegfried. She fears that her son will lose his life in his quest to Burgundy, but sends him off with due honor. About ten years after Siegfried's return, she dies, around the same time that Kriemhild gives birth to a son.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dancrat – Dancrat is the husband of Uote and father of Kriemhild, Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher. He does not appear directly in much of the story.

Dancwart – Dancwart is Hagen's brother, a vassal of the Burgundian kings, and Marshal of the Burgundian court. At Etzel's court, he and his squires are attacked by Lord Bloedelin, starting off waves of bloodshed.

Gere – Gere is a margrave and vassal of the Burgundian kings.

He first announces Etzel's proposal of marriage to Kriemhild.

Eckewart – Eckewart is a margrave and vassal of the Burgundian kings. After Kriemhild agrees to marry Etzel, he accompanies her to Hungary, pledging himself to her until death.

Rumold – Rumold is a vassal of the Burgundian kings and serves as Lord of the Kitchen in the Burgundian court. He is appointed regent when his lords go to Hungary.

Sindold – Sindold is a vassal of the Burgundian kings and serves as Cup-bearer in the Burgundian court.

Hunold – Hunold is a vassal of the Burgundian kings and serves as Chamberlain of the Burgundian court.

Schilbung – With Nibelung, Schilbung is one of the princes of Nibelungenland who asked Siegfried to divide the massive Nibelung treasure, giving him the sword Balmung in payment. Siegfried ultimately slayed both him and Nibelung and took the treasure and kingdom for himself.

Nibelung – With Schilbung, Nibelung is one of the princes of Nibelungenland who asked Siegfried to divide the massive Nibelung treasure, giving him the sword Balmung in payment. Siegfried ultimately slayed both him and Schilbung and took the treasure and kingdom for himself.

Alberich – Alberich is a Nibelung dwarf from whom Siegfried seizes the cloak of invisibility. Siegfried then appoints him treasurer of the Nibelung treasure.

Liudeger – Liudeger is the King of Saxony, who, with Liudegast, invades Burgundy. He is taken prisoner by Siegfried during the battle.

Liudegast – Liudegast is the King of Denmark, who, with Liudeger, invades Burgundy. He is wounded and taken prisoner by Siegfried during the battle.

Gotelind – Gotelind is Rüdiger's wife, who helps him dole out lavish gifts on the many visitors who pass through Pöchlarn and seeks to befriend Kriemhild when she arrives in foreign parts.

Ortlieb – Ortlieb is the son of Kriemhild and Etzel, born seven years after their marriage. Kriemhild insists on his being baptized as a Christian, despite Etzel being a heathen. Ortlieb is brought to the table during the ill-fated festival and is soon beheaded by Hagen.

The Water-Fairies / The Nixies – The fairies, or nixies, are discovered by Hagen while he searches for a way to ford the Danube. They have second sight, and they predict—accurately—that all but one of the Burgundian party will be killed in Hungary.

Bloedelin – Bloedelin is Etzel's brother, to whom Kriemhild appeals for help in killing Hagen, offering him wealth and a bride in exchange. He is beheaded soon after challenging Dancwart, but he successfully instigates fighting among the knights.

Iring, Margrave of Denmark – On the second day of the festival, Iring fights and wounds Hagen, but is finally killed by him.

Wolfhart – Wolfhart is Hildebrand's nephew and vassal of Dietrich. When he is sent with Hildebrand and Dietrich's other vassals to investigate Rüdiger's death, he insists that they be armed, which contributes to their getting drawn into the fight. He and Giselher end up slaying one another.

THEMES

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IDEALIZED AND DEVIANT WOMANHOOD

In *The Nibelungenlied*, a medieval German epic steeped in the history of the fifth and sixth centuries, female characters are relatively few, yet they are responsible for the driving events in the story. Kriemhild and Brunhild—a Burgundian princess and warrior-queen of Iceland, respectively—are the central women. However, the two are decidedly ambivalent women, in that both are highly desirable to men, yet each challenges expectations for proper feminine behavior in medieval Germany. At first, Kriemhild appears to be an idealized princess, especially compared to the somewhat masculine Brunhild. Yet, by the end, she dominates Brunhild and nearly all the men in the story, becoming not only unfeminine but monstrous. With this portrayal, the poet suggests that women who assert themselves apart from the power of men must either be tamed or destroyed.

In the first part of the story, Kriemhild, who lives in quiet seclusion, is lauded as the epitome of womanhood. She is "the adornment of her sex" and "made for love's caresses." Even now, Kriemhild's desirability has an undercurrent of danger, as the poet warns that her beauty would later "[cause] many knights to lose their lives." Yet, for now, "none [is] her enemy." Kriemhild's loveliness is rumored far and wide. In fact, Siegfried, a prince in the Netherlands, hears about the maiden long before he ever sees her, and he desires her so much that he threatens war against Burgundy. In accordance with courtly values, and in contrast to what Kriemhild will become later, Kriemhild's love has an elevating influence on Siegfried's character, showing that she is a proper lady by medieval standards. Other well-mannered knights are glad to have Siegfried in their company, "for he aspired to a noble love"—suggesting that Kriemhild has a civilizing influence on the wild warrior.

In the middle of the story, Brunhild appears as a relic from Germany's semi-mythical past, hailing from Iceland, a distant (and recently pagan) land. In contrast to the elevated and somewhat colorless Kriemhild, Brunhild is an ambivalent figure—exotically attractive, yet besting men at their own games. Not only is Brunhild surpassingly beautiful, she is renowned for her strength and athleticism. To gain her love, warriors must compete against her in several sports, and any man who fails forfeits his head—a courting procession that lacks Kriemhild's apparent refinement and femininity. When King Gunther of Burgundy sails to Iceland to try to win Brunhild's hand, the heroic and accomplished Siegfried offers his help in exchange for receiving Kriemhild as his wife—creating the expectation that he will subdue the "wild" woman in exchange for the retiring, ladylike Kriemhild.

Brunhild is so formidable that Siegfried can only defeat her through supernatural means, slipping into his magic cloak so that he can invisibly complete the contests on Gunther's behalf. Gunther's vassal, Hagen, is so alarmed by Brunhild's prowess that he tells his lord, "The woman whose love you desire is a rib of the Devil himself!" Hagen's criticisms align unfeminine women—especially those with the capacity to best men—with pure evil, suggesting that Brunhild is the devil's creation in the way that Eve, formed from Adam's rib, is God's. Even after she is defeated and duly married to Gunther, the threat posed by Brunhild's strength still looms. Far from being "made for love's caresses," like her Burgundian counterpart, Brunhild emasculates her new husband. On their wedding night, she overpowers him, ties him up, and hangs him from a nail on the wall. Gunther's humiliation contrasts with Siegfried's tender, contented wedding night with Kriemhild. Gunther unhappily confides in Siegfried that, if such behavior is permitted, "the whole sex will grow uppish with their husbands for ever after." So, Siegfried (again in concealment) wrestles Brunhild in Gunther's chamber that night, subduing her so that Gunther can "[take] his pleasure with her as was his due." Afterward, Brunhild's "vast strength fled so that now she was no stronger than any other woman." She has been rendered ordinary, submissive, and dependent on the strength of men.

Soon, Brunhild fades from the action—becoming secluded and nonthreatening like the maiden Kriemhild—as Kriemhild, contrary to expectations, gains the upper hand over her and even assumes Brunhild's ambivalent status as a formidable, "wild" woman who must ultimately be destroyed. When the two queens quarrel bitterly over Siegfried's status and the rumor that Siegfried slept with Brunhild, Hagen murders Siegfried, ostensibly to protect Brunhild's honor. Kriemhild is bent on revenge for the rest of the story, further descending into a threatening version of womanhood. In Hungary, when Kriemhild greets the visiting Burgundians with threats and demands, the exiled Lord Dietrich calls her a "she-devil," echoing the earlier characterization of Brunhild. She later exposes her young son to the mounting violence between the Huns and Burgundians, an act that is seen as particularly dreadful for a woman and mother; she then tries to end the standoff by setting the hall on fire, in "monstrous vengeance." Thus, by the end of the book, Kriemhild has not only displaced Brunhild as a threatening female, but has surpassed her into "monstrous" behavior. Her final vengeance over Hagen isn't allowed to stand in its own right, as Hildebrand immediately kills her for the act—and, by extension, for subverting the expectation that she be feminine, weak, and dependent. Brunhild, meanwhile, survives in Burgundy—ironically, the woman earlier seen as threatening now lives a passive and quiet life, aloof from the business of men.

First impressions about *The Nibelungenlied*'s women are not to be trusted. By the end of the book, mannish Brunhild is a weakened, silent Burgundian queen, while sweet, pliant Kriemhild presides over a vengeful bloodbath in a faraway pagan court and is ultimately killed for it. The poet views women as laudable when they are safely submitted to men; once a woman starts to actively manipulate men, however, there is no telling what other norms will be horrifyingly inverted.

CIVILIZATION VS. BARBARISM

The anonymous author of the heroic epic *The Nibelungenlied* is acutely aware of differences between native and foreigner, pagan and Christian, human and nonhuman (namely magical) creatures—distinctions reflective both of the story's early medieval setting and the poet's high medieval context, where such boundaries would have been ever-present sources of potential conflict. Using this tension throughout the story, the author establishes a world in which it is not only important that "barbaric" influences be tamed and subsumed, but in which even the most "civilized" figures are continually at risk of falling back into barbarism.

The poet first presents a world in which "civilizing" barbaric figures is of foremost importance, as shown by the figures of Siegfried and Brunhild. Hagen initially describes the heroic Siegfried as a foreigner of fearful valor, the subduer of the Nibelungs, and a warrior of such ferocity that "it is best to have his friendship." Siegfried even has contacts with supernatural survivals from the pre-Christian past—such as the dragon whose blood renders him virtually invincible—which add to his mystique. Yet, as Siegfried is persuaded to share the Burgundians' lands with them and eventually goes into battle on their behalf, he goes from being a stranger to "a most welcome guest among the Burgundians" to a desirable catch. The knights conspire to place Kriemhild in Siegfried's path in an effort to "attach this splendid warrior" to themselves. Kriemhild herself is a key civilizing influence on the foreign knight.

Brunhild likewise is a foreigner whose barbarism must be tamed. Brunhild first appears in the story as an exotic figure

from "beyond the Rhine," and the prospect of winning such a woman for himself "thrills" King Gunther's heart. She is distinguished not only by her beauty and wealth, but by her unmatched feats of athleticism and manly strength, contrasting her with the modest Kriemhild, who stays in domestic retirement. Brunhild's prowess is such that only Siegfried, himself a fierce and recently barbarous figure, can subdue her—and, even here, it's notable that he only achieves it through trickery (wearing the magic cloak), both in Iceland and in Gunther's chamber in Burgundy. Once Siegfried achieves this, Gunther can finally take Brunhild's virginity, which robs her of her native strength and renders her indistinguishable from meek German women.

Just as barbaric figures can be civilized, even the most "civilized" of figures can regress to barbarism. Where Kriemhild had stood as a civilizing influence on Siegfried in the Burgundian court, Siegfried's betrayers find Kriemhild to be a barbarous figure when they arrive in the Hungarian court. In contrast to their open-handed reception at Rüdiger's court, the Burgundians are received by Kriemhild "with perfidy in her heart." In startling contrast to codes of courtly hospitality, she immediately demands information about the Nibelung treasure they owe her.

The extremity of Kriemhild's actions toward the Burgundians shows just how far she has sunk into barbarism: effectively sacrificing her own son, Ortlieb, by bringing him into the midst of the violence, allowing her guests to be reduced to drinking blood in order to survive, presenting Hagen with the head of her own slain brother, and finally slaying Hagen with her own hands. Once the pinnacle of femininity and refinement, Kriemhild ultimately becomes a queen of barbarity, illustrating how easy it is for people to become corrupted by cruelty, even corrupting others in the process.

The presentation of "civilized" vs. "barbarian" in the story is more sophisticated than one might expect. Characters who defy courtly expectations are seen as needing to be civilized, like Siegfried and Brunhild; yet, Kriemhild, seemingly the crown of civilization at the beginning of the story, plunges to the very depths by the end. Contrary to her own fears as a widow, it's not marrying a pagan (Etzel) that does this to her—it's her own choice to harbor bitter vengeance and to go to great lengths to wreak bloody revenge. The poet's implied warning is that, depending on the values to which one chooses to devote oneself, anyone can suffer a fall as shocking as Kriemhild's.

HONOR VS. VENGEANCE

In *The Nibelungenlied*, there is a tension between then-contemporary (high medieval) notions of honor and the survival of the older, tribal value of vengeance. Though the anonymous poet is not heavy-handed in championing honor, he ultimately deconstructs the older Germanic concept of vengeance, showing that it contains the seeds of its own undoing. In fact, the poem ends with such total destruction that it seems as if vengeance has won the day. However, the poet argues that vengeance ultimately destroys those who indulge in it, and that, however thankless it seems, a more restrained, elevated ideal of honor is worth emulating, lest society be undone.

The poem does celebrate examples of relatively uncomplicated honor, namely Siegfried and Rüdiger. Both of them are ultimately tragic figures, whose honorable intentions can't stand up to the devastation that vengeance unleashes. For Siegfried, honor resides in gaining and ruling over a land in his own right—hence his overture to the Burgundians at the beginning of the story. Though he does not end up conquering them, he gains the Burgundians' trust by loyally defending Burgundy against an attack by the Saxons. Granted, to "boldly [...] woo honor" is a bloody affair, but Siegfried is also pleased to stop fighting when the Saxons sue for peace, and the wounded are treated with magnanimity. Observing all this, a page remarks that Siegfried has "all the qualities that go to make a brave, good knight," and that, in his company, the Burgundians' "honor is free of all tarnish."

Rüdiger is one of the only enduringly honorable figures in the story. Having pledged his support to Kriemhild, he also offers hospitality and safe conduct to the Burgundians—meaning that to raise his sword against either party would be a breach of honor. Faced with this impasse in Kriemhild's warring court, he calls himself a godforsaken man, who must "sacrifice all the esteem, the integrity, and breeding that by the grace of God were mine!" He and one of Gunther's men slay one another simultaneously, the nearest escape he can hope for.

The fight between the two queens, and the actions of Hagen in response, are the story's hinge between honor and vengeance. The argument between Kriemhild and Brunhild is a contesting of honor between the two (especially since, in their context, a woman's honor would be identified with that of her husband). Brunhild asserts that her husband, Gunther, must take precedence over Kriemhild's husband, Siegfried. This leads Kriemhild to lose her temper and call Brunhild Siegfried's paramour. Devastated, Brunhild later confides in Gunther and Hagen that Kriemhild has tried to rob her of her honor. Hagen immediately declares that Siegfried's (alleged) boast to have slept with Brunhild should cost him his life. Hagen then insinuates to a reluctant Gunther that if Siegfried were taken out of the picture, then Gunther could take over his lands. A line appears to have been crossed; violence is no longer a means to secure or defend honor, but to eliminate someone on a thin pretense. After Hagen and the knights carry out their "treacherous" plot, they deposit Siegfried's corpse on the threshold of Kriemhild's room, thereby setting her on a path that will make her "the sworn enemy of her own happiness" as she promises to avenge her fallen husband.

Once unleashed, vengeance proves to be its own punishment,

corrupting and ultimately destroying those who indulge in it. Kriemhild spends the rest of her life brooding on the wrongs done to her, darkly nursing hopes of vengeance long after remarrying and moving far from Burgundy. Hagen even warns the other Burgundians against accepting Kriemhild's invitation to Hungary, knowing that she "has a long memory" for revenge; however, King Giselher taunts Hagen's cowardice, so Hagen feels he must undertake the deadly journey for honor's sake. Once in Hungary, he even hastens his fate by provoking the queen.

When Kriemhild appeals to Lord Dietrich for help in attacking the Burgundians, Dietrich rebukes the queen for acting dishonorably, telling her, "your request does you little honor with its plotting against the lives of your kindred, who came here in good faith." As an outsider to the immediate conflict, Dietrich sees the nature of the queen's actions with greater clarity. After Kriemhild finally achieves her vengeance, cutting off Hagen's head with Siegfried's sword, she is instantly slain by Dietrich's tutor, Hildebrand. She doesn't get to savor any satisfaction after finally avenging Siegfried. In fact, virtually everyone on both sides of the fight lies dead—there aren't any heroes, and the story literally ends with weeping.

The volume of bloodshed in the story is theatrical, as none of the central characters survive, and everyone else is left riddled with grief. The more treacherous Hagen's plotting, and the more Kriemhild obsesses over how she has been wronged, the more grievous the repercussions once plots are set in motion. The poet suggests that while honor is a genuine value worth preserving, it is an inherently fragile one—often resting on such flimsy foundations as a wife's sense of pride or a vassal's greed. As such, it's easy for honor to spill over into vengeance, and once it does, it is likely impossible to reverse the course of events that have been unleashed.

HOSPITALITY, GIFTS, AND EXCHANGE

Hospitality and gift exchange are the major currency of the world of the story, written in the thirteenth century but featuring events that gesture back as far as the fifth century. Throughout *The Nibelungenlied*, characters repeatedly display their largesse by bestowing lavish gifts and extravagantly welcoming one another into their kingdoms. Yet they also frequently betray one another through treacherous, often deadly "repayments" and falsely hospitable gestures. While it would be anachronistic to say that the poet is making a cynical critique of the gift economy, the poet does demonstrate its limits, arguing that hospitality is susceptible to cruel distortions when people choose to betray one another's trust.

The book contains notable examples of liberal hospitality and gift-giving; at the time, a major motivation for accumulating wealth was to enable generous gifting, so as to secure friendships and reinforce loyalty. After Siegfried's death, for example, Kriemhild gives abundantly to convents, hospitals, and to the needy, both to demonstrate her love for her fallen husband and to ensure that many will repay her in the form of offerings for Siegfried's soul. Even after she is forced to travel to Hungary without the Nibelung treasure, Kriemhild and her new husband, Etzel, celebrate their wedding by giving lavishly. Through such gestures Kriemhild "makes herself known" to the people of her new lands—that is, forges new bonds of mutual loyalty—to such an extent that they exclaim, "We imagined lady Kriemhild had no means, instead of which she has performed marvels of generosity!"

"Open-handed Rüdiger" is likewise a paragon of liberality; "it was not in [his] nature to let anything escape his generosity." He so prevails upon the Burgundian warriors to linger in Pöchlarn that they must "defend themselves" against his feats of giving, as he bestows so many horses and clothes that it is spoken of long after. Later, it's Rüdiger's sense of hospitality as an escort that forbids him from obeying Kriemhild's demand that he fight the Burgundians; by giving in to the demands of either side, he cannot help but act "basely and infamously," betraying his generous nature. He resolves this crisis, in fact, by giving a gift—offering Hagen his shield, knowing it likely hastens his own end.

Breach of hospitality and perversion of gift-giving are so egregious in the world of *The Nibelungenlied* because they undercut the very bonds of loyalty that generosity is meant to cultivate. When Hagen breaks faith with Siegfried by killing him in cold blood, the dying Siegfried cries, "What good has my service done me now that you have slain me? I was always loyal to you, but now I have paid for it." Siegfried's loyalty to the Burgundians, fighting the Saxon invasion and helping to win Brunhild for Gunther, has not secured loyalty in kind from Hagen and the rest—they have instead lured him into the wilderness on the pretense of a friendly hunting party and stabbed him when he had no chance to defend himself. Rather than being "paid back" through mutual devotion, he must pay with his life.

After the betrayal of Siegfried, the Nibelungs depart for his native kingdom without requesting an escort—a hostile act indicating that hospitable relations between the kingdoms have been severed. After she retrieves the Nibelung treasure Siegfried has left to her, Kriemhild "[showers] such largesse on rich and poor alike" that Hagen is angered, assuming she will thereby attract foreign warriors who will undermine affairs in Burgundy. He grumbles to the permissive Gunther that "no man who is firm in his purpose should leave the treasure to a woman!" He proceeds to wrest the remaining hoard and dump it into the Rhine so that Kriemhild can have no further recourse to her inheritance—thinking that this curtails her ability to maintain relationships of reciprocal benefit with others.

In contrast to her earlier open-handedness, Kriemhild's invitation to the Burgundians to visit her in Hungary is a

reversal and perversion of hospitality. Rather than receiving them with a traditional, gift-laden welcome, she greets them with the rather shocking words, "Tell me what you bring me [...] that you should be so very welcome to me!" Indeed, the Burgundian's fateful sojourn in Hungary is marked by breaches on both sides; the warrior-minstrel Volker makes himself "a dreadful guest" by killing Hunnish knights in their own hall; meanwhile, Kriemhild continually schemes for the "destruction of the foreigners," even promising gold, castles, and lands in exchange for Hagen's head. In a darkly humorous understatement, the poet remarks that "the comfort of the noble guests had been shockingly neglected." Vengeance is the ultimate inversion of generosity, as Kriemhild finally "repays" Hagen for his misdeeds by killing him with her own hands.

Throughout the book, the poet takes pains to show, sometimes in tedious detail, how characters "squander" their goods in extravagant displays of gift-giving. In his world, this is no mere wastefulness, but a positive act—the purpose of wealth is to share it, and so to strengthen friendships and alliances. Yet such behavior has a shadow side as well. People with dark intentions can use the bonds of hospitality to deceive, exercise power harmfully, and entrap those whose intentions are purer. It is a system, in other words, uniquely vulnerable to distortion once infiltrated by vengeance; once this occurs, betrayal layers on betrayal.

FATE AND ACTION

Throughout *The Nibelungenlied*, there is an apparent interplay between fate and action. Kriemhild and Hagen, arguably the most proactive and forceful characters in the story, never shrink from the path each has chosen. Yet *The Nibelungenlied* is permeated by a recurrent atmosphere of foreknowledge, supernatural influence, and inevitability. The poet does not seem concerned to parse this problem too finely; it was probably less of a contradiction in his mind than in the modern reader's less supernaturally biased age. In the end, the poet does not absolve actors of their responsibility; in fact, even dreams and prophecies are stifled by the stubbornness of the human will.

On one hand, the story is dotted with supernatural elements that suggest the characters are helplessly subject to fate. On multiple occasions, Kriemhild and her mother, Uote, experience prophetic dreams that foretell death and destruction. In her first dream, for example, Kriemhild sees a falcon torn apart by two eagles. When Uote explains that this symbolizes a beloved man who will be taken away from her, Kriemhild vows that she will always avoid love, so as to avoid sorrow. Much later, before the Burgundians depart for Hungary at Kriemhild's invitation, Uote dreams that all the birds of Burgundy have died, though she had no reason to suspect her daughter's ill intentions toward the warriors.

Though he grumbles about "those who set store by dreams," Hagen encounters some prophetic water-fairies while traveling to Hungary. Gifted with second sight, the nixies warn him that nobody except for Gunther's chaplain will return to Burgundy alive. Enraged, Hagen pitches the priest overboard as if to prove the fairies false—yet, as he admits when the priest survives, he realizes that there is no escaping fate. Later, the poet remarks that "it was the foul Fiend who prompted Kriemhild" to place herself at enmity with her Burgundian kinsmen.

Yet, even as the poem sometimes treats fate as inescapable, the poet gives considerable emphasis to human responsibility and the impact that human choices have across years and generations. When the Burgundians visit Brunhild's court in Iceland, for example, they lay the seeds for their own destruction by pretending that Siegfried is Gunther's vassal—giving a false impression that leads to the queens' verbal duel more than a decade later. When the truth does emerge, "the wrangling of two women" is blamed for the doom of many warriors—though other factors figure into the coming carnage, such as Hagen's determination to avenge Brunhild's honor, Gunther's weakness and susceptibility to Hagen's evil advice, and the two men's plotting against Siegfried.

Far from being able to blame everything on the devil, Kriemhild becomes "the sworn enemy of her own happiness" when, after Siegfried is murdered, she gives in to consuming grief and vengeance. By not merely mourning, but obsessively "nursing" thoughts of revenge, Kriemhild transforms into the person capable of wielding brutal vengeance in the closing chapters of the story, and she takes deliberate steps—like bringing her vulnerable son, Ortlieb, into the midst of battle—to bring her own twisted hopes to fruition.

In a certain way, then, it is difficult to know what the poet means when he peppers his tale with inscrutable asides like, "What was to happen had to happen," and closes the book with the claim that "joy must ever turn to sorrow in the end." Must it, indeed? In the end, the poet doesn't seem to be interested in resolving any apparent contradiction between destiny and human choice. People are responsible for the actions they take, and there are also unknowable forces at work that humans shouldn't presume to violate. Even if the latter were not the case, it appears that human beings are more than capable of wreaking terrible havoc with their lives—as the near-total destruction of the characters shows.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CLOTHES

In *The Nibelungenlied*, clothes symbolize characters' wealth and ability to bestow gifts without concern for expense or waste. Throughout the epic poem, the poet frequently devotes paragraphs to describing outfits that characters wear or give away. For instance, when Gunther and Siegfried plan to sail to Iceland to win Brunhild's hand, they are very concerned to appear not only in new outfits, but in three different sets of clothing for four days. Kriemhild and her ladies quickly agree to sew them elaborate garments out of exotic Arabian silks and rare animal-skins, spangled with precious stones—"the best of knightly apparel." Later, when Brunhild is first received in Worms, the warriors hold a tournament in their most magnificent clothes and "ride [them] to tatters"—showing their lords are rich enough that they can afford this kind of conspicuous waste. It's also customary to provide clothes for one's envoys as a mark of munificence, as Gunther and Kriemhild bestow fine robes on the envoys who invite them to Brunhild's festivity; this spreads the word about their fabulous wealth in advance of their arrival. During the same festival, when Kriemhild and Brunhild have their momentous argument, Kriemhild outfits her ladies in dazzling cloth-of-gold, in order to make an unambiguous statement as she and her train process into church—her household's status is second to no one's. Finally, during their Viennese wedding, Kriemhild and Etzel's extravagant bestowal of fine clothes helps "make [Kriemhild] known" among the strangers who will be her new subjects—they'd assumed she was a poor widow, but she is able to perform "marvels of generosity" and secure people's loyalty nonetheless.

DAWN

In *The Nibelungenlied*, dawn is a time of revelation, when the true nature of things is made plain. While literary tropes of the period traditionally associate dawn with love, promise, and new beginnings, the poet plays on these expectations in various ways to reveal things about his characters' fates. The symbol is used in a traditional, expected manner when Siegfried finally lays eyes on Kriemhild for the first time—she emerges "like the dawn from the dark clouds," freeing him from the long agony of waiting. Later usage turns the symbol on its head, however. In love songs of the period, daybreak was the time when lovers would bid one another goodbye following an overnight tryst. Thus, expectations are subverted all the more hilariously when, "when the bright morning shone through the windows" following his troubled wedding night, dawn finds Gunther tied up and suspended from a nail in the wall, gesturing not only to Brunhild's alarming strength but to Gunther's overall weakness of character at the hands of others. However, the following "bright dawn" finds Gunther and Brunhild lying amorously together, with Brunhild subdued to an ordinary woman's weakness—allowing hearers' expectations for a "proper" marriage to be met, while also signaling Brunhild's fading from the role of formidable female character. There is a grisly twist on the symbol when, after slaying Siegfried, Hagen has his corpse deposited on Kriemhild's threshold overnight, plunging her into lifelong grief and vengeance when she sees him in the morning; thus, the sun rises on the book's bloody second half.

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Nibelungenlied* published in 1969.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ We have been told in ancient tales many marvels of famous heroes, of mighty toil, joys, and high festivities, of weeping and wailing, and the fighting of bold warriors - of such things you can now hear wonders unending!

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

These opening lines of the poem evoke the epic tradition with which the poet and his medieval German-speaking audience would have been familiar. Some examples of comparable literature from the era include the *Kaiserchronik* (a chronicle of Roman and German rulers that blends historical and fantastical elements) and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, an Arthurian romance. The poem would originally have been composed for public recitation, which is helpful to keep in mind while reading. One can almost picture the courtly audience stirring with anticipation as they're reminded of the core themes of heroism, war, romance, and tragedy typically showcased by this genre of entertainment. *The Nibelungenlied* was unique, however, in that its author sought to blend older, coarser, and pre-Christian elements into a story that would be palatable to high medieval courtly sensibilities. Hints of this crop up throughout the story, such as the occasional existence of dragons and fairies, the ambiguity surrounding Siegfried's experience in Brunhild's bedchamber, and the unease surrounding Kriemhild's marriage to a heathen.

Kriemhild dreamt she reared a falcon, strong, handsome and wild, but that two eagles rent it while she perforce looked on, the most grievous thing that could ever befall her. She told her dream to her mother Uote, who could give the good maiden no better reading than this: "The falcon you are rearing is a noble man who, unless God preserve him, will soon be taken from you."

"Why do you talk to me of a man, dear Mother? I intend to stay free of a warrior's love all my life. I mean to keep my beauty till I die, and never be made wretched by the love of any man. [...] There are many examples of women who have paid for happiness with sorrow in the end. I shall avoid both, and so I shall come to no harm."

Related Characters: Kriemhild, Uote (speaker), Siegfried

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the context of the poet's introduction of young Kriemhild. One of the first things readers learn about her is that she has prophetic dreams. In this particular dream, Kriemhild has been practicing the sport of falconry, a common pursuit for noblewomen. It's easy to see why falconry, which involved taming a wild bird to be tended as a pet, was often connected with the medieval ideal of courtly love. But Kriemhild isn't pleased to hear her mother's interpretation of the dream, saying she is determined to shun romance so as to avoid sorrow. This resolution doesn't last very long, as Kriemhild soon falls in love with her "falcon" (Siegfried), tames him, and loses him to violence within the first half of the story. Contrary to her hopes, Kriemhild also fails to "keep [her] beauty" until death—her grief after Siegfried's death ravages and distorts her beauty, and by the end, Kriemhild and everyone around her have paid for her love with sorrow. At the end of the story, the poet confirms Kriemhild's youthful intuition that "joy must ever turn to sorrow in the end." However, the axioms that frame the story omit the agency that Kriemhild displays throughout; she may have been helplessly ensnared by love, but love turns to sorrow largely through Kriemhild's own prideful choices.

Chapter 3 Quotes

In the days that followed, Siegfried was a most welcome guest among the Burgundians, and, believe me, he was honoured by them for his manly courage a thousand times more than I can tell you, so that none could see him and harbour any grudge against him. [...] And whenever gay knights were passing the time with the ladies and displaying their good breeding, people were glad to see him, for he aspired to a noble love. Whatever the company undertook, Siegfried was ready to join in. Meanwhile he cherished a lovely girl in his heart and was cherished in return by this same young lady whom he had never seen but who in her own intimate circle nevertheless often spoke kindly of him.

Related Characters: Kriemhild, Siegfried

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Siegfried becomes a "welcome guest" not long after coming to an amiable agreement with the kings of Burgundy to share wealth and lands rather than fighting. Readers know, of course, that Siegfried has come to Burgundy to woo Kriemhild, though he does not yet acknowledge this publicly. However, his affections have already had a transforming effect on his character and, thus, on his acceptability to the courtly society of Worms. Though he hasn't met Kriemhild in person, his love for her is already purifying and elevating him, making him no longer a brash and bellicose warrior but a desirable companion in polite company. Courtly love was considered to be love for its own sake, most often harbored toward a distant, unattainable figure, something that inspired a man to conduct himself honorably, maintain pleasant habits, and curb his baser appetites. Thus, Siegfried is no longer a foreigner to be feared or disdained, but a welcome friend. By contrast, one could argue that Kriemhild's love for Siegfried ultimately undoes them both—her love is so single-minded that it provokes his enemies to plot against him, and, after his death, it transforms Kriemhild's once lovely character into vengefulness.

Chapter 7 Quotes

And now Brunhild had arrived, armed as though about to contend for all the kingdoms in the world and wearing many tiny bars of gold over her silk, against which her lovely face shone radiantly. […] The man whom she would favour would have to be a very brave one: for this shield which the girl was to carry was (so we are told) a good three spans thick beneath the boss; it was resplendent with steel and with gold, and even with the help of three others her chamberlain could scarce raise it. "What now, King Gunther?" stalwart Hagen of Troneck asked fiercely, on seeing the shield brought out. "We are done for - the woman whose love you desire is a rib of the Devil himself!"

Related Characters: Hagen (speaker), Gunther, Brunhild

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

What makes Brunhild's character so striking is that she's a startling amalgam of conventionality and deviance. Not only is she so strong that her men stagger under the weight of her shield, and not only is she brash enough to defy warriors, but she's radiantly beautiful at the same time—or else so many wouldn't have risked their lives to woo her. Even more than her "masculine" characteristics, it's this confusion of traits that causes Hagen to classify her as devilish. (As the biblical Book of Genesis account describes Eve as having been created from Adam, describing Brunhild as created from the very stuff of Satan marks her as decidedly otherworldly—but not in a good way.) While the older legends of Germanic gods and goddesses had need of such fierce female figures, there isn't room for women like this in the more settled, "civilized" world of *The Nibelungenlied*, where women are expected to inspire and adorn men. The reaction to Brunhild—the impetus to eliminate or at least tame her—springs from this shift in social and gender norms.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Siegfried left the maiden lying there and stepped aside as through to remove his clothes and, without the noble Queen's noticing it, he drew a golden ring from her finger and then took her girdle, a splendid orphrey. I do not know whether it was his pride which made him do it. Later he gave them to his wife, and well did he rue it!

Related Characters: Kriemhild, Gunther, Brunhild, Siegfried

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

This scene, coming directly after Siegfried physically subdues Brunhild so that Gunther can finally sleep with her and consummate their marriage, has puzzled readers for generations. Why did Siegfried take the ring and girdle from Brunhild? The answer probably lies in the *Thidreksaga*, an Old Norse parallel to *The Nibelungenlied* which is believed to preserve an older version of the same story. In that version, Siegfried does in fact deflower Brunhild, with Gunther's permission. It's thought that, in attempting to soften the older story for his 13th-century audience, the poet includes this theft of Brunhild's jewelry as a stand-in for Siegfried's taking her virginity. The audience, however, almost certainly saw through this winking guise and knew what the ring and girdle signified. And, regardless of what she actually believes happened, Kriemhild later seizes upon these items to "prove" that Siegfried did, in fact, sleep with Brunhild. It builds an ambiguity into the conflict between them which is never explicitly resolved. Much as Siegfried's outward deference to Gunther persuaded Brunhild of his vassal status, Siegfried's claiming of these trinkets is enough for Kriemhild to let fly her accusations and for Brunhild to provoke Hagen to avenge her honor. Perhaps it's best seen as an example of characters finding the proof they need in order to believe what they wish to believe.

And now Gunther and the lovely girl lay together, and he took his pleasure with her as was his due, so that she had to resign her maiden shame and anger. But from his intimacy she grew somewhat pale, for at love's coming her vast strength fled so that now she was no stronger than anyother woman. Gunther had his delight of her lovely body, and had she renewed her resistance what good could it have done her? His loving had reduced her to this.

And now how very tenderly and amorously Brunhild lay beside him till the bright dawn!

Related Characters: Siegfried, Brunhild, Gunther

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After Siegfried wrestles the mighty Brunhild into submission, Gunther is finally able to sleep with her. This quote describes their consummation and its aftermath. Brunhild's virginity is associated with her independence and physical dominance. Once she and Gunther have sexual intercourse, Brunhild loses the dominating, "threatening" parts of her temperament as well. She is now just like any other woman who is submissive to her husband in both body and will. But she isn't the only character who has been "reduced" by what has just occurred. By beginning his marriage on false pretenses—both by skirting the truth about Siegfried's status and then by letting Brunhild believe that he was the one who subdued her, not Siegfried—Gunther puts his moral weakness beyond question and sets up himself and his followers for eventual destruction. Also, Brunhild's "taming" gives her something more in common with Siegfried, who, like her, starts out marked by wildness and "otherness." Siegfried's love for Kriemhild reduced him from unstoppable warrior to vulnerable king, subject to the entanglements of court rivalries; Brunhild, too, is no longer untouchable or above the sort of conniving that will ultimately tear her and Kriemhild apart. Both she and Siegfried will fade from the story not long after this, though their romances continue to cast a long shadow over the rest of the characters.

Chapter 14 Quotes

"Whom are you calling a paramour?" asked the Queen.

"I call you one," answered Kriemhild. "My dear husband Siegfried was the first to enjoy your lovely body, since it was not my brother who took your maidenhead. Where were your poor wits? - It was a vile trick. - Seeing that he is your vassal, why did you let him love you? Your complaints have no foundation."

"I swear I shall tell Gunther of this," replied Brunhild.

"What is that to me? Your arrogance has got the better of you. You used words that made me your servant, and, believe me, in all sincerity I shall always be sorry you did so."

Related Characters: Kriemhild, Brunhild (speaker), Gunther, Siegfried

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

After arguing over Siegfried's status relative to Gunther's, Kriemhild has thrown down a challenge to Brunhild by beginning to enter the church before her. Brunhild orders her to stop because, customarily, no liegewoman may enter the church before her superior. That's when Kriemhild throws Brunhild's insult back at her by asking why Brunhild would have lowered herself to sleep with a mere vassal, leading to the exchange above. Kriemhild's reaction to Brunhild is interesting because she doesn't appear to be particularly troubled by the idea that her husband would have slept with another woman, and it's not clear what she believes actually happened on the night Gunther consummated his marriage. She's far more upset about Brunhild's insult to Siegfried's honor (that he, a king, is a mere vassal), and, consequently, to her own honor as his wife. This is quite revealing of Kriemhild's personality, beginning to show shades of the single-mindedness and pride that will characterize her later attempts at revenge. While she genuinely loves Siegfried, there is nothing worse to her than having her status undermined in any way.

"How could the thing be done?" asked King Gunther. "I will tell you," replied Hagen. "We shall send envoys to ourselves here in Burgundy to declare war on us publicly, men whom no one knows. Then you will announce in the hearing of your guests that you and your men plan to go campaigning, whereupon Siegfried will promise you his aid, and so he will lose his life. For in this way I shall learn the brave man's secret from his wife."

The King followed his vassal Hagen's advice, to evil effect, and those rare knights began to set afoot the great betrayal before any might discover it, so that, thanks to the wrangling of two women, countless warriors met their doom.

After Hagen learns of Kriemhild's charge that Brunhild slept with Siegfried, he wastes no time beginning to plot Siegfried's death. After winning over the other Burgundians and even the weak Gunther to his view, he explains his plan to discover Siegfried's vulnerability. It's striking that he uses the device of a military engagement to bring about the betrayal. Siegfried initially won the Burgundians' trust by offering to fight off invaders for them; now, Hagen and the others betray that loyalty by laying a trap for Siegfried, knowing he will leap to defend them in battle. Of course, Siegfried isn't faultless; much as Siegfried defeated Brunhild by secretly using the magical cloak, now the others defend Brunhild's honor by means of an even more convoluted deception. And while it's true that the crisis was touched off by the queens' quarreling, it's Hagen's choice to capitalize on the situation, ostensibly in Brunhild's defense, that triggers actual violence. In addition, Gunther shows himself to be incredibly weak-willed and unwilling to oppose Hagen, despite Siegfried's faithful friendship in the past. There is much more guilt to go around than the poet's terse summary suggests.

Related Characters: Hagen , Gunther (speaker), Kriemhild, Brunhild, Siegfried

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Chapter 15 Quotes

"You and I are of one blood, dear Hagen, and I earnestly commend my beloved spouse to you to guard him." Then she divulged some matters that had better been left alone. [...] "Now I shall reveal this to you in confidence, dearest kinsman, so that you may keep faith with me, and I shall tell you, trusting utterly in you, where my dear husband can be harmed. When the hot blood flowed from the dragon's wound and the good knight was bathing in it, a broad leaf fell from the linden between his shoulder-blades. It is there that he can be wounded, and this is why I am so anxious."

"Sew a little mark on his clothing so that I shall know where I must shield him in battle."

She fancied she was saving the hero, yet this was aimed at his death.

Related Characters: Hagen , Kriemhild (speaker), Siegfried

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Hagen has instigated a fictitious "war" in order to lure Siegfried into combat, thus making Siegfried vulnerable to betrayal. With his much-vaunted knowledge of foreigners, Hagen arguably understands more about Siegfried than anyone else in the story, but he lacks one crucial piece of information: how Siegfried might be killed. Therefore, he draws Kriemhild unwittingly into the plot by asking her advice on how best to protect the knight, and she eagerly obliges. By doing so, Hagen positions himself as Kriemhild's enemy for life, simultaneously sealing his own fate. It's also worth noting that Hagen involves Kriemhild by asking her to sew. In one of her earliest interactions with Siegfried, Kriemhild promised to provide clothing for him to wear to Brunhild's court, the first step in the entanglement of the two couples. So, the making of clothing is both a marker of intimacy between the two and a sign of its fated unraveling. Note, too, that just as Siegfried has a physical vulnerability, Siegfried himself can be said to be Kriemhild's "weak spot"—both her deep love for him and her intolerance for any slight to his (and by association, her) honor.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ The very first kill was when he brought down a strong young tusker, after which he soon chanced on an enormous lion. When his hound had roused it he laid a keen arrow to his bow and shot it so that it dropped in its tracks at the third bound. Siegfried's fellow-huntsmen acclaimed him for this shot. Next, in swift succession, he killed a wisent, an elk, four mighty aurochs, and a fierce and monstrous buck - so well mounted was he that nothing, be it hart or hind,

could evade him. [...]

"If it is not asking too much, lord Siegfried," said his companions of the chase, "do leave some of the game alive for us. You are emptying the hills and woods for us today." At this the brave knight had to smile.

Related Characters: Siegfried

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after the fictional invasion has been averted, and Siegfried and the Burgundians have embarked on the doomed hunting trip instead. Reading the list of creatures that Siegfried rapidly dispatches, one is at first tempted to think that the poet didn't know much about the realities of hunting—but it's more likely that the scene is meant to be funny, providing an interval of comic relief before the drama reaches its climax with the slaying of Siegfried. The note of teasing camaraderie, in fact, makes the coming betrayal all the more shocking. In addition, the scene serves the function of letting the audience enjoy Siegfried's legendary prowess a final time. When Siegfried was first introduced, he routinely killed or captured large groups of warriors single-handedly (when subduing the Nibelungs, for example). This comparatively harmless, light-hearted scene allows readers to see the "tamed" Siegfried in action. He might be the terror of the animal kingdom, but as far as his peers are concerned, the formerly wild knight is now fully integrated into the world of civilized, courtly pursuits, like hunting

❝ The lady Kriemhild's lord fell among the flowers, where you could see the blood surging from his wound. Then – and he had cause - he rebuked those who had plotted his foul murder. "You vile cowards," he said as he lay dying. "What good has my service done me now that you have slain me? I was always loyal to you, but now I have paid for it. Alas, you have wronged your kinsmen so that all who are born in days to come will be dishonoured by your deed. You have cooled your anger on me beyond all measure. You will be held in contempt and stand apart from all good warriors."

Related Characters: Siegfried (speaker), Hagen , Gunther, Kriemhild

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Siegfried has just been slain by Hagen as Gunther and the other plotters look on. As Siegfried's blood pours among the flowers, Kriemhild's prophetic dream of his death comes true. Siegfried's reproach of his betrayers is particularly affecting because of the way it captures the feudal obligations bound up with the deed—something that would have been clear to the poet's contemporary audience. Siegfried has been a loyal defender of Burgundy, earlier going to war on Gunther's behalf against Liudeger and Liudegast, and helping Gunther secure Brunhild, the new Burgundian queen. To slay a friend of the kingdom in this cold-blooded manner is not only a heartless betrayal of those bonds of mutual obligation, but an act unbefitting any knight who aspired to courtly virtues of loyalty and justice. Siegfried was given no chance to defend himself, and, at least in his view, the penalty far outstrips any supposed besmirching of Brunhild's honor on Siegfried's part. However, Brunhild did suffer grave deception and humiliation at Siegfried's hands. Regardless of the justice of what has happened to Siegfried, he isn't unstained by his own unchivalrous behavior.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Now learn of a deed of overweening pride and grisly vengeance. Hagen ordered the corpse of Siegfried of Nibelungland to be carried in secret to Kriemhild's apartment and set down on the threshold, so that she should find him there before daybreak when she went out to matins, an office she never overslept.

They pealed the bells as usual at the minster, and lovely Kriemhild waked her many maids and asked for a light and her attire. A chamberlain answered - and came upon Siegfried's body. […] Before she had ascertained that it was her husband she was already thinking of Hagen's question how he might shelter Siegfried, and now she rued it with a vengeance! From the moment she

learned of Siegfried's death she was the sworn enemy of her own happiness.

Related Characters: Hagen , Kriemhild, Siegfried

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

After Hagen slays Siegfried, he scorns any thought of trying to conceal his deed and orders that Siegfried's body be boldly placed on Kriemhild's threshold for her to discover the next morning. It's a particularly shocking way of avenging the perceived attack on Brunhild's honor, an invasion of Kriemhild's private space with the grisly evidence of Hagen's act. Notably, Kriemhild is described as "lovely" and also as particularly pious here—rising early to attend the first church service of the day, something the poet claims she never misses. Not only does this heighten the contrast between Hagen's vengeful deed and Kriemhild's nobility, but perhaps it also gestures to the deterioration of Kriemhild's idealized personality after facing this trauma. No sooner does she learn what's happened to Siegfried than her thoughts fly to vengeance—suggesting that the potential to lash back in revenge was already within her—and thus she becomes not only Hagen's worst enemy, but her own.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Now that Kriemhild had possession of the hoard she lured many foreign warriors to Burgundy, and indeed her fair hand lavished gifts with such bounty that the like has never been seen […] Hagen declared that were she to live for any time she would recruit so many men that matters would go ill with the Burgundians. […] "No man who is firm in his purpose should leave the treasure to a woman," said Hagen. "By means of her gifts she will bring things to the point where the brave sons of Burgundy will bitterly regret it."

Related Characters: Hagen (speaker), Gunther, Kriemhild

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

More than three years after Siegfried's death, Kriemhild's brothers prevail upon her (with Hagen's prompting) to have the Nibelung treasure, her nuptial dowry, brought across the Rhine to Worms. Hagen has been preoccupied with the idea of the Nibelung treasure since Siegfried first came to Worms, and he is now manipulating circumstances in the hope of finally getting his hands on it. To his annoyance, however, Kriemhild wastes no time in distributing her treasure among rich and poor, friend and stranger alike. As a widow, Kriemhild's ability to grant largesse in this way would have been one of the only forms of power still available to her. In addition, Kriemhild has shown herself to be more than crafty, so it's likely that she is actively currying allegiances with foreign warriors so as to position herself for revenge on Hagen. So, although Hagen's remark about "leaving [the] treasure to a woman" is certainly misogynistic, in this case he does have reason to be nervous! This explains his determination, soon after the quote, to wrest the treasure from Kriemhild, and the additional rage that this deprivation sparks in Kriemhild. She is robbed not only of her rightful dowry, but of her access to power—which explains her openness, some time later, to the idea of marrying the wealthy pagan Etzel.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ Etzel's dominion was so widely known that the most fearless warriors that were ever heard of among Christians and heathen alike were always to be found at his court, all having joined him. And always — a thing that will hardly happen again — the Christian life and the heathen existed side by side. But whichever rite a man followed, the King's magnanimity saw to it that all were amply rewarded.

Related Characters: Etzel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Kriemhild has agreed to marry King Etzel and is journeying to Hungary for the wedding. She hasn't met the King yet, and this passage reads like a bit of an explanatory aside, as though to reassure the audience that this somewhat unusual match is a legitimate one. During the time that the poem is set (roughly the fifth century), Eastern Europe was not yet thoroughly Christianized. What's more, the foreboding figure that history has remembered as Attila the Hun (sometimes called the "Scourge of God" by contemporaries who interpreted his ferocious aggression as a form of God's judgment) enjoyed a tolerant relationship with some Germanic peoples, which explains the benign portrayal that survives in this story. By the 1200s, however, Hungary had been solidly Christian for at least two centuries, and interreligious marriages (the "other" more likely being Jewish or Muslim than pagan by this time) were far from the norm. So the poet walks a fine line—preserving something of the historical record, yet also emphasizing that such interreligious harmony "will hardly happen again."

Chapter 25 Quotes

The priest made great efforts to keep himself afloat, thinking to save his life if only someone would help him. This, however, was ruled out, for mighty Hagen vehemently thrust him to the bottom, to the scandal of everyone there. Seeing no aid forthcoming, the miserable cleric turned back to the shore to his great discomfort, and although he could not swim he was succoured by the hand of the Lord and reached dry land in safety. Standing up, he shook his cassock, and this brought it home to Hagen that there would be no escaping the fate which the wild nixies had foretold. "These knights are doomed to die," thought he.

Related Characters: Hagen (speaker), The Water-Fairies / The Nixies

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Hagen, Gunther, and the rest of the party from Burgundy are traveling to Hungary on Kriemhild's invitation. Hagen has suspected all along that Kriemhild has intentions of revenge, and that the Burgundians are being lured into a trap. When the group reaches the Danube River, Hagen meets some nixies (creatures from Germanic folklore who resemble mermaids) who can see the future, and they tell him that the Burgundians are doomed—except for Gunther's chaplain. As if to test this theory, Hagen promptly throws the priest overboard to see if he will drown. When the priest survives, Hagen is confirmed in his belief that everything will turn out as the nixies have said, and as he has suspected. The image of the hapless cleric wringing water out of his vestments, not to mention Hagen's nonchalance about his survival, is clearly meant to get a laugh from the audience. That aside, it's also confirmation of Hagen's clear-sightedness and determination to see things through—he's been correct in his assessment of their fate, and now there's nothing left to do but persevere with honor. Perhaps the priest's unhappy dismissal also signals that there won't be much place for Christian piety once the group meets what's waiting for them in Hungary.

Chapter 28 Quotes

"Alas," cried lady Kriemhild, "why will my brother and Hagen not let their shields be placed in safety? Someone must have warned them! If I knew who it was he would surely die!"

"It was I that warned the illustrious kings of Burgundy and their vassal, fearless Hagen," replied King Dietrich angrily. "Now come on, you she-devil, you must not let me go unpunished!"

Related Characters: Dietrich, Kriemhild (speaker), Hagen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

When the Burgundians first arrive in Hungary, Dietrich hurriedly intercepts them to warn them that Kriemhild is still actively grieving for Siegfried—meaning that she intends to get revenge on them. Sure enough, Kriemhild greets the group with angry demands and is further incensed when she finds them already on their guard against her. This exchange establishes Dietrich as one of the only characters who isn't cowed by Kriemhild, as indeed he's one of the only figures who will remain alive at the end of the story. His epithet, "she-devil," echoes the earlier description of Brunhild and suggests that Kriemhild has replaced her counterpart as the book's true female

"monstrosity." Dietrich, like Etzel, is based on a historical figure, the fifth- and sixth-century Theodoric the Great, ruler of the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and of Italy. In later Germanic legend, as here, Theodoric was known as Dietrich von Bern. In a departure from the historical record, Dietrich is portrayed as exiled from his rightful rule in Italy and as a contemporary of Attila (Etzel), who actually died before Dietrich was born. As an exile in a strange land, Dietrich is one of the only characters who, like Rüdiger of Pöchlarn, has some outsider perspective on the terrible violence about to unfold. Unlike Rüdiger, he manages not to be dragged down by it.

Chapter 31 Quotes

❝ And now indeed the bright morning sent its rays into the hall to light the guests, while Hagen roused the knights everywhere, asking whether they wished to go to mass in the cathedral, for there was a great pealing of bells in keeping with the Christian rite. But Christians and heathen sang mass differently, as was very evident — they were at variance in this. Gunther's men *did* wish to go to church and they had immediately risen from their beds and were lacing themselves into clothes of such quality that no knights ever brought better into any realm.

Related Characters: Gunther, Hagen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the Burgundians' harrowing first night in the Hunnish court, after it has come to light that Kriemhild wishes them ill. A number of things are striking about it. First, it wasn't so long ago that Hagen was pitching a priest overboard in his showdown with fate—has he experienced some kind of religious awakening? This is unlikely; rather, as a warrior in a Christian culture, he recognizes that his men will be more likely to fight their best if they've had the opportunity to attend mass a final time. Second, the poet's observation that "Christian and heathen sang mass differently" is amusing, though it is simply a reflection of the poet's limited exposure to religions other than his own. He may not have been able to readily picture "nonreligion," so the nearest concept at hand would be "singing mass differently"—an interestingly tolerant gesture, if rather off base. Finally, the poet can't overlook the detail that the churchgoing knights put on the very best of attire. As elsewhere in *The Nibelungenlied*, clothing reveals everything about a person's status in society, so the Burgundians, aware of their foreignness and vulnerability, want to look as noble as possible—though Hagen later warns them that battle-gear would be more fitting attire.

❝ Leaving Bloedelin resolved on battle, the Queen went to table with King Etzel and his men. She had laid a deadly plot against their guests.

Kriemhild's old grief was embedded deep in her heart. Since there was no beginning the fighting in any other way, she had Etzel's son carried to the board. (How could a woman ever do a more dreadful thing in pursuance of her

revenge?) Four of Etzel's followers went immediately and returned bearing the young Prince Ortlieb to the King's table, where Hagen, too, was seated, owing to whose murderous hate the boy must needs soon die.

Related Characters: Hagen , Ortlieb, Etzel, Kriemhild, Bloedelin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kriemhild has just sent her brother-in-law, Bloedelin, to attack her brother Giselher's squire, Dancwart, and then joined her husband and guests at the banquet table. The scene at the table, however, is rather odd. Why would young Ortlieb's appearance at the table provoke fighting? A clue can be found in the Norse *Thidreksaga*, a parallel to *The Nibelungenlied*. In the Norse version, Ortlieb is older (here, he can't be much more than a young child), and Kriemhild instructs him to summon his courage and punch Hagen in the face—for which Hagen beheads Ortlieb in short order. As with the story of Siegfried in Brunhild's bedchamber, the poet appears to be trying to reconcile conflicting versions in order to make the action more palatable to contemporary sensibilities. Perhaps the Norse version, in this one instance, made Kriemhild seem to the poet too horrible to be believed. This makes the parenthetical "How could a woman ever do a more dreadful thing?" a bit more comprehensible. Here, the poet has omitted Kriemhild's goading her son to the suicidal act of provoking Hagen. As it turns out, however, simply bringing Ortlieb to the table does prove to be a deadly

choice, since the boy is soon slain by Hagen in "repayment" for the Huns' attack on Dancwart and his men.

Chapter 37 Quotes

The noble Margrave stood there in despair. "Alas," cried that most faithful knight from the depths of his anguish, "that I have lived to know this, Godforsaken man that I am! I must sacrifice all the esteem, the integrity, and breeding that by the grace of God were mine! Ah, God in Heaven, that death does not avert this from me! Whichever course I leave in order to follow the other, I shall have acted basely and infamously - and if I refrain from both, they will all upbraid me! May He that summoned me to life afford me counsel!"

Related Characters: Rüdiger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, the Huns and the Burgundians have reached a stalemate. The Burgundians have survived a horrifying knight in the burning hall, and they have successfully repelled every attack Kriemhild has thrown at them. After the murder of his son, even Etzel is bent on the foreigners' destruction. He and Kriemhild (in a self-demeaning gesture) beg Rüdiger on their knees to help them by fighting the guests. In a highly affecting outcry, Rüdiger laments the helpless position in which he finds himself. Hitherto having served as Etzel's and Kriemhild's faithful envoy, generous and hospitable to all, he is now stuck between his sworn loyalty to them and the Burgundians he has served as host and escort. His words encapsulate the importance of honor in his society, and especially to his own sense of integrity; to turn against either side destroys the values dearest to him, and neutrality isn't an option, since it exposes him to shameful dishonor. It's arguably one of the only moments of humanity in Kriemhild's court, and it finds a fitting consummation when Rüdiger later surrenders his shield to Hagen. Indeed, Hagen's merciful request for Rüdiger's shield is a rarity for Hagen's character, showing the humanity Rüdiger inspires in others—the mark of a truly chivalrous knight.

Chapter 39 Quotes

"You have repaid me in base coin," she said, "but Siegfried's sword I shall have and hold! My fair lover was wearing it when last I saw him, through whom I suffered mortal sorrow at your hands." She drew it from its sheath -he was powerless to prevent it - and bent her thoughts to robbing him of life. She raised it in both hands - and struck off his head! King Etzel saw this, and great was the grief it gave him.

Related Characters: Kriemhild (speaker), Etzel, Hagen , Siegfried

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears at the very end of the story. Hagen has been captured and imprisoned, and, even after she displays the head of the just-murdered Gunther, Kriemhild can't persuade him to reveal the location of the Nibelung treasure. So, at last, Kriemhild exacts the vengeance she has longed for. When she says that Hagen has "repaid [her] in base coin," she could be referring to Hagen's failure to repay her the treasure she is owed or, more broadly, to his betrayal of her across the years, starting with tricking her into helping him slay Siegfried. It's notable, too, that Kriemhild's motives appear to be conflicted; she claims to be willing to spare Hagen if only he reveals the location of the treasure, but when he doesn't, she pivots to her desire to avenge Siegfried. While this might be another instance of the poet's struggle to seamlessly integrate parallel traditions, it's also true that multiple motives—especially in a history as long and winding as Kriemhild's and Siegfried's—aren't necessarily incompatible. Etzel's grief stems from a couple of things—first, witnessing his wife's final descent from queen to "deviant" woman to monster; and, relatedly, from what the era would have considered to be the unseemliness of a woman pursuing revenge against a warrior. Her action isn't allowed to stand; immediately thereafter, Kriemhild is slain by Hildebrand.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The poet recalls "ancient tales [...] of famous heroes," "weeping and wailing, and the fighting of bold warriors," promising that the reader will now hear of more such "wonders."

From the poem's first words, the poet situates The Nibelungenlied *within the tradition of heroic epic poetry, shaping expectations for what is to come—namely, plenty of tragedy, bloodshed, and drama.*

The poet introduces Kriemhild, a maiden of Burgundy. Kriemhild has grown up to be a beautiful woman, "causing many knights to lose their lives." She is so charming, noble, and lovely, that it's as if she was "made for love's caresses," and no man is her enemy.

There is an immediate contrast between the traditional expectations for a desirable princess and the danger Kriemhild will later come to represent. There is an especially pointed emphasis on the fact that she's without enemies—later, it's implied, she will have enemies aplenty.

Kriemhild is a princess, the sister and ward of the renowned kings Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher, and daughter of Dancrat and Uote. The family rules from Worms beside the Rhine, and they are served by many proud knights "till their dying day, when the enmity of two noble ladies was to bring them to a sad end." Some of these knights include famed warriors such as Hagen, Dancwart, Ortwin, and Volker.

The poet introduces Kriemhild's family, their prominence, and the fierce loyalty of their vassals. It will take something drastic to end the lives of such proud knights, and the existence of a second complicit lady is hinted at, though her identity is not yet revealed.

Kriemhild dreams that she raised a wild falcon, which was torn apart by two eagles while she watched. When she recounts the dream to her mother, Uote replies that the falcon represents a noble man who will be taken from her. Kriemhild retorts that she will remain "free of a warrior's love all [her] life." Uote warns her not to forswear love, since only a man's love can bring true happiness.

The sport of falconry was pursued by noble ladies in the Middle Ages, and it sometimes had romantic overtones in medieval literature. The idea that Kriemhild would have a pet falcon, whose wildness she would tame, is a perfect example of this, prefiguring her "conquest" of Siegfried—and his eventual destruction by fiercer "species."

Kriemhild explains that she has heard many examples of women who paid for happiness with sorrow in the end, but that she intends to avoid both happiness and sorrow. She contentedly avoids romance for a while. But, the poet explains, the time will come when she will be wed to her "falcon," that he will be slain, and that Kriemhild will take terrible vengeance on his slayers.

Kriemhild shows she is familiar with the tropes of the literary tradition, and the poet suggests that she will try to avoid the snares of the genre. He is quick, however, to forecast that she won't avoid the pitfalls of courtly romance; in fact, she will reveal herself to be far from the idealized medieval princess by the end.

CHAPTER 2

Further down the Rhine, in the Netherlands city of Xanten, lives a prince named Siegfried, the son of Siegmund and Sieglind. His youth is filled with marvelous deeds, and women admire his valor and handsome looks. When Siegfried reaches the age to be knighted, his parents throw an elaborate festival, bestowing lavish gifts and knighting 400 men alongside Siegfried.

Next, the poet introduces the hero, Siegfried. His valor and splendor are such that readers might expect that he will dominate the entire story.

Besides a splendid bohort (a sort of mock jousting tournament) and a feast, the festival includes the bestowal of lands and castles on Siegfried's companions and the giving of rich gifts to all present—indeed, "it rained horses and **clothes** as though their donors had not a day to live!" Despite everyone's great esteem for him—secured in part by the lavish gifts—Siegfried isn't interested in becoming king of the Netherlands while Siegmund and Sieglind are still living. He simply desires to be a valiant knight in his country's defense.

Siegfried's parents' lavish festival and gift-giving are the poem's first example of the type of liberality that marked people as part of the nobility. Here, it creates the expectation that Siegfried is capable of being a suitable match for the Burgundian princess. His knightly valor also implies that he is the "wild falcon" who will later appeal to Kriemhild.

CHAPTER 3

One day, Siegfried hears about Kriemhild's rare beauty and spirited disposition. (Her reputation has spread beyond Burgundy, though she never admits to herself that she is interested in any lover.) Siegfried announces his intention of wooing Kriemhild. When Siegfried's parents hear of it, they are grieved, Sieglind "having no illusions about Gunther and his men" and fearing for her son's life.

Siegfried has never met Kriemhild, but his determination to woo her from afar is in keeping with medieval codes of courtly love, which emphasized pursuit of a distant, even unattainable love. In this case, however, Siegfried's mother, like other women throughout the story, has a premonition of danger.

Siegmund finally agrees to help his son in this endeavor, but warns Siegfried to be wary of Gunther's many proud vassals, especially Hagen. Siegfried isn't troubled; whatever he can't get by friendly requests, he says, he will gain by his own valor, even if it means wresting the Burgundians' lands and people from them. He outfits a band of 12 stalwart companions to accompany him to Burgundy. As Siegfried and his warriors set out, many young women weep. "I imagine their hearts had truly foretold them," the poet remarks, that the journey would result in death.

Hagen's significance in Siegfried's future is first hinted at here, in a dark warning from Siegmund. The recurrent, implicitly prophetic weeping of women appears for the first time as well. However, Siegfried is undeterred and unruffled, and imagines himself capable of seizing whatever he desires through honorable combat—setting him up as a somewhat naïve character.

After a week's travel, the company arrives in Worms. As squires greet them, Siegfried asks that their horses be kept ready, since it's his intention to ride away quickly, and he asks where he might find Gunther. Meanwhile, Gunther and his men receive word of the dazzling knights who have just arrived, and Gunther summons Hagen, since Hagen "knows all the kingdoms and foreign countries" and can identify the newcomers.

Whether it's a pretense or not, Siegfried wants to give the impression that his business in Burgundy won't detain him for long. Meanwhile, Siegfried's outsider status is emphasized, as the worldly-wise Hagen is asked to identify these strangers.

Though Hagen has never seen him before, he guesses that the unfamiliar knight is Siegfried, slayer of the Nibelungs. He proceeds to tell Gunther and his men a notable episode from Siegfried's history. Siegfried had once come upon the Nibelung princes, Schilbung and Nibelung, and their men gathered around a massive treasure of precious stones and gold, which they begged Siegfried to divide for them. They gave Siegfried the sword Balmung in payment, but Siegfried proceeded to slay them and 700 men of Nibelungenland with the sword, causing other warriors to yield the land and its castles to him. The dwarf Alberich tried to stop him, but he was no match for Siegfried's strength, and Siegfried won an invisibility cloak from him. Thus Siegfried became lord of all the Nibelung treasure. He had the treasure returned to the cave and appointed Alberich its treasurer.

Hagen's knowledge of foreign exploits is used to further contextualize Siegfried's character, portraying him as not just any knight, but as a fierce warrior of unparalleled strength. The sheer number of men he's slain, in fact, makes Siegfried seem a superhuman, untamable figure. The Nibelung treasure described here, far from being just an interesting anecdote, becomes a major point of contention later in the story—and Hagen's fixation on this particular topic may not be accidental.

Hagen further relates that Siegfried once slew a dragon and bathed in its blood, which caused his skin to become impenetrable by weapons. Hagen encourages Gunther to receive Siegfried with special honor, since he is so valiant that "it is best to have his friendship."

Siegfried's wildness is further emphasized, and his near invincibility is established as a significant plot point. Because he is such a mighty figure, it's worthwhile to make sure one is on his good side—hence the importance of receiving him with due ceremony.

Gunther and his warriors welcome Siegfried and ask him what business brings him to Burgundy. Siegfried explains that he has heard of the Burgundians' valor, and, since he, too, is a warrior and entitled to wear a crown, he wishes to possess a land and people in his own right. "I will wrest from you by force all that you possess!" he tells them.

In this passage, Siegfried enacts his conception of knightly valor and honor—possessing a land he has acquired by his own might.

Gunther and his men are angry, but Siegfried persists in his demands. Each country should stake its patrimony against that of the other, he asserts, and the victorious side will be master of both. Gunther and his men take counsel over the matter, displeased at Siegfried's provocations. While some, like Ortwin, call for battle, Gernot urges that the matter be settled courteously. He points out that the Burgundians would gain little honor and Siegfried little profit from such a conflict. Siegfried taunts them for their hesitation, but is nevertheless mollified by thoughts of Kriemhild.

The Burgundians, Ortwin aside, are not on board with Siegfried's idea of honor and wish to resolve this matter in a more civilized way. Siegfried's preoccupation with Kriemhild casts some doubt as to whether he is really as bent on warfare as his boasts suggest.

At this point, the Burgundian kings formally welcome Siegfried, promising him that they will share everything in common with him, as long as he accepts it honorably. Siegfried is appeased and settles in the Burgundian court for the time being, "a most welcome guest" among them.

Now that Siegfried agrees to accept the Burgundians' "honorable" terms, he goes from being a suspicious outsider to an accepted, even desirable, guest.

Whenever the knights pass their time in courtly pursuits, they are always glad to include Siegfried, "for he aspired to a noble love." Meanwhile, Siegfried quietly treasures Kriemhild in his heart, although he has never actually seen her. Kriemhild returns his feelings, often watching him from her window when the knights conduct sports in the courtyard. Siegfried spends a year attending to kingdom matters in Burgundy without setting eyes on the princess, "often in great distress from the love he bore her."

In accordance with the code of courtly love, Siegfried's love of Kriemhild elevates his character and knightly prowess, making him welcome company to the other knights. The fact that he has yet to see her (though, interestingly, Kriemhild is free to observe him from a distance) detracts nothing from his ardor, but his longing causes him acute distress.

CHAPTER 4

Liudeger, King of Saxony, and Liudegast, King of Denmark, send messengers to warn Gunther that they intend to invade Burgundy in 12 weeks' time, unless Gunther should choose to negotiate with them. Gunther summons his men to court for advice. Hagen suggests asking Siegfried for help. Gunther continues to brood over the matter, and when Siegfried asks what troubles him, Gunther replies that "one should complain of one's wrongs to proven friends." Siegfried appears to be affronted by this, telling Gunther, "If you are looking for friends, I shall assuredly be one among them."

For the first time, Gunther's suggestible nature and reliance on stronger characters is apparent. Hagen appears to be interested in strengthening ties with Siegfried, though his motivations for this alliance aren't yet clear. As yet, Gunther seems a bit uncertain about Siegfried, or at least chooses to appear so. Siegfried takes this uncertainty as a breach of friendship.

Gunther tells Siegfried about the threatened invasion. Siegfried urges Gunther to allow him to win honor on Gunther's behalf. When Gunther agrees, Siegfried tells him to muster a thousand men, as well as his kinsmen and vassals. Gunther then sends the envoys home with gifts and a warning that the Burgundians will be prepared to repel any attack.

Siegfried wishes to repay Burgundian hospitality by defending them on the battlefield. Though the Burgundians won't welcome foreign meddling, giving gifts to the messengers is a gesture of goodwill and largesse befitting kings.

When the envoys return to Denmark, Liudegast is alarmed to hear the report of mighty Siegfried's support of Burgundy. He and Liudeger accordingly muster more than 40,000 men for the invasion. The Burgundians prepare for battle as well, Siegfried urging Gunther to remain at home while he leads the defense of Burgundy himself.

Siegfried's formidable reputation apparently extends across Europe, frightening foreign kings. The numbers in a medieval epic—such as 40,000 in this case—are generally not meant to be taken literally; here, it might be read as "a very significant invasion force."

After the Burgundians pillage the Saxon countryside, Siegfried rides out by himself to observe the enemy position. He encounters King Liudegast doing the same, and the two gallop towards one another, engaging in fierce single combat. Before any of the Danish king's men can come to his aid, Siegfried wounds him and takes him prisoner. Siegfried then slays 29 of Liudegast's men single-handedly and hands over his captive to Hagen.

Siegfried again displays his ferocity in battle, though also a degree of gallantry, in that Liudegast (unlike Schilbung and Nibelung, of Siegfried's earlier conquest) is allowed to live.

When the two armies meet each other, "they hacked wound on gaping wound, and blood was seen flowing over saddles—so boldly did those knights woo honor." Siegfried and Liudeger are soon locked in combat, but when Liudeger learns Siegfried's identity, he immediately stops the fighting and sues for peace. The Burgundians take the wounded and 500 prisoners, including the two kings, back to Worms with them. The poet comments that "gallant Siegfried had done what he had set out to do," and Gunther's men can't help but acknowledge it.

"Wooing honor" is clearly a very bloody affair, but it doesn't preclude peace, as Siegfried is willing to stop the fighting when a cowed Liudeger requests it. Siegfried has proven himself not only a worthy knight, but a friend and defender of Burgundy, ostensibly wiping away any lingering suspicions between him and his adoptive kingdom.

Back in Worms, Kriemhild secretly summons one of the returning messengers into her chamber to report on the battle. She doesn't want anyone to suspect that Siegfried is "the darling of her heart." The page tells her that no warrior's achievements compare to the marvels done by Siegfried that day. In fact, Siegfried "has all the qualities that go to make a brave, good knight." Moreover, the Burgundians' "honor is free of all tarnish" after joining with him in the fight.

Kriemhild's love for Siegfried has matured beyond what anyone around her suspects. The messenger conveys the Burgundians' general attitude about their new champion: he's the ideal knight, and the honor of the Burgundians themselves is elevated in his presence. This is a far cry from the wild, ferocious figure who'd threatened them a year ago.

Hearing the news, Kriemhild blushes with delight and rewards the page with fine **clothes** and gold. (Such gifts, the poet observes, "encourage one to tell such news to great ladies.") Gunther rides out to greet the returning warriors, sees that the wounded are cared for, and addresses his enemies with respect. Liudeger promises that if Gunther treats them mercifully, they will pay him handsomely. Gunther allows the kings to move freely within his court.

The poet makes a tongue-in-cheek observation about the courtly custom of rewarding messengers; does expectation of reward impact messengers' delivery? Meanwhile, Gunther shows honorable magnanimity toward the defeated and suffering, in marked contrast to scenes later in the story.

Following the battle, Gunther treats both friends and foes with magnanimity, richly rewarding the physicians who treat the wounded, and giving lavishly to his allies. A festivity is planned for six weeks after the battle so that the wounded will be able to celebrate, too. When Siegfried asks to return to the Netherlands, Gunther begs him to stay, and Siegfried agrees, in hopes of meeting Kriemhild. Everyone begins to plan the magnificent **clothes** they will wear to the festival.

Gunther continues to show himself a good-hearted king when he's left to his own devices. Siegfried's request to leave might be a chivalrous cover for his own secret wish to linger and hopefully meet the lady he's desired for the past year.

CHAPTER 5

Throngs of noble guests begin to arrive in Burgundy for the great festivity. Meanwhile, Gunther has observed Siegfried's love for his sister, Kriemhild. Ortwin suggests that Kriemhild should be allowed to appear before the guests. Gunther sends word to his mother and Kriemhild accordingly. One hundred vassals and as many ladies-in-waiting escort Kriemhild and Queen Uote to the festival, and the knights jostle to get a good look.

Gunther is not an oblivious fool, at least in this matter, and finally arranges for the long-desired meeting to unfold. In keeping with courtly custom, Kriemhild is accompanied by scores of beautiful women, signifying her royal importance. Since a lady of her stature would have largely kept to her own quarters, her emergence in public for the festival is a big deal for the entire kingdom.

Kriemhild emerges "like the **dawn** from the dark clouds," and Siegfried is freed from the distress of his yearning to see her. He is nevertheless sad, thinking it foolish to expect that he could ever win the princess' love. As the knights observe the beautiful women, "the high aspirations of their hearts" bring them much joy.

Kriemhild's appearance liberates Siegfried from his status as a lovelorn knight pining from afar, and the appearance of the other courtly women stirs up chivalrous desires in the other men present.

Gernot then encourages Gunther to present Siegfried to Kriemhild. "With this," he counsels, "we shall attach this splendid warrior to ourselves." When he is summoned, Siegfried's heart is finally filled with undiluted joy. As Kriemhild greets him, he blushes and bows, his spirit soaring. The two take hands and walk together, exchanging tender looks. Other knights look on with envy. When Kriemhild bestows a kiss on Siegfried, King Liudegast reflects grimly, "This most exalted kiss has been the cause of many a man's lying wounded."

Siegfried has gone from feared outsider to valuable ally, and now the Burgundian court wants him to be one of them, through marriage. Meanwhile, genuine romance blossoms between the pair, sealed with a ceremonial kiss indicating Kriemhild's esteem for Siegfried. Looking on, the foreign king sums up the theory of courtly love as a positive, emboldening force—Siegfried's longing for this kiss had made him an especially ardent warrior, to the detriment of Liudegast's and Liudeger's men.

Siegfried accompanies Kriemhild to and from church. Kriemhild thanks him for his service in battle, and Siegfried tells her that he has done it to win her favor. The two continue to appear in one another's company over the next 12 days of the festival. Liudeger and Liudegast express their desire to return home, and Gunther goes to Siegfried for advice. Siegfried advises that the foreign kings be allowed to go free, without obligations, as long as they swear never to invade again. The kings do so. Finally, Gunther doles out heaping shields of gold to his friends and dismisses them with honor.

Loose ends appear to be tying up neatly. The lovers' courtship continues, the aftermath of war has been fully resolved, and gifts of gratitude have been lavished on those who served the court.

Siegfried, too, makes preparations to leave, but Giselher urges him to stay. Siegfried agrees. As a result, he sees Kriemhild daily. It is her "transcendent beauty" that keeps him there, but Siegfried is "tormented" by the passion Kriemhild arouses in him—"thanks to which," concludes the poet, "the hero met a pitiful end."

Siegfried makes another token attempt to leave, but is drawn back by the promise of Kriemhild. Her "transcendence" and his resultant "torment" are a perfect example of the courtly love ideal; the object of his affections is both so near and so unattainable. If he had been able to resist Kriemhild's beauty, the poet implies, then Siegfried wouldn't have died.

CHAPTER 6

News reaches Burgundy of beautiful maidens in foreign lands, and Gunther decides he wants to win one of these women for himself. In particular, he pines for Brunhild, a queen of Iceland who boasts incredible strength. In order to win Brunhild, men must compete with her in several athletic contests. If a man loses even one of these contests, he forfeits his head.

Brunhild is immediately presented as foreign, strange, and exotic. At the time of the poem's setting, in fact, Iceland had not yet been settled, and at the time the poet wrote, it had been officially Christianized for only two centuries. Thus, Brunhild is something of a shadowy, larger-than-life figure from a mysterious land beyond the sea.

Siegfried, seemingly familiar with Brunhild's intimidating ways, advises against Gunther's plan, but Hagen suggests that Gunther enlist Siegfried's help, which he does—promising to help Siegfried in turn. Siegfried requests the hand of Kriemhild in return for helping Gunther, and Gunther agrees. The two knights swear oaths accordingly.

In her formidableness and wildness, Brunhild is reminiscent of the younger Siegfried. Indeed, the two have some sort of past link, though this is never clarified in the poem. In any case, Siegfried's heart clearly belongs to Kriemhild, whose modest femininity contrasts with Brunhild's masculine traits, and whose hand he hopes to win in exchange for helping Gunther best Brunhild.

Siegfried plans to bring the magic cloak he won from Alberich, since it gives him the power of 12 men and also grants him invisibility. He helps Gunther plan the journey to Iceland, deciding to take only Hagen and Dancwart as additional companions. Gunther and Siegfried also visit Kriemhild, and, while Kriemhild and Siegfried exchange flirtatious glances, Gunther explains that their party will require the finest **clothes** for their journey to Brunhild's court. Kriemhild promises that her maidens will make four days' worth of jewel-encrusted clothes for the four men.

Brunhild's strength is so otherworldly that even Siegfried must resort to magical powers in order to defeat her. But, perhaps just as important, an overture to a foreign court requires clothing befitting the Burgundians' station—showing that they can afford an ostentatious surplus of fancy garments.

Kriemhild demonstrates her favor for the knights by supplying them with elaborate, exotic **clothing**. The fabrics are imported from such faraway lands as Arabia, Morocco, and Libya, the linings come from the skins of "strange water-beasts," and everything is spangled with precious stones.

Entrusting Kriemhild (or her ladies, at any rate) with this task is another courtly gesture of sorts, giving her the opportunity to bestow her favor. And she comes through for them—not only are the clothes elaborate, but their exotic materials seem to fit the party's equally strange and exotic destination.

Once the knights' ship has been built and they've modeled their new wardrobes, they are ready to depart. The ladies weep copiously, their "hearts [foretelling] them the outcome." The warriors' horses, as well as fine food and the best Rhenish wine, are taken aboard. Finally, the four men embark, with Siegfried as captain, since the route to Iceland is familiar to him.

The description of the Burgundians' voyage abroad is rather fanciful, sounding more like a first-class pleasure cruise than a dangerous venture across the North Atlantic. It's not meant to be a realistic picture of seafaring, however; rather, the poet wants to convey the men's gentility in contrast to their frontier destination.

After 12 days of sailing, they arrive at Brunhild's fortress of Isenstein in Iceland. Before disembarking, Siegfried cautions the men that they should stick to a common story if Gunther's quest is to succeed—that Gunther is overlord and Siegfried his vassal. They all agree, but "none refrained out of pride from saying whatever he wanted."

No explanation is given for why Siegfried cautions the men this way. However, it seems plausible that Siegfried suspects Brunhild will favor him, unless she's given a reason to consider Gunther the superior catch. In any case, this deception will have ramifications for all of them.

CHAPTER 7

As maidens peer down at them from the fortress above, Gunther sees Brunhild for the first time and deems her beautiful. After they disembark, Siegfried helps Gunther onto his horse within sight of the ladies. Brunhild's vassals attend to the Burgundians' food and lodging. Meanwhile, Brunhild asks her courtiers about the newcomers. When someone identifies Siegfried, Brunhild retorts that he has come at peril of his life, since she would never consent to marry him. Nevertheless, she dresses beautifully and goes to welcome him, attended by many ladies and knights.

Siegfried behaves like Gunther's vassal when he knows the foreigners are watching. When Brunhild hears about him, it's again clear that the two have some sort of a shared past. She extends courtly hospitality in spite of her disdain.

Siegfried introduces Gunther to Brunhild, taking care to present Gunther as his lord and himself as liegeman, and explains their quest. Brunhild warns them that she is a formidable opponent, and they might want to reconsider throwing away their lives and reputations by attempting her sports. Siegfried quietly reassures Gunther that he will employ "ruses" to defeat the Queen on his behalf. Gunther accepts Brunhild's challenge.

Deception is the rule of the day, as Siegfried believes their quest can't succeed in any other way. Brunhild's "unladylike" bravado, meanwhile, reinforces the perception of her as a humorously larger-than-life figure.

While the rest are preparing for the games, Siegfried returns to the ship and slips into his invisibility cloak. Back at the athletic ring, Brunhild appears, armed with a heavy spear and a shield of steel and gold. Seeing this, Hagen tells Gunther, "We are done for—the woman whose love you desire is a rib of the Devil himself!" Gunther and Dancwart, too, are beginning to doubt the wisdom of Gunther's suit, since to die shamefully at the hands of a woman would tarnish their reputation as heroes. Hagen laments that they don't have their battle gear (the court chamberlains had stowed it upon their arrival), since if they did, "this amazon's proud spirit would be mollified."

Hagen's remark casts Brunhild as not only a deviant female, but as diabolical; her enormous strength signals that there's something deeply unnatural about her, and she can't possibly have been created by God. The shameful prospect of being slain by a woman foreshadows a parallel threat to come at the end of the story. For now, the men tell themselves that if only they were dressed for battle, they could easily put Brunhild in her place.

In his magic cloak, Siegfried sneaks to Gunther's side and instructs him not to worry: "Now, you go through the motions, and I shall do the deeds." Then Brunhild hurls her javelin so forcefully that it tears through Siegfried's shield and Gunther's mailshirt. Siegfried rebounds and sends the spear back at her. Angered, Brunhild then hurls a great boulder 24 yards, following with an even longer leap. With the strength of the magical cloak, Siegfried exceeds these distances and carries Gunther along with him as he leaps.

This scene enacts Gunther's ongoing dependence on the strength and initiative of others. It's also meant to be humorous, with Brunhild's unlikely feats—and Gunther's comical playacting—showing just how strange and threateningly unfeminine she is. Only her fellow foreigner, Siegfried, is really a match for her, and that with magical assistance.

Furious at her defeat, Brunhild summons her vassals to pay homage to Gunther. Brunhild grants Gunther authority to rule over Iceland. Siegfried returns his magic cloak to the ship and returns to the palace, pretending he doesn't know the games have already occurred. When Hagen explains the outcome, Siegfried says he is glad that someone has mastered Brunhild, and that she must return to Burgundy with them. With all the vassals converging on Isenstein, the Burgundian contingent is nervous about Brunhild's intentions, so Siegfried sails away to gather a thousand of his best fighting-men to defend them.

Honoring the rules of her game, Brunhild submits to Gunther, though she's simmering with rage—she may have been defeated, but she's not yet fully "tamed." She is still potentially dangerous to the outnumbered men, so Siegfried goes for reinforcements.

CHAPTER 8

Siegfried sneaks away to Nibelungenland. Upon arriving at a castle, he subdues a burly watchman and then Alberich the dwarf, who helps Siegfried gather the thousand gallant knights he requires. Siegfried and the knights sail back to Iceland and are received by Brunhild.

Siegfried's earlier conquest of Nibelungenland serves him well, as he commands the loyalty of more than enough knights to make a sufficient show of strength in Brunhild's court.

Brunhild lets Dancwart distribute some of her treasure to the foreign guests, but is soon dismayed at his excessive generosity, telling him that she trusts herself to squander her own inheritance. Hagen tries to convince her that Gunther has such riches that her own won't be needed, but she insists on filling her own coffers in preparation for the journey to Burgundy. She then appoints a governor, gathers her retainers, and takes leave of Iceland for the last time. She declines to consummate her marriage with Gunther, however, until they have arrived in Burgundy.

The problem of women's trustworthiness when it comes to managing their own wealth (it's seen as better that they rely on the provisions of men) will come up more than once in the story. Squandering one's riches is a queen's prerogative, and denying her that diminishes Brunhild's power. However, her refusal to consummate her marriage is an assertion of power in its own right (and allows her to maintain her status as a problematic woman for the time being).

CHAPTER 9

After more than a week of sailing, Gunther dispatches Siegfried to the Rhine to give Kriemhild and the rest of the Burgundian court news of what has taken place in Iceland. At first, seeing Siegfried arriving alone, the ladies are afraid that Gunther has been slain in Iceland, but Siegfried quickly reassures them. He passes along Gunther's wish that the newcomers be given a noble welcome, so the vassals duly prepare for a lavish festivity. A massive entourage of finely arrayed ladies-in-waiting and warriors prepares to receive Brunhild's party.

The Burgundians are eager to celebrate Gunther's apparent triumph and also to demonstrate their ability to throw an excellent party and offer lavish hospitality. It's customary for such an important newcomer to be greeted by a huge party of the kingdom's finest.

CHAPTER 10

Queen Uote and Kriemhild are escorted to the shores of the Rhine by Siegfried to greet Gunther and Brunhild. Kriemhild welcomes Brunhild with courtesy and affection. Then the ladies are conducted to tents so they can watch the knights compete in ceremonial sports.

The two ladies of the court meet each other for the first time. For now, Brunhild still represents the "deviant" woman, while Kriemhild represents the idealized one.

During the subsequent feast, Siegfried reminds Gunther of his oath, that he should have Kriemhild as his wife in exchange for Siegfried's help in gaining Brunhild. Kriemhild is duly summoned to the King's hall and asked to accept Siegfried as her husband. She quickly agrees. The two stand in the midst of a ring of knights and make their vows to one another. They are then seated in the high seat of honor opposite Gunther and Brunhild.

Siegfried is quick to collect on the promise Gunther has made to him—the lovely Kriemhild in "exchange" for the aggressive Brunhild. Fortunately, she is agreeable—she is the idealized woman, after all—and the festivity duly becomes their marriage feast in addition to Gunther's.

When Brunhild sees Kriemhild seated at Siegfried's side, she begins to weep. When Gunther asks her what is the matter, she replies, "It wounds me to the heart to see your sister sitting beside a liegeman, and if she is to be degraded in this fashion, I shall never cease to lament it!"

In Iceland, Brunhild had been persuaded of Siegfried's inferiority to Gunther. Perhaps because of her ambivalence about her own marriage, she takes the apparent "degradation" of Kriemhild to heart. Siegfried's plotting is beginning to bear fruit.

Gunther hushes Brunhild, promising to explain the circumstances of the marriage to her later. Brunhild says that she won't share Gunther's bed unless he tells her now. Gunther promises her that Siegfried's lands are quite as good as his own and that he's a mighty king; he's a worthy husband for Kriemhild. Brunhild still feels troubled, however.

When Gunther brushes off Brunhild's angst, Brunhild deploys the primary weapon at her disposal by withholding their marital consummation yet longer.

Gunther and Brunhild soon retire from the festivities, followed by Siegfried and Kriemhild. The latter enjoy a tender and contented night together. Gunther's night is much different, however. As he gathers Brunhild into his arms and caresses her, she flies into a rage and tells him that she intends to remain a maiden until she has learned the truth about Siegfried.

The contrast between the two couples couldn't be starker: Siegfried and Kriemhild are the ideal, conventional couple, while Gunther's and Brunhild's marriage begins in a much less promising manner.

Gunther grows angry and tries to take Brunhild by force. In response, she binds him with her girdle and hangs him from a nail on the wall. No matter how he begs, she refuses to loosen his bonds, since she is lying too comfortably in bed. When **dawn** comes, Brunhild taunts him with the possibility of being discovered by his chamberlains in such a shameful state, but she finally releases him. He rejoins her in bed, staying as far away from her as possible, until their attendants enter to prepare them for the festival mass.

To a medieval audience, this scene would have been quite comical indeed—everything from Brunhild's refusal, to Gunther becoming a pathetic laughingstock, to cringing away from his wife after he rejoins her in bed. It's perhaps the ultimate expression of Brunhild as "deviant" woman.

During the subsequent festivities, Siegfried notices that Gunther is in low spirits, and he asks him how his night went. Gunther confides his humiliation to Siegfried. Siegfried promises that he will use the invisibility cloak that night to "tame" Brunhild for Gunther, or die in the attempt. Gunther agrees and makes Siegfried promise not to be sexually intimate with Brunhild in any way. Siegfried promises.

Once again, Gunther finds himself appealing to Siegfried for help with his unruly wife, and Siegfried turns to his magical powers to save the day.

That night, Siegfried affectionately lies in bed with Kriemhild—and abruptly disappears. He has put on the magical cloak and gone to Gunther's chamber, where he puts out the lights, a prearranged sign with Gunther, who quickly bars the door. Siegfried gets into bed and clasps Brunhild, who flings him out of bed so powerfully that he cracks his head on a stool. When he recovers and starts rumpling Brunhild's shift, she scolds him for his vulgarity and rams him against the wall. Siegfried thinks that if Brunhild succeeds in killing him, "the whole sex will grow uppish with their husbands forever after."

Siegfried's sudden disappearance leaves Kriemhild literally in the dark about what's about to happen—which will come back to haunt them both. Siegfried fears that if Brunhild can't be tamed, womankind as a whole will become untamable. While the poet presents even this scene as somewhat comical, the misogynistic undercurrent can't be missed.

Siegfried and Brunhild are locked in fierce struggle for a while, and, although Brunhild inflicts "agony" on the warrior, he eventually overpowers her strength. She finally begs for her life, and Siegfried quickly takes her ring and girdle before leaving her to Gunther, who "[takes] his pleasure with her as was his due." After they have slept together, Brunhild's "vast strength fled so that now she was no stronger than any other woman."

Siegfried finally prevails, significantly taking some souvenirs with him. After Brunhild has submitted to her husband, she is completely tamed at last—rendered weak, pliable, and dependent, hence nonthreatening.

The festivity lasts for two more weeks. During this time, both Gunther and Siegfried liberally squander robes, gold, horses, and silver on all in attendance.

As at previous festivities, the two kings demonstrate their worth through an extravagant outpouring.

CHAPTER 11

After the guests depart, Siegfried tells his wife and his men that he, too, wants to return home. Kriemhild, however, doesn't want to leave before she and her brothers have divided their landholdings. The Burgundian kings assure Siegfried that they will share all their lands and castles with him. Siegfried thanks them and says that, since she will be rich in possessions in the Netherlands, Kriemhild can forgo her Burgundian inheritance. But Kriemhild speaks up to remind him that allegiances to vassals must still be accounted for.

Like Brunhild before her, Kriemhild finds herself largely at the mercy of her husband's and brothers' whims regarding the disposal of her rightful lands, but she finds a way to speak up for herself—her Burgundian vassals might not wish to transfer their allegiance to the king of a foreign realm.

Gernot grants Siegfried a thousand knights for his household. Kriemhild wants to take Hagen and Ortwin as her liegemen, but Hagen is incensed at the implication that Gunther can "give" them to anyone or that they can abandon their obligations to the Burgundian court.

Notably, Hagen identifies himself strongly with his obligations to Burgundy and resists being placed in service to Siegfried. Gunther doesn't show up in these negotiations whatsoever, another suggestion of his weakness.

They abandon this matter and get ready to leave, taking Kriemhild's retinue of 32 maidens and 500 vassals. Messengers are sent to inform Siegmund and Sieglind that their son, Siegfried, is on the way with his new bride. The happy parents prepare a high seat for the royal couple. Many vassals, as well as Sieglind with her ladies, ride out to meet the newcomers and accompany them home to Xanten. After the Burgundian entourage has been warmly welcomed in the Netherlands, Siegmund announces that he is making over his crown and kingdom to his son.

At last, Siegfried returns to his native land a fully civilized figure, fit for kingship—in contrast to the fighting and wanderlust of his wilder youth. He and Kriemhild become King and Queen of the Netherlands.

Siegfried lives in magnificence and dispenses justice for ten years, at which time Kriemhild gives birth to a son, named Gunther after his uncle. Brunhild, too, gives birth to a son in Burgundy, named Siegfried.

Both kingdoms dwell in peace for ten years, and both households bear sons. It appears that all is as it should be.

CHAPTER 12

Over the past ten years, Brunhild has been disquieted by Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried, and she wonders why they hold themselves aloof and offer Burgundy so little service, if indeed Siegfried is Gunther's vassal. She asks Gunther if it might be possible to see Kriemhild again. Gunther says that she and Siegfried live too far away to be easily summoned, but Brunhild begs and finally prevails.

A whole decade has passed, yet Brunhild continues to nurse bitter feelings about Kriemhild's marriage. The poet doesn't offer many clues as to why this is the case. However, it seems to be more than Siegfried's (perceived) failure to be a good vassal; does Brunhild suspect that Siegfried might have been the more suitable match for her after all? In any case, it bothers her enough that she contrives to invite Siegfried and Kriemhild back for a visit.

Messengers are sent on the three-week journey to the Netherlands to invite Siegfried and Kriemhild to a festivity that will be held before midsummer. Though the messengers are warmly welcomed, Siegfried is hesitant at first about making the long journey. His friends persuade him to go, traveling with a large party of warriors, and Siegmund accompanies them as well. Siegfried and Kriemhild outfit their guests with fine **clothes** for the journey.

The return to Burgundy isn't a quick journey, but a fully outfitted state visit—a big deal. Siegfried and Kriemhild also give Gunther's messengers beautiful gifts, no doubt to advertise that their household and kingdom are thriving.

The messengers return to Burgundy and share the news that Siegfried and Kriemhild will attend the festivity. They also show off the munificent gifts they received, prompting Hagen to remark that it's easy for Siegfried to bestow such gifts, since he holds the Nibelung treasure. "Ah me," he sighs, "if that were to come to Burgundy!" Meanwhile, the rest of the court prepares for the festivity.

In contrast to Brunhild's obsession with Siegfried, Hagen is less interested in the impending guests than in the treasure they steward. He already daydreams about the possibility that the Nibelung hoard he spoke of earlier could somehow be brought to Burgundy—and within his reach.

CHAPTER 13

Siegfried, Kriemhild, and Siegmund set out for the festival expecting great joy, though, the poet notes, "it turned out to the great sorrow of them all." Meanwhile, in Burgundy, vassals prepare to ride out to meet the guests. Gunther approaches Brunhild, who is sitting idly, and asks her to welcome Kriemhild with the same honors with which she herself was received when she first came to Burgundy.

The poet creates dramatic irony by forecasting how the visit is going to turn out. In contrast to the bustle around Burgundy, Brunhild continues to brood passively. This signals such a breach of etiquette—Kriemhild is entitled to at least an equal welcome after having greeted Brunhild as a stranger—that even Gunther takes notice.

Gunther tells Brunhild that she must bestir herself if she plans to receive the guests the following morning. Brunhild does so, and she and Gunther, with their ladies and warriors, ride out with great magnificence the next day. Gunther welcomes Siegfried and Siegmund joyfully. The two queens also greet one another courteously.

Once Brunhild has remembered her obligation as queen, she and Gunther lead the Burgundian court in welcoming the Netherlands king and queen. The two royal couples are reunited for the first time in many years.

As the guests are conducted to the palace, Brunhild "[darts] a glance" at Kriemhild "now and again." A lavish feast is set up, and Siegfried is seated with 1,200 knights. Brunhild thinks that no liegeman could be mightier. The poet remarks that "her feelings towards him were still friendly enough for her to let him live."

Despite her hospitable exterior, Brunhild is still squarely fixated on Kriemhild. She is also distracted by Siegfried's outward displays of high status. So far, though, there is an ambivalence in her reception of the two—neither warm nor hostile.

The next day, exuberant knightly sports take place, and everyone attends a cathedral mass together. The poet draws attention to the fact that "Brunhild was as yet well disposed towards her guests, and they all entered [the church] together in their crowns." The joy of the high feast persists until the 11th day.

The festivity carries on as intended for a while; everyone enjoys the traditional entertainments and treats one another with courtesy. Any hostile feelings are suppressed, while courtly dispositions prevail outwardly.

CHAPTER 14

One evening, while the two queens sit watching the warriors at their sports, Kriemhild remarks that her husband, Siegfried, is of such merit that he could rule over all the kingdoms of the region. "How could that be?" Brunhild retorts. She argues that as long as Gunther is alive, this could never come about.

Despite the fact that it's Brunhild who has been brooding over Siegfried, it's Kriemhild who first brings the subject into the open—in a provocative, pointed way that can't help seeming calculated.

Kriemhild persists in saying that splendid Siegfried is fully Gunther's equal. Brunhild replies that, when the knights came to Iceland, she heard them both say that Siegfried was Gunther's vassal, so she considers him to be her liegeman. Kriemhild is offended, since her brothers would not have married her off to a liegeman. She asks Brunhild, in friendship, to stop saying such things.

The two queens argue over the very deception that Gunther's men had put in motion ten years ago in Brunhild's court. The "insult" of Siegfried's status cuts both ways.

Brunhild retorts, "[W]hy should I renounce my claim to so many knights who owe us service through Siegfried?" At this, Kriemhild loses her temper and tells Brunhild that Siegfried in fact ranks above Gunther, so Brunhild can expect no services or dues from him as her liegeman.

In a culture structured around lord-vassal relationships, the implication that Siegfried owed service to Gunther as lord (including the charge that Siegfried had been remiss in discharging that service) would have been very offensive to Kriemhild.

Both ladies are very angry. Kriemhild declares that, since Brunhild thinks Siegfried to be her liegeman, the King's vassals must witness whether Kriemhild dares enter the church before Brunhild, giving visible proof that she is a free noblewoman. She claims to be "of higher station than was ever heard of concerning any Queen that wore a crown." Fierce hate grows between the two.

As anger flares between the two queens, Kriemhild throws down a challenge before her rival. The matter of precedence in entering church, raised publicly before Gunther's knights, gives it the feel of one proud knight challenging another to a duel.

Kriemhild instructs her maidens to dress well so that they won't be put to shame in front of Brunhild. Soon, she and a train of 43 ladies-in-waiting make their way to the cathedral, dressed in cloth-of-gold from Arabia. Everyone wonders why the two queens arrive at church separately, contrary to their custom. They also marvel at the splendor of the ladies' appearance, since "thirty queens could not have found the wherewithal" to dress so richly.

Here, again, opulence of dress symbolizes status. The apparently daring luxury displayed by Kriemhild's entourage draws attention to the fact that they are breaking established custom—an intentional move. Kriemhild is deliberately making a spectacle of herself to further provoke Brunhild.

At the church entrance, Brunhild harshly orders Kriemhild to stop, since a liegewoman may not enter before a queen. Kriemhild retorts that Brunhild should have held her tongue, since she has brought dishonor on her own head. "How," she asks, "could a vassal's paramour ever wed a King?"

By ensuring that their standoff is public, Kriemhild makes sure that Brunhild's "dishonorable" claim about her status is public, too—as is the charge she makes in response, that Brunhild is Siegfried's paramour, or lover. While Brunhild has been characterized as the more formidable figure in the past, Kriemhild has clearly seized control of this situation.

Brunhild asks whom Kriemhild is calling a paramour. Kriemhild claims that it wasn't Gunther who took Brunhild's maidenhead, but Siegfried. If Siegfried was indeed Brunhild's vassal, Kriemhild jeers, then why did she let him make love to her?

Neither Brunhild nor Kriemhild knows about Siegfried's invisible wrestling with Brunhild ten years ago (at least as far as the poem has revealed). But Kriemhild clearly suspects something about the night Siegfried abruptly disappeared, and she's using it to turn Brunhild's mockery around on her.

Brunhild swears to tell Gunther of Kriemhild's charge and begins to weep. Kriemhild proceeds into the church before her. "Thus," the poet says, "great hatred arose and bright eyes grew very moist and dim from it." During the church service, Brunhild broods on Kriemhild's accusation. If indeed Siegfried has boasted of having slept with her, she decides, it will cost him his life.

Brunhild is humiliated, both by Kriemhild's jeer and her pointed entrance into the church. It's the turning point in their relationship—Kriemhild has gained the upper hand, and in her flagrant insults could now be considered the "barbarous" one in contrast to the earlier Brunhild. Meanwhile, Brunhild wants Siegfried to pay for having shamed her in this way.

Outside the church, Brunhild demands proof of Kriemhild's charge. Kriemhild proves it by displaying the gold ring on her finger, which, she claims, was brought to her by Siegfried after he first slept with Brunhild. She also wears a silk, jewel-encrusted belt which Brunhild had worn that same night. Brunhild is agitated at the sight of the stolen ring and girdle, and, weeping, she summons Gunther.

Though it hadn't been revealed earlier, the destiny of Brunhild's stolen accessories is now revealed. It's easy to believe that Kriemhild slipped on these items, along with her showy outfit, in order to throw them in Brunhild's face. To Kriemhild, they are sufficient evidence that Siegfried did, in fact, sleep with Brunhild that night. She doesn't seem particularly disturbed by the possibility of her husband's adultery; rather, it's one more weapon she can use against Brunhild.

Gunther asks Brunhild what is the matter. Brunhild explains that Kriemhild has tried to rob her of her honor. She formally accuses Kriemhild of saying that Siegfried made her his concubine. Gunther is cautious and noncommittal in his response. He summons Siegfried.

Brunhild makes a formal, public accusation of Kriemhild for putting her honor in question, but Gunther seems wary.

Gunther tells Siegfried of Kriemhild's accusation. Siegfried denies it, and Gunther lets him offer an oath in the presence of the knights. Gunther acquits him of Kriemhild's allegation on the basis of his trust in Siegfried. Siegfried says that women "should be trained to avoid irresponsible chatter," and that he is ashamed of his wife's behavior.

Recall Siegfried's promise, after Gunther's wedding night, that he won't sleep with Brunhild when he steps in to subdue her strength. The story gives no indication that he actually did *sleep with her; in any case, Gunther is reluctant to press the matter, lest the full story of that night come into the open. It's far easier to fault the women's chatter.*

The women depart the scene in silence. Later, Hagen comes upon Brunhild, sees that she is crying, and asks her what is the matter. As soon as he hears the story, he vows that Siegfried must pay. Ortwin, Gernot, and Hagen begin plotting Siegfried's death. When Giselher comes upon this discussion, he defends Siegfried and asks why they are going to such drastic lengths over a women's quarrel. Hagen insists that Brunhild's honor is at stake.

When Hagen hears Brunhild's account of the situation, he doesn't waste any time, but seizes on the opportunity to eliminate Siegfried. His haste gives the reader the feeling that he has only been biding his time. Giselher seems to have the same impression, wondering if Brunhild's complaint really rises to the level of exacting revenge through blood.

Gunther also argues in favor of Siegfried's loyalty. But the rest of the knights, "though he had done them no wrong," declare themselves Siegfried's enemies. Hagen points out to Gunther that, if Siegfried were taken out of the picture, then Gunther would be the lord of many kingdoms. Gunther is despondent.

Gunther tries to stand up for Siegfried. It becomes clear that, for Hagen at least, an ulterior motive is present beyond simple revenge—a desire to seize Siegfried's power and wealth.

As they watch the sports, many of the vassals continue to nurse resentment. Gunther reminds them of Siegfried's commitment to the honor of Burgundy, and anyway, Siegfried is so strong and brave that it would be foolish to oppose him. Hagen replies that he will always be Siegfried's enemy, and that he will carry out a plot against him in secret by having a fake "war" declared on Burgundy. Hagen will learn from Kriemhild where Siegfried is vulnerable, and, in the course of the fictitious campaign, Siegfried will lose his life.

Gunther continues to oppose the plan, seeing it as dishonorable (not to mention foolish) to oppose someone who's been so valiant in Burgundy's defense. But Hagen already has an elaborate plot in mind, which he believes will guard the plotters from suspicion and will also indirectly implicate Kriemhild herself.

Gunther follows Hagen's instructions, "to evil effect," and the betrayal is underway. "Thanks to the wrangling of two women," the poet concludes, "countless warriors met their doom."

Gunther is ultimately swayed by Hagen, despite his feeble attempts to mount an opposition. The poet glosses over various factors in his conclusion: he doesn't necessarily absolve the plotters of their complicity, but chooses to emphasize the feuding queens' role in what will unfold.

CHAPTER 15

Four days later, 32 messengers are seen riding to court to tell Gunther that war has been declared on him, allegedly by Liudeger and Liudegast. Some of Gunther's men want to give up the plot even now, but Hagen won't hear of it. "Their plotting," the poet observes, "fell out to their own torment in the end."

Here, the deceptive scheme is put in motion. It's clear that Hagen is the ringleader of the plot and is determined to see it through.

When Siegfried hears of the "war," he immediately offers to ride against the invaders as he has done before. Gunther perfidiously thanks him. Knights from both Burgundy and the Netherlands begin to prepare for battle. When Hagen tells Kriemhild about the impending war, she mentions that Siegfried should not be made to pay for any wrong that she has done, since Siegfried has beaten her soundly and "taken ample vengeance" for her having vexed Brunhild.

Spousal abuse is taken entirely for granted in this context, even within the bounds of an apparently loving marriage; and in the story, it's categorized as a matter of "vengeance," with Kriemhild accepting it as a way of dealing with the trouble she initiated. The implication is that the matter need never have escalated from private household violence to violence between men.

Hagen asks Kriemhild what he can do to help protect Siegfried from harm in battle. Kriemhild commends Siegfried to Hagen's protection, revealing that, when Siegfried bathed in dragon's blood, a linden leaf fell between his shoulder-blades, rendering that one spot vulnerable to harm. She is anxious that Siegfried will come to harm in battle this way. Hagen tells Kriemhild to sew a small mark on Siegfried's **clothing** so that he will know where he must protect Siegfried in battle. Kriemhild agrees, thinking she is helping protect her husband.

Cruelly, Hagen extracts specific information from Kriemhild about Siegfried's vulnerability, thus ensnaring her in the plot, too. It's also a callback to Siegfried's "wilder" past, a reminder that he's practically invincible due to his contact with the magical realm.

The next morning, Siegfried rides out happily with his men for battle. Once Hagen observes the mark sewn on Siegfried's clothes, he secretly sends two of his men to report that Liudeger is, in fact, going to leave Burgundy in peace. When they return to court, Gunther thanks Siegfried for his loyal intentions and suggests—put up to it by Hagen—that they embark on a hunting trip instead. Siegfried agrees and rides off, while Hagen fills Gunther in on how he intends to betray Siegfried. "Never should a man practice such monstrous treachery," concludes the poet.

Hagen quickly aborts the mission once he identifies Siegfried's weak spot, giving Gunther the chance to suggest the diversionary hunting trip. The characterization of Hagen's actions as "monstrous" will echo much later in the story in Kriemhild's actions against Hagen and his fellows.

CHAPTER 16

Before the men leave for the hunt, Siegfried finds Kriemhild distraught. Last night, she dreamed that two boars chased Siegfried over the heath, and that the flowers were dyed with blood. She dreads disaster befalling Siegfried and urges him not to go. Guilelessly, he replies that none of Kriemhild's kinsmen bear him any ill will. Kriemhild disagrees, telling him of another dream in which two mountains fell on him. But Siegfried merely kisses her goodbye and leaves.

Kriemhild's prescient dreams occur once again, suggesting that Siegfried's death was somehow fated—or perhaps that Kriemhild's guilty conscience is at work. Siegfried evidently doesn't suspect that anything is amiss between him and the men of Burgundy.

The hunting party rides deep into the forest and sets up camp. Siegfried heads into the woods, guided by a huntsman and hound, and kills many beasts, including a lion, a bison, a buck, and a boar. As the hunters return to the camp, they startle a savage bear. Siegfried declares that he will give his friends some entertainment. He pursues the bear on foot, ties it to his horse's saddle, and brings it back to the campfire. When he turns it loose, the bear runs into the camp's kitchen, terrifying all present. Finally, Siegfried chases down the bear and kills it with his sword.

This scene provides a moment of comic relief before the tragedy the poet has been hinting at from the beginning of the book. Siegfried is an impossibly skilled—and lucky—hunter, apparently dispatching a great number of woodland creatures with minimal effort. The audience gets to laugh at the rather fantastic details while also admiring Siegfried's larger-than-life prowess for a final time.

As the hunters settle down for a feast, the butlers are slow to appear with the wine. Hagen explains that the butlers were misdirected to a different hunting ground. Thirsty, Siegfried soon goes in search of a brook for a drink of water. At this point, the knights put their plot into action. Hagen goads Siegfried into challenging him to a race to the spring, so the men strip off their hunting clothes and begin to run. Siegfried reaches the brook first and courteously waits for Gunther to drink first.

By misdirecting the butlers and contriving a situation whereby Siegfried will shed his hunting garb, Hagen has gone to considerable lengths to set up a scenario for slaying Siegfried. This shows how difficult it is to get Siegfried in a vulnerable position, and also how cold-blooded Hagen is in his sheer determination to see it through.

Siegfried, it turns out, "paid for his good manners." As he bends to drink, Hagen hurls Siegfried's own spear at the mark on his tunic, so that it fixes in his heart. Then Hagen flees in fear. In rage, the wounded Siegfried searches for his bow or sword, but finds that Hagen has placed them out of reach. He seizes his shield instead and smashes it into Hagen so forcefully that the riverside echoes, and Hagen reels. Then his strength ebbs away, and Siegfried falls among the flowers.

The poet uses the very issue that sparked the queens' fight—Siegfried's status relative to Gunther—to set up his death. Ironically, Siegfried does defer to Gunther here, and Siegfried's courtesy is turned against him, as the two men can then act behind his back as he drinks. And the once-wild Siegfried, in his embodiment of courtly behavior, is now struck down in what could well be described as a barbarous act.

As he dies, Siegfried rebukes his betrayers: "What good has my service done me now that you have slain me? I was always loyal to you, but now I have paid for it. Alas, you have wronged your kinsmen so that all who are born in days to come will be dishonored by your deed."

With his dying words, Siegfried appeals to the importance of mutual obligation in feudal ties—a sacred bond that his betrayers have blatantly shattered. His loyal service has been repaid with murder over a questionable matter of honor.

As the men watch him die, Gunther laments, but Hagen reprimands him. They will now be virtually unopposed, he says, and he is glad they've put an end to Siegfried's supremacy. With his last words, Siegfried asks Gunther to stand by Kriemhild loyally. Then he dies, the flowers around him drenched with blood.

Gunther grieves what they've done, but Hagen's malevolence is made plain—he has wanted to be rid of Siegfried for a long time, and this desire goes beyond merely defending Brunhild's offended honor. Kriemhild's dream of the blood-drenched flowers has come true.

When they see that Siegfried is dead, the men place his body on a shield and discuss how to conceal Hagen's deed. They decide that they must spread the story that Siegfried was killed by robbers while hunting alone in the forest. Hagen, however, doesn't care if Kriemhild learns what he has done. "It will trouble me very little," he claims, "however much she weeps."

Though concealment and trickery have marked earlier misdeeds , Hagen now feels free to broadcast what he's done. Evidently, he doesn't believe that Kriemhild, or anyone else, poses much of a threat to him.

CHAPTER 17

The warriors wait for nightfall before crossing over the Rhine with Siegfried's body. Then, Hagen commits a deed of "overweening pride and grisly vengeance." He orders that the corpse be placed on the threshold of Kriemhild's apartment so that she will discover it at **dawn**.

Hagen's cruelty is clearly on display—he not only doesn't care to conceal the murder, but ensures that Kriemhild won't be spared the full horror of what's befallen her husband.

When the church bells ring the next morning, Kriemhild wakes and begins dressing for the early service. Her chamberlain discovers the bloody corpse on the threshold but doesn't realize it is Siegfried. He warns Kriemhild to stay where she is. Suspecting the truth, Kriemhild bursts into lament, and her thoughts go immediately to her conversation with Hagen before the hunt. She swoons in her grief, having already become "the sworn enemy of her own happiness."

The poet takes care to paint Kriemhild as particularly pious, sharply contrasting her with the barbarism of her betrayers (and perhaps also with the later Kriemhild, who is not a sympathetic victim). In keeping with her prophetic dreams, Kriemhild intuits what has happened before she sees it. Describing her as "the sworn enemy of her own happiness," the poet predicts that Kriemhild will end up undermining herself in her own grief.

When her attendants suggest that the dead man might be a stranger, Kriemhild replies, in anguish, that it is Siegfried. She adds, "It is Brunhild who urged it, Hagen did the deed!" When she sees her husband's body, she notices that his shield is unhacked by any sword, suggesting he has been murdered. If she could prove who had done it, she says, she would ceaselessly plot his death.

Though Kriemhild is already convinced that Hagen is to blame, she knows she must obtain proof before pursuing vengeance against him. Siegfried's intact shield suggests that he was attacked in cold blood, with no chance of defending himself.

When Siegmund is awakened with news of his son's death, he and his men are so shocked that some begin running toward the wailing women even before getting dressed. He soon cradles Siegfried's body, and the combined mourning of women and vassals causes the city to echo with weeping. Siegfried's Nibelung vassals stand ready to avenge their lord, but don't know where to turn. Kriemhild warns them that sudden action would be suicidal. She persuades them to grieve with her for the time being.

The men of Siegfried's realm have lost their king, so the mourning is tremendous. Yet even now, Kriemhild has her wits about her and discourages hasty action.

The next morning, Siegfried's body is carried to the cathedral. There Kriemhild meets Gunther and Hagen. Gunther expresses his sorrow, but Kriemhild says that if he truly regretted this death, it would never have happened. Both men try to take oaths of innocence, but Kriemhild cuts them short, demanding that guilt or innocence be proven another way—they should stand next to the corpse, and if the murderer is among them, the corpse's wounds will bleed anew. When Hagen stands next to the bier, this is exactly what happens. Gunther continues to insist that robbers did the deed, but Kriemhild retorts that those "robbers" are well known to her. She publicly accuses the two of murder.

Kriemhild gets the proof she desires, according to the supernatural evidence of the bleeding corpse. Gunther denies his involvement, but Hagen doesn't resist. Kriemhild doesn't shrink from calling the situation exactly as she sees it.

After mass, many people bring monetary offerings for Siegfried's soul. So much is brought that a hundred masses are sung in a day. The townsfolk go home, but Kriemhild asks all the priests and monks and all Siegfried's followers to keep vigil with her over his body for three days and nights. In the meantime, even the poor are told to draw money from Siegfried's treasury in order to make offerings for his soul, and Kriemhild distributes revenues to hospitals, convents, and to the poor.

Kriemhild's piety is on further display, even to the extent of providing money so that the poor can participate fully in honoring Siegfried's memory. Her distribution of wealth is a public sign both of her love for Siegfried and of her ability to serve as a patroness.

On the third morning, the funeral mass is held, and as they accompany the body to the grave, Kriemhild is repeatedly overcome with emotion. She begs Siegfried's men to break open his sarcophagus so that she can gaze on him a final time. She weeps tears of blood in her sorrow and finally has to be carried away from the grave, nearly dying from grief.

Kriemhild's overwhelming sorrow at the funeral foreshadows the devastating effect that her grief will have throughout the rest of her life—her inability to let go of her loss will become a burden to all who surround her.

CHAPTER 18

Siegmund urges Kriemhild to return to the Netherlands with him, as she seems to be an unwelcome guest in Worms. He reminds her that Siegfried's crown and realm will be hers. However, her kinsmen, especially Giselher, beg her to remain, promising that she need never see Hagen and that it will comfort her to live with her mother and brothers. Siegmund is distressed that she won't return to her little son, and Siegfried's men are affronted at having had to make such a perilous journey for no reason. Kriemhild commends the knights to God's keeping and her son to the knights' care. Everyone mourns anew at this parting.

Kriemhild ultimately chooses the kingdom of her birth over the kingdom that's hers to rule by right, believing that her kinsfolk are better able to support her in her continued mourning.

The Nibelungs ride homeward without requesting a Burgundian escort. Kriemhild continues to live at Worms in ceaseless lament, with only Giselher able to comfort her. Brunhild, meanwhile, sits "enthroned in her pride," extending no affection toward her bereaved sister-in-law.

The Nibelungs' unaccompanied departure would have been seen as a hostile act; asking for an escort was considered a mark of esteem and trust. Brunhild fades from the story at this point; readers last see her presiding silently over the mess she's created, while the role of the proactive (and ultimately threatening) woman is assumed by Kriemhild.

CHAPTER 19

Count Eckewart remains in Burgundy with the widowed Kriemhild. A magnificent house is built for her next to the church, and she lives there joylessly, going only to services and to Siegfried's grave. Her keen grief for her husband displays her great virtue.

It's clear that Kriemhild's life going forward is to be swallowed up by her grief, and this is fitting in the eyes of her culture; little more is expected of a woman in her situation.

For three and a half years, Kriemhild avoids speaking to Gunther or even setting eyes on Hagen. Meanwhile, Hagen tells Gunther that if he won back Kriemhild's friendship, then they could bring the Nibelung treasure to Burgundy. Gunther agrees to make overtures to Kriemhild through his brothers. After Gernot and Giselher entreat her, she agrees to see Gunther, though Hagen doesn't dare enter her presence.

Kriemhild's capacity to carry a grudge is becoming evident—and Hagen's shameless persists as well. He is still preoccupied with the wealth Siegfried left behind and is happy to use his lords, Kriemhild's brothers, to get to it.

Kriemhild makes peace with Gunther, and it isn't long before the Nibelung treasure, her nuptial dower, is ferried over the Rhine. Giselher and Gernot, along with 8,000 men, travel to Nibelungenland to fetch it from Alberich the dwarf, who grumbles that if Siegfried hadn't stolen the invisibility cloak, then none of this would have happened. It takes four days and a dozen wagons to haul the gems and gold back to Burgundy, and Kriemhild's rooms are soon crammed with treasure.

Claiming the Nibelung treasure gives Kriemhild power that she wouldn't otherwise have had, thus inviting potential trouble. Alberich's complaint lends a bit of (perhaps truthful) levity to the situation.

Kriemhild's hoard draws many foreign warriors to Burgundy, and she bestows lavish gifts on rich and poor alike. This begins to make Hagen nervous, and he is annoyed with Gunther's permissiveness toward his sister, telling him, "No man who is firm in his purpose should leave the treasure to a woman." Gunther still refuses to interfere, so Hagen secures the keys to the treasure himself.

Kriemhild's riches and generosity threaten the status quo in Burgundy; the bonds she creates through her gift-giving could unsettle balances of power among the men. Hagen's comment recalls a similar situation with Brunhild; she wasn't trusted to dispose of her own wealth, either.

Kriemhild appeals to her brothers to intervene, but while they are away on a journey, Hagen dumps the entire treasure into the Rhine with the intention of using it for himself one day. When her brothers return, they agree that Hagen has acted badly, but he stays away from them until their anger cools. Kriemhild, however, stews in her malice toward Hagen. Her sorrow increases all the more, and she spends 13 years after Siegfried's death lamenting.

Hagen finally obtains his objective, securing the treasure for himself and, he thinks, preventing Kriemhild from causing any trouble about the matter, since the money is beyond her reach. Kriemhild's brothers are completely ineffectual in coming to her defense. Meanwhile, the injustice of the theft only intensifies Kriemhild's grief and anger, and her life revolves around her obsession.

CHAPTER 20

In Hungary, King Etzel, a widower, desires to take another wife. His friends encourage him to consider Kriemhild. He replies that this would be a miracle, since Kriemhild is a Christian, and he is an unbaptized heathen. They respond that it's worth a try, since she might be swayed by his vast possessions.

The poem shifts its focus abroad. Etzel is the poet's adaptation of the historical figure of Attila the Hun (c. 406–453)—a portrayal rather far from the fearsome warrior of legend. The poet also shows a strikingly pragmatic view of royal marriage—that wealth could perhaps override religious difference in such a case.

Rüdiger of Pöchlarn, who has known the Queen and her brothers since childhood, offers to go to the Rhineland as Etzel's envoy. Etzel promises to reward him with treasure, **clothes**, and horses, though Rüdiger says it isn't necessary. A week later, he rides out from Hungary.

In his intermediate position between foreign and familiar, Rüdiger enters the story as a literal go-between. He will serve as a bridge for Kriemhild between the world she's known and the one she will soon enter.


Rüdiger and his entourage stop in Pöchlarn on the way, staying with Rüdiger's wife Gotelind and their young daughter. Rüdiger asks Gotelind to bestow friendly gifts on his accompanying knights, since it will only help them on their mission, and she duly gives them costly fur-lined brocades. After a week, the party leaves for the journey through Bavaria, and within 12 days they arrive at the Rhine.

This is the first example of Rüdiger's famed open-handedness in giving, and another example of the way that gifts, especially clothing, smoothed the progress of both political and personal endeavors in the medieval world.

The people of Worms are intensely curious about the wealthy newcomers. Gunther asks Hagen if he knows them, and he replies that they would have to come from outlandish parts for him not to recognize them at once. When Rüdiger and his companions ride into court, Hagen quickly identifies him, and they go to meet him and his 500 magnificently clad Hunnish knights.

As at Siegfried's arrival in Burgundy, Hagen is again summoned for his expertise on foreigners. The Huns who accompany Rüdiger were members of a nomadic people who had made their way from Central Asia into Europe between the fourth and sixth centuries, conquering the Goths and other Germanic peoples.

The envoys are graciously received in the King's hall. Hagen reminds Gunther that he was once a hostage in Etzel's court, and that they must always seek to repay Rüdiger for his kindness to Burgundy. When Gunther asks after Etzel's wellbeing, Rüdiger explains that he and the whole land have been bereaved. They have heard that Kriemhild, too, is a widow, and they seek Gunther's blessing for her marriage to Etzel.

Though Hagen doesn't usually stand out for his meticulous attention to matters of courtesy, his youthful experiences in Etzel's court have evidently made a positive impression on him, which make him positively disposed toward Rüdiger and Hagen's obligations toward him and the other guests.

Gunther promises an answer in three days' time. He seeks his men's opinions about the marriage, and all but Hagen express their approval. Hagen insists that they will have trouble on their hands if Gunther allows the marriage. Giselher appeals to Hagen to make amends for the harm he's done Kriemhild by letting her enjoy this good fortune. Hagen retorts that he foresees revenge; somehow, Kriemhild will contrive to do them great harm. The others aren't dissuaded, arguing that they will never set foot in Hungary, so there is no risk to them.

Hagen is the only one who seems to recognize Kriemhild's mettle—that if she wants to get revenge on those who plotted to bring down Siegfried, she is fully capable of making it happen, even from a great distance. Hagen's perceptiveness is not surprising, since he and Kriemhild increasingly appear to be cut from similar cloth—single-mindedly obsessed with obtaining their desires.

Lord Gere goes to Kriemhild with the news and to encourage her to assent to the marriage. Kriemhild refuses, though she agrees to see Rüdiger. Still dressed in her widow's **clothes**, she receives him the following day in tears. After hearing Etzel's proposal, Kriemhild explains that she cannot love another man. Rüdiger argues that affection can heal sorrow, and besides, as Etzel's wife she would rule over 12 kingdoms.

Even if she is already inwardly disposed to assent to the marriage, propriety would force Kriemhild to refuse, at least at first. She continues to act the part of the grieving widow. Rüdiger doesn't shrink from dangling the material advantages of the match beside the intangible ones.

Giselher and Uote appeal to Kriemhild in private, trying to convince her that marriage to Etzel will make her happy. Kriemhild prays and ponders all night, wishing she had access to the kinds of riches she had enjoyed when Siegfried was alive, yet fearing the disgrace of being married to a heathen.

Kriemhild appears to have genuine reservations about marriage to a non-Christian, but wealth—and the power and relative self-determination it affords her—is an undeniable draw. Perhaps the "disgrace" of marriage to a Hun is an acceptable price to pay to regain some ability to act on her own behalf.

When Rüdiger meets with Kriemhild again the following day, she is persistent in her refusals. However, in private, Rüdiger tells her that he will make amends to her for any harm that should befall her. She makes him and his vassals swear an oath that they will avenge her wrongs if she is ever harmed, and not to deny her anything, provided it is to her honor.

Rüdiger's oath will have significant ramifications for all involved, especially himself and Kriemhild. At the moment, it seems a reasonable oath to make to a woman about to enter an unfamiliar land, and Rüdiger has no reason to suspect that a conflict of interest might later arise.

Considering her newfound allies, Kriemhild thinks that perhaps Siegfried may yet be avenged. She will have command of many warriors, after all, and the ability to attract more warriors by gifts, despite having been robbed of her fortune by Hagen. Aloud, she voices her concerns about Etzel's heathenism. Rüdiger assures her that Etzel has many Christian warriors, and besides, perhaps she will influence him to be baptized.

Kriemhild is acutely aware of the possibilities her newfound status may afford her, though she's careful to emphasize her concerns about the religious difference. Attila became known as the "scourge of God" and the epitome of barbarism because of his conquering of Christian lands, but this portrayal of Etzel is of a religiously indifferent and quite harmless figure.

Finally, Kriemhild consents to marry Etzel. Rüdiger urges her to prepare for the journey to Hungary at once. When Kriemhild plans to dole out gifts to Rüdiger's men, Hagen hears about it and demands that the money stay with him. The kings do nothing about it, however, and Rüdiger soothes Kriemhild with the promise that Etzel will give her more than she can squander. She is nevertheless angry about Hagen's despotism.

In a final insult, Hagen refuses to allow Kriemhild to follow the courtly protocol of rewarding the envoys, and, like previous characters, well-meaning Rüdiger misses the point by insisting that her new husband will provide all she could desire.

Kriemhild ruefully asks who will accompany her to a strange land, and Margrave Eckewart agrees to be at her service until death. She gathers her ladies and finally takes leave of Worms accompanied by a guard of honor, messengers rushing ahead to tell Etzel that his new bride is on her way.

Kriemhild departs from her native land and the site of her long mourning and begins the transition to a new setting, where her deportment and character will look radically different from the demure, distant Kriemhild knights had so desired.

CHAPTER 21

Giselher and Gernot accompany Kriemhild as far as the Danube before tearfully taking their leave. Rüdiger's party then passes through Bavaria. In the town of Passau, many people come out to see the strangers, including Bishop Pilgrim, who is Kriemhild's uncle and encourages them to stay for a visit. They press on toward Rüdiger's lands, however, and Gotelind rides out from the camp in hopes of cheering Kriemhild, who is now a stranger in a foreign land.

The poet's somewhat more detailed description of the brief passage through Bavaria, particularly Passau, has been cited as evidence of the poet's origins in that region. Kriemhild is now decidedly beyond the reach of those who have known and loved her and begins to become a stranger to them, even as she's a stranger within unfamiliar lands.

Kriemhild and Gotelind greet one another courteously and spend time getting acquainted, "neither [having] any foreboding of what was destined to happen." The next morning, they press on to Pöchlarn, where Kriemhild's party is well looked after, and she in turn gives fine gifts to her hosts through what "slender means" remain to her.

The poet continues to drop hints that later events will devastate all the characters. Meanwhile, although Kriemhild doesn't have access to her rightful wealth, she's still able to reward and cement the loyalty of those she meets on the journey.

Kriemhild's party stays in Etzel's fortress on the Traisen River in Austria for a few days while waiting for the Huns to arrive to accompany her into Etzel's lands. "Etzel's dominion," the poet comments, "is so widely known that the most fearless warriors ever heard of among Christians and heathens alike" flock to him. "And always," he adds, "the Christian life and the heathen existed side by side. But whichever rite a man followed, the King's magnanimity saw to it that all were amply rewarded."

The positive characterization of Etzel as a tolerant and generous king is likely due to his alliance with the Ostrogoths, the Germanic peoples who settled in Austria and its environs in the sixth century. Though his kingdom is decidedly "other" in its paganism and ethnic diversity, it's a relatively benign otherness.

CHAPTER 22

As Etzel rides out to meet Kriemhild, "bold knights of many different languages […] great companies past counting of both Christians and heathens" ride ahead of him, including Greeks, Russians, Poles, Wallachians, and "wild Pechenegs." In the Austrian town of Tulln on the Danube, Kriemhild encounters many unfamiliar customs and is received by various knights "who were to suffer at her hands in days to come."

This scene highlights the variety of peoples who will be under Kriemhild's command as Etzel's wife—but also makes it all the more alarming how much destruction and suffering it will be within her power to bring about.

Finally, King Etzel appears, accompanied by Lord Dietrich and his comrades. He joyfully approaches Kriemhild and greets her with a kiss. After a brief jousting display, the couple retires to a pavilion, chaperoned by Rüdiger. The next day, they all journey to Vienna, where the wedding is celebrated. Kriemhild gives so many gifts to her new vassals that they remark, "We imagined lady Kriemhild had no means, instead of which she has performed marvels of generosity!"

Etzel and Kriemhild exchange amiable greetings at last. The Goth exile, Lord Dietrich—like Kriemhild, a foreigner in a foreign land—also appears in the story for the first time. As has been well established at earlier weddings, gift-giving is an important celebratory gesture, cementing new relationships at the same time. It's important to Kriemhild to establish this reputation for generosity from the start.

The festivities go on for 17 days. As rich as Siegfried was, Etzel is richer—no man has ever been surrounded by so many noble heroes or has given away so many gifts of fine **clothes**. There is such an air of sumptuous generosity that everyone "freely gave whatever was asked [...] with the result that, thanks to his generosity, many a knight was left there with no clothes to stand up in!" In the midst of all this, Kriemhild weeps in memory of Siegfried, but she masks her feelings, and no one notices.

Although Etzel is as rich as Kriemhild could desire and then some, the wedding festivities only inspire fresh tears, which she's careful to hide. Her marriage, and the riches that accompany it, are obviously a means to an end for her. Meanwhile, Etzel's unsparing generosity inspires a similar attitude in his guests, carried to an absurd extreme. The air of festive camaraderie will be grotesquely paralleled by extremes of hostility by the end.

The next day, they ride away from Vienna and into Hungary. When they arrive at Etzelnburg, Kriemhild receives marks of submission from her new subjects, and she gives away all that she had brought with her from the Rhine. She comes to wield great power, and the court and country live in great splendor and bounty in the years to come.

The following years are marked by harmony and further consolidation of power and riches—making it look as if all is well. The poet lulls readers into thinking that Kriemhild has been peacefully assimilated into her new world—which, based on past upsets, creates an expectation that such peace will eventually be shattered.

CHAPTER 23

Etzel and Kriemhild live together peacefully for seven years, at which time Kriemhild gives birth to a son, Ortlieb, and insists on having him baptized. Kriemhild continues to be "renowned among natives and foreigners alike," a reputation she maintains in Hungary until her 13th year there.

The religiously and culturally mixed marriage produces a son, whom Kriemhild insists on raising as a Christian, with no apparent opposition from Etzel. Kriemhild remains beloved by subjects from all backgrounds for many years.

All this time, however, Kriemhild has been brooding over the wrongs that had been done to her in Burgundy. She muses that if she could get Hagen to Hungary in some way, she could exact revenge on him. She also dreams of walking with her brother Giselher and kissing him.

Despite outward appearances, Kriemhild hasn't actually changed; she hasn't let go of past wounds. As Hagen has predicted, she is resolved on harming him in some way. Her dream of once again seeing her favorite brother comes true, although the affection shown in the dream doesn't.

"If you ask me," remarks the poet, "it was the foul fiend who prompted Kriemhild to break with Gunther." Kriemhild is oppressed by the memory of how, through no fault of her own, she was brought to the point of having to marry a heathen—something for which she blames Hagen and Gunther. Aware of how much wealth and power she now possesses, she "tenaciously […] nurse[s]" the intention to do Hagen harm.

The poet backs off from fully blaming Kriemhild for what's to come, though it's unclear whether he is being tongue-in-cheek or genuinely trying to salvage her reputation for an audience disposed to see her as a courtly heroine. The full extent of Kriemhild's duplicity is also made clear—far from being the generous wife she appears to be, she's still resentful of this marriage, more than a decade later, and goes out of her way to continuously stoke a mindset bent on vengeance.

Kriemhild knows that no one in Hungary would dare thwart her plans, so she decides she will prompt Etzel to invite her relatives to visit. So, one night, as the King lovingly caresses her, she thinks of her enemies. She tells Etzel that people in Hungary think her a friendless foreigner, and she regrets that her kinsmen are never seen here. Etzel immediately offers to invite them.

Kriemhild, in a striking parallel to Brunhild's prompting of Gunther much earlier in the story, prompts Etzel to put her revenge plans in motion at long last. Her single-mindedness after so many years is striking, as is the fact that she's fixated on the subject even while her husband is showing her genuine affection. Also, despite having cultivated a positive image and reigning as queen for 13 years, Kriemhild still thinks the people perceive her as a foreigner; or at least that's what she claims.

Etzel immediately summons his two minstrels, Swemmel and Werbel, and explains that he is sending them to the Rhine as envoys to invite Kriemhild's kinsmen to a midsummer festival. He outfits them with new **clothes** and a company of warriors. Later, in secret, Kriemhild meets with the minstrels again and promises them further riches in exchange for delivering a more detailed message. She tells them they must never let her kinsmen know that they have seen her sorrowing. And if Hagen wishes to stay at home, they must ask how the retinue will find their way to Hungary, since he has known the roads all his life. The messengers don't understand why the Queen is so insistent on Hagen's coming, but they duly set out for the Rhine.

Kriemhild takes further initiative in her scheming, going behind Etzel's back to ensure that her kinsmen won't suspect ulterior motives on her part, and that Hagen can't weasel out of making the journey.

CHAPTER 24

Swemmel and Werbel ride out swiftly for Burgundy, arriving within 12 days. The minstrels are graciously welcomed by Gunther's court, and they share good news of the Kriemhild's health and well-wishes. Then they relay the invitation to the festival, and Gunther requests a week's deliberation. When he asks his vassals their opinion, many desire to make the journey, but Hagen, unsurprisingly, is fiercely opposed. He tells the King, "You are bent on your own destruction."

After all these years, Hagen is no less suspicious of Kriemhild than Kriemhild remains bent on bringing Hagen down; there is a quickened sense of the two figures' fates advancing to a climax.

Gunther dismisses this, saying that Kriemhild had renounced her feud with him before she left for Hungary, though her quarrel with Hagen remains open. Hagen replies that Gunther is deceiving himself, because "in matters of revenge King Etzel's queen has a long memory." Seeing Hagen's hesitation to go to Hungary, Giselher taunts him that "those that dare" should make the journey. At this, Hagen is determined to prove that no one on the journey has greater courage than he does.

Hagen shows again that he truly has the measure of Kriemhild's personality, succinctly summing up her fixation on revenge. Gunther, by contrast, seems oblivious to the depths of his sister's feelings. While Giselher's taunt seems petty, it's a genuine challenge to Hagen's honor, which he would have considered it his duty to counter.

Hagen counsels that if Gunther is determined to go to Hungary, he must uphold his honor by traveling heavily armed, with the best of his vassals. Gunther agrees and goes about gathering knights for the State visit. One of these knights is Volker, a noble lord who also plays the viol and so is known as "The Minstrel." Meanwhile, Hagen delays Etzel's envoys so that they can't arrive too far in advance of the Burgundians, lest Kriemhild have extra time to plot harm to her enemies.

Even though Gunther doesn't fear Kriemhild's intentions, Hagen talks him into traveling well-armed on the grounds of honor. And even though Hagen knows what's coming, he won't hand Kriemhild any additional advantages that would worsen the Burgundians' fate.

At last, Swemmel and Werbel, laden with gifts, set out with speed for Hungary. Kriemhild is pleased to receive them and lavishes them with gifts as she'd promised. She questions them as to who exactly is coming and expresses particular pleasure at the prospect of seeing Hagen. Etzel's court begins to make preparations for the State visit.

Like the messenger early in the story, Swemmel and Werbel enjoy the benefits of bringing happy news to a great lady. Kriemhild's plans appear to be coming together, as both sides appreciate the magnitude of such a visit.

CHAPTER 25

The Burgundians prepare to set out for Hungary in great splendor. Before they can leave, Queen Uote implores her sons not to go; she has just dreamed that all the birds of the land were dead. Hagen retorts, "Those who set store by dreams cannot rightly know where their whole honor lies."

Like Kriemhild has done several times, Uote foresees what's to happen in a dramatic dream. Hagen's response is ambiguous; does he deny the dream's prophecy, or merely assert that the prophecy should determine their actions now? His response to Giselher earlier suggests that he values honor even above supernatural warnings of "fate."

As the party is about to set forth, Gunther's vassal Rumold expresses reservations about the King's departure. Gunther entrusts his lands and son to Rumold in his absence, though he is convinced that he will return unharmed. Finally, the knights depart cheerfully, though they leave many at home whom they will never see again, "for Siegfried's wounds were still tormenting Kriemhild."

As the kings and their vassals leave Burgundy for the last time, Brunhild's silence is striking; her role doesn't factor into the action any longer. Rather, the vengeful killing of Siegfried, and its unabated effects on Kriemhild, are cited as the causes of the knights' doom, with neither one being elevated above the other.

12 days later, the party (whom the poet begins to refer to as the Nibelungs) reaches the Danube and are dismayed to find its banks flooded. Gunther sends Hagen to find a way to ford the river. He can't find a ferryman, but he soon hears splashing and comes upon some water-fairies, or nixies, who are endowed with second sight.

The use of the title "Nibelungs" for the Burgundians may be a relic of the poet's own confusion—the Nibelungs were the vassals of Siegfried and would thus be the enemies of the Burgundians. The Nibelung treasure is now in Burgundian possession, but this is not a fully satisfying explanation, either. Whatever the poet's reasoning, the usage persists to the end of the story. In the meantime, supernatural creatures suddenly appear—a feature in keeping with the genre of medieval courtly romance.

Hagen tries to sneak up on the water-fairies, but they flee, so he takes their clothing. One of the nixies promises that if he returns their clothes, they will tell him how the visit to Hungary will turn out. Hagen decides he believes them. The fairy pledges her word of honor that they can ride confidently into Etzel's land without fear of harm. Pleased, Hagen returns their clothes, but another fairy says that her cousin has lied for the sake of getting her clothes back. The knights will surely die in Hungary, she warns him, and should turn back while there is still time.

Nixies are a mermaid creature familiar in Germanic folklore. In other tales, they sometimes try to lure the unsuspecting into the water, but here their role is to assure Hagen that his fate is sealed. There is a comic element in this scene that offsets the fairies' dire message; it's humorous to imagine the fierce Hagen hiding the creatures' clothing, yet being tricked nonetheless. The fairies suggest that despite their prediction, it's possible to thwart fate.

Hagen questions the water-fairies further, and one of them predicts that only Gunther's chaplain will return to Burgundy alive. They also give him information about a ferryman who will help them cross the river, explaining that Hagen must bribe and deceive him in order to gain his services. Following their instructions, Hagen pretends to be a vassal of the local margrave and offers the ferryman gold.

The fairies offer further confirmation of the outcome of the quest, as well as specific details on how to make it across the Danube alive. Despite his earlier disdain for supernatural signs, Hagen apparently sees no alternative and doesn't hesitate to follow the fairies' advice.

The ferryman, enraged once he figures out he has been deceived, refuses to take strangers across the river. He and Hagen fight, and the ferryman is beheaded. At that moment the ferry floats downstream, and when Hagen steers back to the rest of the party, he denies that he has seen any ferryman. He ferries the warriors and their goods across the river.

The deception and violence of this encounter offer a preview of the ways that reciprocal relationships will come undone and devolve into even greater violence at the journey's end. It suggests the gradual collapse of civilized relationships into barbaric caricature.

At this moment, Hagen remembers the water-fairies' prediction. When he sees the chaplain, he flings the priest overboard, to the horror of the onlookers. When the priest tries to keep himself afloat, Hagen again tries to drown him. The unfortunate chaplain finally swims to the far shore and must walk back to Burgundy. Hagen realizes he can't escape the fate the nixies have predicted, so he smashes the ferry, to the amazement of all.

Again, there is a humorous note to this shocking scene, as the hapless priest helplessly treads water and finally has to trudge homeward in his wet vestments. Hagen's attempt to test the fairies' prediction, followed by his matter-of-fact, point-of-no-return smashing of the ferry show that he's still wrestling with the role of fate in this endeavor, but finally decides that they must face whatever comes. Perhaps the swift dismissal of the priest, despite its comical function, also signals the departure of Christian piety—hence of "civilization"—from the story.

CHAPTER 26

Once they have safely attained the other shore, Hagen reveals the water-fairies' prophecy. Hagen warns everyone to arm themselves, since he *did* kill the ferryman and thus has acquired some enemies on the journey. Distressed, the men decide to appoint Volker as their guide through hostile country.

Hagen reveals the full story about the ferryman and the danger they're in, which obviously doesn't boost the men's spirits. Since they have no option but to proceed, they prepare for attack, setting the tone for the rest of their ordeal.

Gelpfrat, a lord of Bavaria, and his brother, the margrave Else, hear about the killing of the ferryman, and soon the Burgundians are under attack. Hagen explains he was acting in self-defense and is willing to make amends, but soon he and Gelpfrat are locked in fierce combat. The Burgundians just barely escape with their lives. Since the skirmish occurred after dark at the rear of the party, Gunther doesn't learn of it until the next morning and is dismayed to have missed the fighting.

Again, this clash, fueled by the Bavarians' desire for vengeance, offers a preview of the more catastrophic violence to come. Gunther considers it a stain on his kingly honor to have been left out of the fray.

After this episode, the Burgundians pass peacefully through Passau and reach the frontier of Rüdiger's domain. There they find a sleeping knight named Eckewart, whose sword Hagen takes. When Eckewart awakes, he is terribly ashamed to discover his negligence, but Hagen takes pity on him and returns the sword. Eckewart thanks him, but warns him that people in Hungary hate him for killing Siegfried. Hagen dismisses this and sends Eckewart as messenger to Rüdiger. Rüdiger is glad to learn of the Burgundians' approach.

This brief episode shows that Hagen, for all his fierceness, does care for honor, because he doesn't allow the negligent knight to be shamed. He also learns that his murderous reputation has far preceded him, but this warning is of little consequence to him now.

CHAPTER 27

Rüdiger and his men ride out to greet the Burgundians, welcoming them with warm promises of hospitality in Pöchlarn, giving special attention to Hagen and Volker. That evening in Rüdiger's hall, Rüdiger's young daughter attracts the admiration of many knights. After some discussion, it's agreed that Giselher will take her as his wife, to be escorted back to Burgundy with him after the visit to Kriemhild.

As during Kriemhild's journey to Hungary, Rüdiger offers a haven of civilized hospitality in the midst of foreign and often hostile lands. The comfort of his estate is such that the Burgundian knights can imagine a future after the journey to Hungary, though perhaps, too, this signals young Giselher's naïveté.

The Burgundians are prevailed upon to stay in Pöchlarn for four days, however much they protest—Rüdiger's hospitality is too formidable to resist. Before they continue on their way to Etzel's country, Rüdiger bestows many gifts, including a gem-studded shield that catches Hagen's eye. He also cheerfully escorts them to the festival. The poet notes that this glad generosity contrasts with the hostility that will later grow between the men and their host. Many ladies' "hearts foretold them what great sorrows lay ahead."

The stay in Pöchlarn is like an island of sanity and peace in the midst of incivility and violence. Rüdiger's hospitality is described as if it is a warrior's ferocity, too much to resist. His escorting the party would have been thought to create bonds of mutual obligation that it would be dishonorable to break. The prophetic "ladies' hearts" suggest that this will lead all involved into sorrow.

Meanwhile, messengers rush to Etzel's court to announce that the Nibelungs are in Hungary. Kriemhild stands at a window watching for her relatives' arrival. "How happy am I!" says Kriemhild. "Whoever is willing to take gold, let him remember my grief and I shall always show myself grateful!"

Kriemhild, ever since Siegfried's death "the sworn enemy of her own happiness," finally achieves happiness as she watches her plot moving toward fruition. She also offers gold and the promise of further acts of gratitude to anyone who will avenge her grief. Contriving violence is of course a perverse way to welcome foreign guests, and the exchange of gold for revenge is a notable shift from the more benign exchanges that have marked her earlier generosity.

CHAPTER 28

When the Burgundians arrive in Hungary, Lord Dietrich learns of their approach and is sorry to hear it, but he rides out to give them a warm welcome. He immediately tells them that Kriemhild still weeps for Siegfried. Hagen is dismissive, but Dietrich warns the men to be on their guard.

Dietrich distinguishes himself from the start as a figure who will seek to rise above the fray—and he is obviously perceptive, as Kriemhild hasn't managed to disguise her grief from him.

Gunther, Gernot, and Dietrich withdraw to discuss Kriemhild's state of mind in private. Dietrich reveals that he hears Kriemhild weeping and grieving for Siegfried every morning. Volker points out that there's no stopping whatever will befall them in Etzel's court, so they might as well proceed. As they do so, Hagen attracts much curiosity because of the rumors of his murder of Siegfried.

While the information about Kriemhild gives the men from Burgundy some pause, they remain steadfast with their plan. Volker beings to come to the fore as a figure sharing Hagen's initiative and valor.

Kriemhild welcomes the men of Burgundy "with perfidy in her heart." She kisses only Giselher, prompting Hagen to lace his helmet tighter. Kriemhild refuses to greet Hagen personally, instead demanding to know what he has done with the Nibelung treasure and why he has not brought it for her as a present. Hagen retorts, "I have brought you nothing and be damned to you!"

This greeting is meant to be extremely shocking. Past welcomes have been marked by great ceremony and civility; now Kriemhild insults her guests and, rather than offering gifts herself, demands what belongs to her. She is the opposite of the courteous, proper princess who once drew the gaze of every guest.

Hagen and the others refuse to let their weapons be stowed, and when Kriemhild is enraged by this, Dietrich quickly admits that he has warned them of her ill intentions—even calling Kriemhild a "she-devil." She withdraws from them in fear for the time being. Meanwhile, Etzel, oblivious, reminisces about Hagen's boyhood as a hostage in his court.

Dietrich's epithet recalls Hagen's use of the same word to describe Brunhild near the beginning of the story, suggesting that Kriemhild has attained a similar level of "deviance."

CHAPTER 29

Hagen asks Volker to accompany him as a comrade-in-arms. As the two sit in the palace courtyard, many of the Huns stare at them as though they are strange beasts. Kriemhild looks on from a window and weeps, puzzling her vassals, who have only recently seen her happy. They ask how they might avenge whatever wrongs she has suffered. Kriemhild begs them to kill Hagen.

The Burgundians seem just as strangely foreign to the Huns as the Huns do to them. Kriemhild's emotions, meanwhile, are becoming more transparent to her men, as the veil of the "ideal" queen increasingly slips away to reveal her underlying character.

Kriemhild summons 400 knights who are eager to slay Hagen. She tells them to wait until she publicly upbraids him. When he sees the Queen approaching with armed men, Volker promises Hagen his aid. Hagen then insists that the two remain seated when Kriemhild passes, even laying Siegfried's sword provocatively across his lap. Volker does the same with his sword-like fiddle-bow. When the Queen sees Siegfried's sword, she begins to weep.

Kriemhild wants to make her charges public before carrying out her vengeance. Knowing they're already doomed, Hagen provokes Kriemhild with the very weapon he'd taken away from Siegfried before slaying him.

Kriemhild demands to know why Hagen slew Siegfried. Hagen admits his responsibility for the deed, and says that Siegfried had to pay for Kriemhild's maligning of Brunhild. He challenges anyone to avenge the wrong he has done. Kriemhild calls on her knights, but they are cowed by the sight of the warriors. Several of them declare that they would not fight these two in exchange for any riches. The men from Burgundy retreat to the court, where Etzel greets them amicably and presides over a feast in their honor.

Hagen continues to maintain that he was right to act as he did, for the sake of Brunhild's honor. He and Volker present such formidable figures that nobody is yet willing to take them on, so they escape with their lives for the time being.

CHAPTER 30

As the Burgundian guests retire to bed, they are jostled by Kriemhild's Hunnish knights. Hagen warns them that if they're spoiling for a fight, they should come back the next morning. They are conducted into a spacious hall filled with expensive quilts. Giselher laments that, in spite of her hospitable treatment, Kriemhild means to do them harm. Hagen and Volker offer to keep watch so that the rest can sleep.

Kriemhild's hospitality belies her violent intentions, and her guests are painfully aware of the incongruity between her simmering anger and her outward display.

The two take their stand outside the building, and Volker plays lullabies on his fiddle to help the other knights sleep. Overnight, Kriemhild tries to send some of her knights to slay the guests in their sleep, but they are intimidated by Hagen and Volker. The Queen, filled with hatred, must devise other means to carry out her revenge.

Attempting to kill the guests in their sleep is a yet more egregious distortion of the code of hospitality, which, at bare minimum, should ensure the safe lodging of guests. This suggests that there are no lows to which Kriemhild wouldn't stoop.

CHAPTER 31

The next morning at **dawn**, Hagen wakes the knights and asks if any wish to attend mass. They do, and accordingly begin dressing in their fine **clothes**. Hagen warns them that they should dress in battle-gear instead and pray for mercy, since this is probably the last time they will hear mass in their lives. Hagen and Volker stand guard outside the church.

This doesn't suggest a sudden religious awakening in Hagen (who, not too long ago, was willing to drown a priest), but a recognition that they're all probably about to die.

When Etzel arrives and sees the Burgundians wearing their helmets in church, he is sorry and wants to make amends to whomever he has offended. Hagen convinces him that it's the Burgundian custom to go armed for three whole days at a festivity. Kriemhild looks at Hagen savagely when she hears this lie.

With almost touching innocence, clueless Etzel continues to be oblivious to the bristling hostilities right underneath his nose, accepting a flimsy pretense put forth by Hagen.

Hagen and Volker force the Huns to jostle around them in order to enter the church. After church, there is a bohort involving knights from many countries, and the Burgundians, despite being in an ugly mood, "[cover] themselves with glory" in the contests. During the bohort, Volker thrusts his spear through one of the Huns, leading the rest of the Huns to take up their swords against him. Etzel hurriedly takes a sword and beats back his own knights, enraged at such a disgraceful breach of hospitality; Volker's actions were accidental.

Bohorts were for friendly competition and display of skill and were not meant to lead to actual fighting. It's unclear whether Volker (who has already shown himself to be belligerent) speared the Hun intentionally, to provoke overall fighting, or accidentally, as the horrified Etzel—still oblivious to the tone of the court—insists.

Everyone retreats to the palace for a feast. Kriemhild beseeches Dietrich for help, but he refuses to participate in her plot against her kinsmen, arguing that such a request "does [her] little honor." She next appeals to Lord Bloedelin, Etzel's brother, offering him riches, lands, and a bride if he will fight. He is swayed by her promises and plans to start an uproar, with the aim of delivering Hagen to her in bonds.

Dietrich, again from his position as an outsider to the conflict, is the only character to call out Kriemhild's behavior as unbefitting. Kriemhild isn't swayed by his reproach and again offers riches in exchange for violence, this time to her brother-in-law.

Kriemhild's grief remains "embedded deep in her heart." Since the fighting could be instigated in no other way, she has Etzel's son brought to the table. The poet remarks, "How could a woman ever do a more dreadful thing in pursuance of her revenge?"

By exposing Ortlieb to such an explosive scene, the poet suggests, Kriemhild is doing something unthinkable for a woman and mother—continuing her descent into deviant womanhood, as well as barbarism.

Etzel happily praises Ortlieb's great promise and asks that he be taken home with Kriemhild's relatives to Burgundy, so that he can be reared as a knight. Hagen says that the young prince has an ill-fated look, and that they will never see *him* ride to court to wait on Ortlieb. Etzel and his lords are deeply pained at these words.

Entrusting a child to a relative to be raised with specific skills in a different household was considered an honor both for the child and the relatives, so Hagen's insult of Ortlieb cuts deep.

CHAPTER 32

Bloedelin takes his squires to the quarters of Giselher's vassal and Hagen's brother, Dancwart. Dancwart welcomes him warmly, but Bloedelin replies that Hagen slew Siegfried and that he and many others must pay for this. He calls on the "wretched foreigners" to defend themselves.

It needs hardly be said that confronting and threatening foreign guests in their own quarters is a blatant breach of hospitality. It's also clear that Kriemhild considers her own family to be implicated in Hagen's deed, too—she has to expect that once Giselher's vassal is involved, Giselher's life is at risk, too. It's another proof of just how far Kriemhild has gone.

Dancwart immediately jumps up and cuts off Bloedelin's head. Bloedelin's men immediately spring at Dancwart's, and bloody fighting ensues. Even before Etzel hears of it, 2,000 Huns slaughter Dancwart's men. Dancwart survives the fray, fighting his way to the court to warn Hagen of his peril.

It's worth remembering that the numbers given in medieval epics are meant to convey drama more than accuracy, but still, it's clear that a large number of Kriemhild's men are involved and more than willing to slaughter their guests on her command.

CHAPTER 33

Dancwart arrives at the court, his armor streaming with blood, and summons Hagen. Hagen orders Dancwart to guard the door while he has a word with the Hunnish knights who have struck down the Burgundians' squires without provocation. He declares, "Let us now drink to the dead and so repay the King's wine—with the young lord of the Huns as the first." With this, he strikes off Ortlieb's head so that the boy's head falls into Kriemhild's lap, unleashing a savage slaughter among the warriors.

The horrifying murder of Ortlieb is made yet more shocking when Hagen casts it as "repaying" King Etzel's hospitable acts, though Hagen is being sarcastic here; it's revenge for the Huns' attack, and he probably hopes to provoke Kriemhild into showing her vengeful intentions openly as well.

Volker leaps up from the table, wielding his fiddle-bow like a sword, and makes "loud music." The three Burgundian kings also jump up, but it's too late for them to put a stop to the violence, so they enter the fray themselves. In the midst of the bloodshed, Kriemhild appeals to Dietrich to help her escape. He promises to try, although he has never seen so many good knights so bitterly roused. He begins to shout so resoundingly that his voice puts a stop to the fighting.

Kriemhild may have gotten what she wanted by triggering violence, but she has no wish to be swept up in it, at least not yet. Dietrich is the only character who is able to be heard over the din, which symbolizes his tendency to remain above the fray.

The warriors allow Dietrich safe-conduct to leave the scene of the fight along with Etzel, Kriemhild, and Rüdiger. Once outside the hall, Etzel laments that Volker's "lays grate on the ear," and that he has never had "so dreadful a guest." Back inside, the knights of Burgundy succeed in felling the Hunnish knights so that none remains alive, and the battle dies away.

The poet is fond of musical plays on words to highlight Volker's fierceness as a fighter. Etzel's comments on Volker's rudeness sound humorous, but it's true that in the context of the story, his failures as a guest would be seen to only compound his deadly behavior.

CHAPTER 34

During the reprieve from the fighting, the Burgundians carry 7,000 bodies to the door of the hall and throw them down the stairs. Outside the palace, Hagen taunts Etzel to join in battle—he and Siegfried have a very distant relationship, he jeers, since Siegfried had his pleasure with Kriemhild long before she met him; what does Etzel have against him? Kriemhild is incensed anew by these words and offers to give castles, lands, and a shield-full of gold to anyone who kills Hagen.

The image of thousands of bodies littering the court is no doubt intended to get a reaction from an increasingly horrified audience. The contrast between splendor and carnage is arresting. Hagen's jibe at Etzel shows his capacity for gratuitous cruelty and only serves to deepen Kriemhild's rage.

CHAPTER 35

Iring, Margrave of Denmark, announces his intention to fight Hagen. He does succeed in wounding him, but Hagen ultimately makes an end of him. After Iring dies, his companions rush into the hall with a thousand warriors and hurl showers of javelins at the Burgundians again, but they are all killed. The carnage is such that blood flows through the water-spouts into the gutters. There is another respite from the fighting, during which Etzel and Kriemhild lament bitterly.

Hagen's deadliness as an opponent is as apparent as ever. A fresh wave of killing breaks out, and things don't look good for Etzel and Kriemhild's knights.

CHAPTER 36

The Burgundians rest, but they are forced to squat on the bodies of the fallen, "for the comfort of the noble guests had been shockingly neglected." By evening, another 20,000 Hunnish warriors have been assembled, but they, too, are vanquished. The Burgundians request a truce, thinking that death must be better than this drawn-out agony.

The comment about the guests' comfort is both sardonic and pointed; Kriemhild is the worst imaginable hostess for allowing such circumstances to come about. It's hard to believe that such a large number of warriors could have been present at Etzel's court in the first place, but the point is that the Burgundian contingent is fierce, and successfully holding its own.

Etzel comes at their request, but he refuses the idea of a truce, since his losses have been too great; the guests' violence has made Hungary "a land of orphans." Gernot argues that because they are so battle-weary, another round of fighting could finish them off. Etzel is on the point of agreeing and dispatching more warriors to do the job, but Kriemhild angrily intervenes, believing her brothers and vassals would successfully avenge themselves in this scenario.

In the wake of his son's death, the amiable Etzel finally shows some mettle. He's willing to see the Burgundians finished off, but Kriemhild knows them better and suspects they're still capable of fighting their way out of whatever the Huns throw at them.

When Giselher protests that he has done Kriemhild no wrong and that she should show mercy, Kriemhild retorts that her heart has no mercy to show. As long as Hagen is alive, reconciliation is not possible, and they must all pay for it together. The only alternative would be for her brothers to give up Hagen to her as a prisoner.

Because Kriemhild has shown Giselher special affection in the past, it's shocking to see her zero-sum response to his plea. She seems bent on the men's total destruction, especially since she must suspect that her brothers wouldn't go against honor to betray their lifelong vassal, Hagen.

Gernot, Giselher, and Dancwart immediately speak up in Hagen's defense, protesting that they cannot break faith with a friend in this way. Kriemhild then orders her men to drive all the Burgundians back inside the hall while she has the building set on fire. Soon the hall is completely aflame, and the men are tormented, bewailing the Queen's "monstrous" vengeance.

As expected, Kriemhild's brothers refuse to give up Hagen. This is the last straw for Kriemhild. Since the festival began, she has increasingly morphed from a conventional queen into a deviant figure, and now she descends into "monstrous," savage behavior toward her own family and guests.

Hagen tells the suffering men to drink the blood from corpses' wounds in order to assuage their thirst, and many of them do. Giselher calls their predicament "a vile banquet my sister Kriemhild has been giving us."

Hagen's disturbing suggestion shows just what dire straits Kriemhild has driven them to, as indeed Giselher reproaches her for her repugnant failure of hospitality.

As **dawn** breaks, Kriemhild is shocked by the report that 600 men have survived the perilous night in the burning hall. That morning, 1,200 more Huns eagerly hurl their spears at the survivors, since Kriemhild offers piles of gold to anyone who will fight—"never was there such a hiring of men against one's enemies." The conflict has become a stalemate.

The situation continues to deteriorate. Kriemhild is clearly desperate, throwing money at anyone who might succeed in finally dispatching her stubbornly resilient guests.

CHAPTER 37

When Rüdiger comes to court and sees the tremendous carnage inflicted on both sides, he weeps from the bottom of his heart. A Hunnish warrior tells Kriemhild, "They say he is fabulously brave, but amid all these perils there has been shockingly little sign of it!" In response to this insult, Rüdiger punches the man so hard he falls dead instantly.

As Kriemhild's vassal and former host of the Burgundians, Rüdiger feels helplessly torn. When a Hun mistakes his grief for cowardice, even such a reasonable man can't let the insult stand.

Rüdiger laments that he would naturally oppose the foreigners, except that he has acted as their escort into Etzel's country, so he is honor-bound to them and cannot fight them. Kriemhild argues that he swore to risk his life for her. Rüdiger replies that this is true, but that he never swore to lose his soul.

For Rüdiger, losing his soul would mean betraying his own sense of honor—a dilemma that the poet's original audience would instinctively understand. His attitude stands in striking contrast to Kriemhild's unchecked aggression.

Etzel joins his wife, Kriemhild, in entreating Rüdiger on their knees. Rüdiger declares himself a "godforsaken man," crying, "I must sacrifice all the esteem, the integrity, and breeding that by the grace of God were mine!" Either course requires that he act "basely" toward someone. Rüdiger offers to return all his lands to Etzel and go into exile. Etzel offers to let Rüdiger rule alongside him if he avenges him. Rüdiger repeats that he can't go against the many hospitable acts he has extended to the Burgundians.

This scene is emotionally charged, as the characters make almost unheard-of appeals to one another. It's shocking that a vassal would offer to return his lands or that a king would elevate even a trusted vassal to rule at his side. That's how desperate both Rüdiger and Etzel are in this situation; they're both frantically groping for a way out of the terrible impasse.

Finally, Rüdiger agrees to discharge his oath to Kriemhild and attack his friends against his will. He and his men arm themselves. To the shock of the Burgundians, Rüdiger approaches and shouts, "You ought to profit from me, but instead I shall make you pay dearly. Till now we have been friends, but I wish to be quit of our ties!"

Once Rüdiger makes his decision to act, he does not hesitate. He even refers to the tragic reversal of the bonds of hospitality—instead of friendship, the Burgundians will now find its opposite.

Gunther and his men try to appeal to Rüdiger, mentioning his wonderful gifts and hospitality in the past. Gernot laments having to fight Rüdiger with the very sword he had gifted him. Giselher bewails the fact that Rüdiger will be widowing his daughter before she is even a wife. Then Hagen appeals to him, for the shield Gotelind had gifted him has been hacked to pieces. Rüdiger gladly gives Hagen his own shield in its place—the last gift he offers any knight. Even Hagen is deeply moved by this gesture, vowing that he must repay him by never touching him in battle. Volker joins him in this promise.

Showing the strength of their tie with Rüdiger, the Burgundians protest, appealing to the very gifts and bonds they have secured through him in the past. Though he isn't dissuaded, Rüdiger's gift of his shield is a very touching gesture—a fitting end for a famously generous man, and a marker of how even Hagen wishes to honor the Margrave.

Rüdiger proceeds to fight boldly, until at last Gernot, seeing many of his vassals cut down by the Margrave, begins to pursue him with deadly intent. Rüdiger mortally wounds Gernot, but before he dies, Gernot strikes him down with the sword Rüdiger had given him in Pöchlarn. They slay one another within moments. The Burgundians are weary and grief-stricken by this turn of events. When they see Rüdiger's body carried out, Etzel and Kriemhild, too, lament loudly.

The fact that Rüdiger is slain with his own gift-sword is yet another sign of the sad reversal in the bonds of hospitality, as is the mourning that breaks out on both sides of the conflict—Rüdiger had truly been a mediating figure among the characters, but now, nothing is left to stand between the two sides and their mutual destruction.

CHAPTER 38

Dietrich is horrified to learn of Rüdiger's death, deeming it "terrible vengeance and a diabolical mockery of all that is right." He sends Hildebrand, his master-at-arms, to approach the foreigners civilly to learn what has happened. His nephew, Wolfhart, insists that they go armed. When Volker sees the group approach, he fears they will attack.

Dietrich, again stepping into the story as a character above the fray, attempts to find a peaceful resolution. Wolfhart's decision to bear arms, however, will undermine Dietrich's peaceful intent.

When Hildebrand and his men confirm the truth about Rüdiger's death, they weep. Hildebrand wishes to bear the Margrave's body away. Volker refuses to hand over the corpse; they must come and get it. He and Hagen continue to provoke the men until they finally give up their restraint and run into the hall. Determined to avenge Rüdiger, Hildebrand fights as if he's gone berserk and finally kills Volker. Soon after, Wolfhart and Giselher slay one another. Then Hagen, grieving for Volker, wounds Hildebrand. Now Gunther and Hagen are the only Burgundian warriors left alive.

Hagen and his men are uninterested in a peaceful parley; indeed, it seems that everyone involved has been reduced to a barbaric, willful lack of restraint by this time. One by one, most of the remaining major characters are finally killed off.

Meanwhile, the mortally wounded Hildebrand staggers back to Dietrich, who is grieved to have the news of Rüdiger's death confirmed, and utterly shaken to hear that all his men have been killed in the meantime—especially since he'd forbidden them to fight. Dietrich declares himself godforsaken and laments that he cannot die of grief.

Like Rüdiger, Dietrich will discover that even his status as a seemingly impartial exile does not exempt him from weighing into the conflict; now that his men have been slain, honor forbids his inaction, but the necessity breaks his heart.

CHAPTER 39

Hildebrand helps Dietrich put on his armor, and they approach the two Burgundians. Dietrich asks Gunther why he has done such a thing to him, a wretched exile, who now "[stands] robbed of all that were my refuge." Hagen says they can't be blamed, since Dietrich's men had entered the hall fully armed. Gunther adds that they were trying to spite Etzel, not Dietrich, with their refusal to surrender Rüdiger's body.

Dietrich tries to reason with Hagen and Gunther, but both of them are still in a defensive and vengeful frame of mind and show no sympathy for the bereaved exile's grief.

Dietrich asks Gunther to surrender himself and Hagen, and Dietrich will ensure they are kindly treated. Hagen says they would be disgraced in doing this, and that he means to take on Dietrich in single combat. After a fierce fight, Dietrich overcomes Hagen with a deep wound, and, with his great strength, manages to bind his opponent and deliver him, "the boldest warrior that ever bore sword," to Queen Kriemhild.

As a warrior, Hagen can't stomach the option of surrender, especially after such a drawn-out struggle and the loss of so many of his own men. Dietrich, one of the only figures who has been reluctant to take up arms, finally overcomes the bloodthirsty Hagen.

At long last, Kriemhild is happy. She has Hagen locked in a dungeon. Dietrich says that Hagen should be allowed to live and make amends to her. Meanwhile, Gunther, in his grief, pursues Dietrich. Despite putting up an honorable fight, Gunther is finally felled by Dietrich, who binds him, too, and carries him to Kriemhild. Dietrich appeals once again to the Queen that such worthy knights should be allowed to live. She agrees, but after Dietrich leaves, she puts her final vengeance in motion.

Kriemhild is finally completely happy. Perhaps seeing this, the perceptive Dietrich makes an appeal to whatever humanity she has left by asking her to show mercy—the two knights have proven themselves deserving of redemption.

Kriemhild visits Hagen in the dungeon and says that if he returns her treasure, he may return to Burgundy alive. Hagen refuses, so Kriemhild gives the order to have Gunther beheaded. She then carries her brother's head by its hair and presents it to Hagen. He is still unmoved, promising the "she-devil" that the treasure's location will forever stay hidden.

If it momentarily seemed that Kriemhild might consider clemency, it is quickly disproven. Her unfeeling treatment of Gunther is shocking, and Hagen accordingly pronounces her a she-devil, irredeemably fallen from what she was at the beginning of the story.

"You have repaid me in base coin," says Kriemhild, "but Siegfried's sword I shall have!" She takes the sword Balmung in her hands and slashes off Hagen's head. Etzel is grieved to witness the slaying of such a great warrior by a woman's hand. Hildebrand immediately leaps up to avenge Hagen, leaping forward and hewing Kriemhild in pieces.

Kriemhild finally gets her revenge; after all this, she achieves it by her own hand. Even after what Hagen did to Ortlieb, Etzel sees something shameful in the fact that a woman has brought the fearsome warrior down. So does Hildebrand, and his hasty vengeance permits Kriemhild little time to savor her victory.

Overlooking the bodies of all the doomed, Dietrich and Etzel weep for their kinsmen and vassals. The festival has ended in sorrow, "as joy must ever turn to sorrow in the end."

At the end, only the heathen King and the exiled Goth are left standing. When vengeance does its work, the whole world is undone. And Kriemhild's girlhood fear comes true: love may bring happiness, but it also brings great sorrow to all whom it touches.

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