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# Politics and the Representation of Women in the *Nibelungenlied*

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## ABSTRACT

The article examines the manner in which the female characters are represented in the *Nibelungenlied* by dividing them into two groups: the traditional women, who keep their socially accepted positions and are supportive of the men, and the women rebelling against tradition, who try to be part of the male world, thereby exceeding the limits of tradition and rebelling against it. The article suggests that in the *Nibelungenlied* the two groups of women represent the Church and the men the Empire. The group of traditional women represents the Church before the breakout of the historical conflict with the Empire while the group of rebellious women represents the Church in the period of advanced conflict.

**Keywords:** *Das Nibelungenlied*, Women, Politics, Representation, Church, Empire.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel überprüft die Art und Weise, wie die weiblichen Figuren im *Nibelungenlied* dargestellt sind. Sie sind in zwei Gruppen unterteilt: die traditionellen Frauen, welche ihre sozial festgelegte Stellung akzeptieren und die Männer unterstützen; und die Frauen, welche gegen diese Tradition rebellieren und versuchen, ein Teil der Männerwelt zu werden, und die damit die Grenzen der Tradition überschreiten. Dieser Artikel legt nahe, dass die beiden Frauengruppen im *Nibelungenlied* die Kirche und die Männer des Kaiserreichs repräsentieren. Die Gruppe der traditionellen Frauen repräsentiert die Kirche vor dem Ausbruch des historischen Konflikts mit dem Reich; die Gruppe der rebellierenden Frauen symbolisiert die Kirche in der Periode des fortgeschrittenen Konflikts.

**Schlüsselwörter:** *Das Nibelungenlied*, Frauen, Politik, Darstellung, Kirche, Kaiserreich.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia la forma en que aparecen representados los personajes femeninos en el *Nibelungenlied*. Están divididos en dos grupos: las mujeres tradicionales, que aceptan su posición social y que apoyan a los hombres, y las mujeres que se rebelan contra esa tradición y tratan de convertirse en una parte del mundo masculino, sobrepasando con ello los límites de la tradición. Este artículo pone de manifiesto que los dos grupos de mujeres representan a la Iglesia y a los hombres del Imperio. El grupo de las mujeres tradicionales representa a la Iglesia antes de su conflicto con el Imperio; el de las mujeres rebeldes simboliza a la Iglesia en el periodo más avanzado del conflicto.

**Palabras clave:** *Das Nibelungenlied*, mujeres, política, representación, Iglesia, Imperio.

**SUMARIO:** 0. Introduction. 1. The First Stage: Traditional Women. 2. The Second Stage: Women Who Rebel Against Tradition. 3. Conclusion.

## 0. Introduction

Close examination of the female characters in the *Nibelungenlied* reveals two types of women: traditional ones (Uote, Sieglind, Helche, and Gotelind) and women rebelling against tradition (Brünhild and Kriemhild). This article explores the manner of presentation of the two types of women and the way in which this presentation exposes the political ideology upon which the text is based. Contrasting the conduct of the two types of women and their relationship with the men reveals the work as a political metaphor in which women represent the Church and men the Empire. More specifically, the traditional women represent the Church during the political stage that preceded the investiture struggle while the rebellious women represent the Church in the midst of this feud.

Most recent studies agree that the author of the *Nibelungenlied* resided at the court of the Bishop of Passau (Schulze 1997: 11-32). In his book *The Nibelungenlied: History and Interpretation* Edward R. Haymes called it «a very political court» (Haymes 1986: 113). Bishop Wolfger of Passau was a supporter of the Hohenstaufen and an influential diplomat, serving as representative of his Hohenstaufen king at the Curia (Hymes 1999: 31-3). The fact that Bishop Wolfger was very likely the patron of the author has far-reaching consequences for deciphering the text, which is presumed to have been written around the year 1200 (Ehrismann 2002: 152). This was a period of transition in Germany, which had been united under Frederick Barbarosa but became fragmented and conflict ridden after his death, racked by bitter struggle between the Hohenstaufen, supporters of the Empire, and the Welfs, supporters of the Papacy. With the feud between the Emperor and the Pope at its height, it was still possible to remember the period of harmony before the conflict (Fuhrmann 1986). The author of the *Nibelungenlied* refers to the present conflict and points an accusing finger at the party he considers responsible for it by placing two groups of female characters in opposition to each other.

It is possible to distinguish two stages in the balance of power between the Church and the Empire. The first period extends to the end of the rule of Henry III (1056). This was a period of cooperation between the Empire and the Church, with the Church wielding spiritual power and the Empire temporal power. The emperors had the privilege of granting the Church land through feudal gifts ('gewere') while the Church recognized the important status of the Emperor. The second period starts after the death of Henry III, during the rule of his son, Henry IV. This is the time of the Gregorian reforms, when the Church attempted to set aside imperial interference in ecclesiastical appointments and to sever the connection with the Empire by abolishing the lay investiture and emphasizing the status of the Pope - and later his ascendancy over the Emperor. Saint Bernard writes in *De Consideratione* that the Pope holds both the temporal and the spiritual swords and is superior to the Emperor in both respects. This was the attempt of the Church to prove that the Emperor was but a «puppet on a string» in the hands of the Pope. From the vantage point of the Hohenstaufen, there was no question that the Church was responsible for the conflict with the Empire.

The author of the epic uses the female characters to express his opinion on the continuing conflict. By dividing the women into two groups, each representing a

different stage in the relationship between the Church and the Empire, he hints that it was the Church that has exceeded its bounds by trying to interfere in matters of imperial administration instead of serving as its spiritual support, as it had done in the past.

## 1. The First Stage: Traditional Women

The characteristics of Uote, Sieglind, Helche, and Gotelind conform to the expectations of medieval society from the guardians of tradition. Although they appear in the work as individuals, their features are similar and there is no significant differentiation among them. More than any individuality, they represent tradition itself.

One of the common characteristics of the four is their being mothers, concerned about the welfare of their children – both young and grown. As Claudia Opitz writes: «Although male authors showed little interest in the details of the maternal role, the identification of women with motherhood was fundamental to the medieval view of life» (Opitz 1992: 248). In the writings of the Church, women are under no obligation of motherhood (Shahar 1984 and Atkinson 1991). Sieglind, Siegfried's mother, is mentioned almost exclusively in this context. In her first appearance, she attends, together with her husband Siegmund, to Siegfried's education and to his attractive attire. The text notes that they placed wise people in charge of Siegfried's education (25).<sup>1</sup> When Sieglind hears that her son intends to go to Worms to woo the beautiful Kriemhild, she expresses great worry because of her acquaintance with Gunther and his people (3051). She practically mourns him as he sets out (6), but her worry vanishes when he returns to court safely (703).

Uote, mother of the Burgundian kings, is defined by her motherhood, most conspicuously so in her relationship with Kriemhild. The epic opens with the daughter seeking her mother's help in interpreting a dream. When considering this dialogue Albrecht Classen claims: «Ute demonstriert sowhol hier als auch bei späteren Dialogen, lange nachdem Kriemhild bereits zur Witwe geworden ist, eine stark mütterliche Emfindung und drängt Kriemhild schließlich sogar dazu, die Werbung König Etzels anzunehmen, denn sie wünscht sich für ihre Tochter, nach den langen Jahren des Leides doch wieder persönliches Glück zu erfahren» (Classen 2002: 77). The solution offered by Uote is within the bounds of the tradition she represents: Kriemhild's place is next to her husband. Kriemhild's reaction is unenthusiastic, but the fact that she turns to her mother shows the close relationship between them<sup>2</sup>. Uote is quick to silence Kriemhild's resentment against this interpretation: 'Nu versprich ez niht ze sêre' (16) («Be careful what

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations of the text are from *Das Nibelungenlied*, eds. Karl Bartsch, Helmut de Boor, 22<sup>nd</sup> ed. Roswitha Wisniewski, (Mannheim: Brockhaus 1988). English quotations are from *The Nibelungenlied*, trans. D.G. Mowatt (1962; New York: Dover Publications, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> I do not agree with Ann Marie Rasmussen's interpretation that the subject of the dialogue is Kriemhild's sexual education by Ute (RASMUSSEN 1996). I think the subject is the sociological norm concerning the woman's place in society as a married woman, which Kriemhild does not want to accept.

you say»). Uote is worried that Kriemhild's words may come true. Uote's longings as a mother are also present in the words she speaks to the messengers being sent to invite Siegfried and Kriemhild to Burgundy (752). When the messengers return, Uote takes them aside to inquire about Kriemhild (772). The narrator emphasizes that her questions indicate great concern for her daughter. Uote exercises significant influence over Kriemhild, as can be learned from their relationship after Siegfried's murder, when she persuades her daughter to remain at court (1081). The same is true in the second part of the epic, when she persuades Kriemhild to accept Etzel's offer of marriage, having mourned long enough (1246). Uote's longing for her daughter is expressed also in her reaction when Kriemhild invites her to the Hun court. She is deeply sorry that she will not be able to see her beloved daughter («die lieben tochter mîn») because the journey is too long for her (1455). Uote's motherly feelings for her sons are similarly apparent: after a dream predicting their deaths, she tries but fails to prevent them from traveling to Hunland (1509); but it is possible to learn from this attempt that her relationship with her sons is one of love and concern.

Gotelind, the wife of Dietrich von Bern, appears almost exclusively in a motherly context. Every time she is mentioned, her daughter (whose name is not provided) is mentioned with her. As she is a secondary character, the text does not elaborate on her relationship with her daughter, but it is clear that they function together. The narrator mentions that Gotelind chooses not to bring her daughter into the hall where the Burgundians visiting her court are feasting, and emphasizes that this is the right course of action: 'ir tochter si dô lie belîben bî den kinden, dâ si von rehte saz' (1672) («Her daughter was left with the children, where she belonged»). This comment underscores a later one concerning the inappropriate conduct of Kriemhild, who does bring her son Ortlieb into the hall where the Burgundians are feasting. It may be that Gotelind kept her young daughter out of the banquet hall because of her concern for the modesty of a maiden on the verge of womanhood (later to be engaged to Giselher) and not because her daughter was a child. But the text emphasizes that she was left in the company of children ('bî den kinden') and not of young maidens, a clear allusion to Kriemhild's act, which is viewed as negative in light of its result.

Helche,<sup>3</sup> Etzel's deceased wife, appears not to have had sons, but after her death, when the messengers describe the state of the Hun palace to the kings of Burgundy, the text notes that many young maidens lost their mother as a result of her death and that her own daughters have also been orphaned (1194-1195). It appears, therefore, that one of the functions of Helche was to care for the education of the children, especially of the young maidens.

Thus, the care and concern for children, big and small, is a prominent characteristic of the four traditional women, in complete contrast with Kriemhild and Brünhild whose motherhood is almost entirely absent from the epic. Although they both have sons, the text says little about them except for their names: Gunther

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<sup>3</sup> RUTH H. Firestone claims that Kriemhild is contrasted to Helche who is a model of the noblewoman (Firestone 1991).

and Ortlieb (Kriemhild's) and Siegfried (Brünhild's). The text stresses that Kriemhild does not see fit to look after her first born, orphaned of his father, and leaves him in the care of his father's knights. The narrator also notes that by bringing her younger son into the banquet hall where the Burgundians were feasting, she indirectly brought about his death.

Another characteristic of the traditional women is management of the household, which consists of two functions: looking after the wardrobe and receiving guests. Uote, Sieglind, and Gotelind make sure that the knights who embark on journeys do so properly attired, as befits their rank. Siegfried, setting out on his journey to woo Kriemhild, asks his mother to prepare a proper attire for him and for the knights accompanying him (61-62). Sieglind promises that their attires will be the most beautiful ever worn by knights (63). Gunther, about to set out on a journey to woo Brünhild, tells his friends that he will ask his mother to instruct her maidens to prepare his clothes for the journey (345). Dietrich von Bern asks Gotelind, his wife, to bestow gifts on the knights accompanying him so that they may set out happy, and she gladly accedes to his request (1171).

The women welcome the guests visiting the kingdom and offer them gifts. Uote, Sieglind, and Gotelind all go out to meet their guests. Sieglind rides out to meet Kriemhild, who arrives in the company of her son to Xanten, and receives her with kisses (707-709). Uote welcomes Brünhild outside the gates of the city and kisses her repeatedly (581, 589). Gotelind goes out to meet Kriemhild, who arrives from Worms on the eve of her marriage with Etzel (1303-1308). All three also reward with gifts messengers arriving to their courts: Sieglind hands out red velvet, silver, and gold to messenger who herald Siegfried's return to court accompanied by Kriemhild (705); Uote gives gold to Etzel and Kriemhild's messengers arriving from Hunland (1492); Gotelind bestows precious stones and wondrous clothes upon Kriemhild's companions (1324). The women were in a position to make gifts of gold and silver because they were in charge of household finances.

The chief characteristic of the four women is their central role within the society of the court. This is especially conspicuous with regard to Uote, Helche, and Gotelind. All three are aware that their function is behind the scenes, to stand by their husbands and children and not overstep their bounds. Uote says so explicitly to Kriemhild when she interprets her dream: Kriemhild's place is next to her husband, and she will be happy only as a married woman (16). Gotelind also stands by her husband who journeys to Worms. She senses that something is not in order and inquires delicately. When she hears that he is apprehensive about the mission, she encourages him (1168-1170). Naturally, Helche is not revealed in her actions, but she is described as the ideal queen: Etzel loved her much, she handled competently the affairs of the court, as expected of her, educated the young maidens, and ruled over the kingdoms and dukedoms that were subject to her authority. Her women loved her as well: Gotelind mourns her and wonders whether Kriemhild, the new queen, will be like her (1160-1161). Herrat, who manages the household since her death, still misses her, many days after Kriemhild has taken her place (1755). It often appears that the text contrasts Helche, the ideal woman, with Kriemhild.

The four women appear satisfied with their traditional roles and do not attempt to partake of the male world. They conform to the feminine image as presented in the epic literature of the Middle Ages. Ann Marie Rasmussen says:

Women in medieval epics, for example, are usually defined in relation to the hero. As mother, princess, beloved, helper, or opponent of the hero, women play important roles, but they often remain, narratively speaking, places, obstacles, tests through which the hero must pass in order to fulfill his destiny (Rasmussen 1996: 83).

We conclude that the main characteristic of the traditional women in the *Nibelungenlied* is attending to others, whether it is the welfare of their children, of their courtiers, or of the men in general. As traditional women, their role is in the backstage; it is supportive and does not cross the boundaries of their gender. As John Carmi Parson and Bonnie Wheeler write:

In its metaphorical practice –or in its literal absence– ...mothering was a convenient way to suppress female authority precisely in order to absorb it into male patriarchal ideologies and thus exploit it for patriarchy's own self-promoting purposes (Parson and Wheeler 1996: xiii).

It is in this aspect that traditional women represent the Church at the first stage of the relations between Church and Empire, when the Church fulfilled its role as the «holy mother church:» nurturing the emperor's spiritual needs and maintaining its place in the background of the political life. According to the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* it is clear that the traditional place of the Church, represented by the traditional women, was better than the one it assumed later.

## **2. The Second Stage: Women Who Rebel Against Tradition**

This group comprises the two prominent women in the epic: Kriemhild and Brünhild. In the course of the work, the two undergo opposite developments: Kriemhild, from a more or less traditional woman becomes a rebel, while Brünhild is transformed from a rebellious woman into a traditional one. Both processes take place gradually, in several steps. As rebellious women, they represent the Church during the second stage of the relations between Church and Empire. In this stage, according to the Hohenstaufen point of view, the Church overreached its traditional bounds as a backstage supportive of the emperor, and by augmenting its political power betrayed the Empire and became a threat to it.

### **2.1. Kriemhild**

At the end of a gradual development, Kriemhild dies after having taken on the role of a man by killing Hagen single handedly. Even at the beginning of the epic Kriemhild is not a typical traditional woman. From her first appearance, in her



reaction to her mother's interpretation of her dream,<sup>4</sup> it is clear that although she resides within the boundaries of the female court, she rebels in her thoughts and is not willing to fulfill the expectations of tradition and marry. Her mother urges her to marry and find her place by a proper man; but Kriemhild wants to have nothing to do with men and love, as the latter causes only sorrow (17). The narrator comments that Kriemhild decided not to marry (18) and persevered in her decision by rejecting numerous suitors until the arrival of Siegfried (45-46). This decision is in itself a rebellion against the tradition represented by Uote, her mother.

Kriemhild's rebelliousness is manifest even after she marries Siegfried. Before leaving for Xanten, she insists on receiving her share of her father's bequest, a request that is within the accepted norm: it is her right to her inheritance, as Uta Störmer-Caysa writes: «Wenn die Tochter aus der Familie ausscheidet, ist das der Zeitpunkt, an dem sie ihren Anteil am väterlichen Erbe einfordern kann und muss, falls ihr ein Anteil daran zusteht» (Störmer-Caysa 1999: 97). This is why Siegfried, who rejects her brother's offer to take possession of the lands belonging to Kriemhild, cannot openly oppose Kriemhild's wish to take with her a thousand of her brother's knights (696). The fact that Kriemhild asked specifically to take Hagen with her stresses the fact that it is not money she is after (as Siegfried thinks), but independent power. This attempt, which falters, alludes to the fact that although Kriemhild submitted to social convention by the very act of marrying, she does not intend to be merely a queen by virtue of her husband (*consor regni*) but owner of her personal property and knights. In this, she once again rebels against convention, this time not within the 'Kemenâte' but within the broader family framework that exists between her brothers and her husband. This rebellious act stresses the poet's idea about the Church in this stage: just as Kriemhild's act does not spring from an economic point of view but from a need of individual political power, so is the Church willing to give up a prosperous connection with the emperor in order to gain political power of its own.

An additional step in Kriemhild's independence is revealed during the argument with Brünhild at Worms, when Kriemhild stands up for her status as an independent queen. The argument centers on Kriemhild's rank as she sees herself, a rich and independent queen, or as Brünhild sees her, a vassal of the Burgundian kings. At stake is not merely Kriemhild's honor as Siegfried's wife but also her self-respect. She would prove to all that it is she who is higher and more respectable of the two. Kriemhild answers Brünhild's affront of being called a vassal (838) by calling Brünhild 'Kebse,' a kept woman or harlot. This low, personal tone attests to the fact that the argument is not about the status of the husband only but about that of Kriemhild herself. Here is again a notion connecting the two rebellious queens to the Church in the second stage: the quarrel takes place in front of the cathedral, but

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<sup>4</sup> Albrecht Classen provides several opinions about the dream and its interpretation (CLASSEN 2002). Two older articles deal with the three dreams of Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied*: D.G. MOWATT, «A Note on Kriemhild's Three Dreams,» (MOWATT 1971); JERLOD C. FRAKES, «Kriemhild's Three Dreams,» (FRAKES 1984).



its only connection to religion is the dubious validity of Brünhild's marriage following Kriemhild's accusation. In its deepest meaning, the quarrel is again about status and power: the queen who is more honorable will enter the Cathedral first. The poet hints that the cathedral, that is to say, the spiritual aspect, does not concern the Church any more, but it is rather its status and power that represent its foremost concern.

Kriemhild seeks to protect her position even after Siegfried's murder. At first, she does so as an independent and rich widow at the Burgundian court; later as a queen possessing her own property at the Hun court. Soon after Siegfried's death, it becomes clear that Kriemhild is establishing for herself a court within the Burgundian court by erecting her own wing near the cathedral where Siegfried lies buried (1102). Bringing the treasure of the Nibelungs to court and the use she makes of it to purchase knights attest to the fact that Kriemhild is setting up some type of independent court for herself. This has Hagen worried, and he insists on stealing the treasure to prevent Kriemhild from becoming stronger than the Burgundians (1127-1128).

Kriemhild's decision to accept Etzel's marriage proposal follows primarily from her desire for power and independence to take revenge on Hagen. At first, she appears to hesitate. But after she is promised the late Helche's personal property (1235-1237) and the loyalty of Rudiger and his men (1256-1257) she accepts. As Albrecht Classen comments:

We observe a highly intriguing exchange of arguments between Kriemhild and the Hunnish messengers who make the idea of marrying Attila step by step more appealing by referring to the power which Kriemhild would acquire (Classen 2001: 581).

The prerogatives of the deceased queen do not satisfy her however, and only Rudiger's oath of allegiance persuades her to take the final step that would lead her to political and economic power.

During her misgivings about Etzel's marriage proposal, Kriemhild uses Etzel's religion as part of the debate. As a Christian woman Kriemhild cannot accept the proposal of the heather Etzel. Nevertheless, she decides in the end to marry Etzel because the marriage would lead her to power. The poet implies that in the second stage of the relationship between Church and Empire, the Church as represented by the rebellious women would compromise even its primary mission in order to gain political power.

The decisive step in her revenge takes place 13 years later. Kriemhild's status at the Hun court is higher than that of Helche's used to be (1389-1390) (Müller 2002: 129), and she takes advantage of it with the arrival of her brother at the Hun court. Kriemhild's stand vis-à-vis her brother undergoes a gradual development. Even though the visitors are the Burgundian king and his men and it was Etzel's duty as a king to meet them, Kriemhild by going herself underscores the fact that at the Hun court she is their equal. The first confrontation between her and Hagen takes place as soon as they meet, and it quickly turns into a total war of the Hun court against the Burgundians. In its initial stages the struggle is a private one, that of Kriemhild's

people against the Burgundians, but after the murder of the young Ortlieb, it becomes all encompassing, led on the Hun side by Kriemhild herself. The fight reaches its climax with Kriemhild's order to torch the hall where the Burgundians reside (2111) and her subsequent forcing of Dietrich von Bern and Rudiger to join the fight. But the climax of the epic and of Kriemhild's march toward independence comes when she wields the sword herself (Pafenberg 1995) to sever Hagen's head (2373). By this very act, Kriemhild crosses the line separating the worlds of men and women, bringing the rebellion she started while she was still within the bounds of «kemenâte» to a head. The narrator perceives this act as extreme and hastens to report the reaction of the men to it: the immediate execution of Kriemhild ordered by the equivalent of a field court martial and therefore without any possible reaction on the part of Etzel. Here is testimony to the narrator's tendency to present Kriemhild's character as undergoing a process of rebellion against the social conventions that place women in a position circumscribed by «kemenâte.» Kriemhild goes from rebellion against the limits of the feminine social circle to those of the family and the tribal circle. She gradually crosses these lines, first when she appears in place of her husband to welcome her brothers; next when she turns her conflict with the Burgundians into a total Hun-Burgundian war; and finally when she leads the fight herself, ordering the burning of the Burgundians' hall, sending Rudiger and Dietrich into battle, and eventually seizing the sword. By this final act, she crosses the borders of female tradition completely and stands as a warring man, entirely unacceptable in courtly society. As Ann Mary Rasmussen states:

Such a portrayal of Kriemhild suggests a fear that when a woman is not confined by the limits of her object status, she will recognize no boundaries at all. Kriemhild's subject status, then, is not only a transgression of male prerogative but also a threat to the gender ideology that underwrites the narrative structure itself (Rasmussen 1996: 84).

By turning Kriemhild gradually into a warrior, the poet is exaggerating the possibility that the Church might try to usurp by force the emperor's position. Given that the men in general represent the Empire, it is important to bear in mind that Kriemhild's actions are clearly more clever than those of the men. First, she is the one who summons her brothers to the Hun Court. Kriemhild's brothers coming to her may stand here for the Henry IV coming to Canossa to ask for the absolution of Pope Gregory VII, which was one of the crucial points in the confrontation between the Church and the Empire and must certainly have appeared as such to the author of the epic. In our story, however, it is obvious that Kriemhild does not expect the Burgundians to apologize, and they know that she is planning her revenge, which makes the position of the Church in the conflict appear even worse in this allegorical representation. Second, it is Kriemhild who instigates the war, reflecting perhaps the Pope's frequent threat during the Middle Ages of excommunicating the emperor. As Brian Tierney writes in his article «'Tria Quippe Distinguit Iudicia...» A Note on Innocent III's Decretal *Per Venerabilem*: «A sentence of excommunication launched against a king for some specifically ecclesiastical

offense like sacrilege might, for example, have political repercussions» (Tierney 1962: 55-56). Just as Kriemhild changed the circumstances from private and personal to public and general, so does the Pope when threatening excommunication. Kriemhild's last actions change the entire balance of power. While the Burgundians are doing their utmost in vain, while Etzel reveals himself as a weak king who chooses almost not to interfere in the fighting, Kriemhild takes the initiative and leads the fight. The poet seems to stress the danger of allowing the Church to amass excessive power at the expense of the Empire, to the point where the emperor becomes a puppet in the hands of the Church, just as Etzel has become in the hands of Kriemhild. Kriemhild's seizing the sword into her own hand represents the political process taking place at the time the text was being written (around 1190-1205), when the Church was interfering in secular disputes, a process that culminated with Innocent III's decree «*Per Venerabilem*» (1202).<sup>5</sup> From the Hohenstaufen point of view, this decree exceeded all limits of interference in secular affairs. The Empire could not tolerate this situation, and with Kriemhild's decapitation the poet suggests a similar action against the Church.

## 2.2. *Brünhild*

In my opinion Brünhild develops in the opposite direction from Kriemhild. This is in contrast to the opinion whereby Brünhild undergoes a drastic change moving from Iceland to Burgundy, as, for example, William G. Durden and Gail Newman think (Durdan 1976; Newman 1981). She represents the Church at the zenith of its power, but the narrator suggests that if stopped in time, the Church might be reduced to its rightful place, under the imperial aegis. Brünhild is introduced at first as a rebellious, unusual character, very beautiful, strong, and fighting men for her love (326). The narrator describes the contest between her and her suitors, noting that only the suitor who defeats her will win her hand and all who fail will lose their head (327-328). The narrator notes that the maiden wins time after time. When hearing about Gunther's desire to try his luck, Siegfried advises against it and terms Brünhild's behavior «*vreisliche*,» that is, awful, frightful, horrible – an indication that Siegfried sees her as a rebel against tradition, a woman outside the bounds of womanhood as circumscribed by medieval courtly tradition.

The text emphasizes Brünhild's unusual strength. The narrator describes the weight and effect of each of her weapons: her armor is carried by four men (437); her sharp lance is made of half a ton of metal, and three men carry it with great difficulty (441-443). Already at the beginning of the contest with Gunther (and Siegfried), she displays supernatural power by tossing a great distance a rock that twelve men can hardly lift (449). The reaction of the Burgundians is a measure of her anomaly. Hagen calls her at first «Satan's wife» («*tíuvéles wíp*') (438) and later «Satan's bride in Hell» («*jâ sol in der helle sîn des übeln tiuvels brut*') («Why, she'd

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Tierney tries to sort out the judicial cases that the ecclesiastical courts may interfere with in light of Innocent III's decree (TIERNEY 1962).

be better off betrothed to the devil in hell») (450). Gunther says that even Satan from Hell cannot defeat her (442).

Mention of Satan places Brünhild in his camp, together with «the other,» the fundamentally negative. Her deviance makes her different and dangerous. Charles N. Nelson states about her behavior:

One opinion on the Germanic origin of reduced and unequal legal rights for women (and other groups such as slaves) is that they were incapable of defending themselves with weapons and thus could not participate in judicial combat as a means of settling disputes. Brünhild's prowess flies in the face of this finding; unless she is robbed of her power she constitutes a threat and a challenge to the natural and legal prevailing order (Nelson 1992: 123).

Kriemhild, in a later stage of her development, when the Burgundians arrive in Hunland, is also referred to by Dietrich von Bern as a «she Satan» ('vâlandinne') (1748). Hagen also calls her by this name after she kills Gunther (2371). Thus, both Brünhild and Kriemhild are identified with Satan when they transgress against the boundaries of tradition, which requires that they appear in their womanhood. When they exceed the limits or deviate from the norms, they become dangerous and are identified with the greatest evil of all. Again, we can sense the poets' feeling toward the Church at the apogee of its strength as threatening the welfare of the Empire. When crossing exceeding its natural boundaries, the Church is placed in the same group as Satan; its abnormal behavior is part of a devilish plan to ruin the Empire.

In the course of the contest with Gunther, Brünhild appears self-confident, even indifferent (455). Metaphorically, the Church, represented by Brünhild, appears to have decided to use her sword against the Empire, represented by both Gunther and Siegfried. But as the contests continue and the fight develops, her anger rises because she is not used to anyone standing up to her. The narrator explains that only because Siegfried is helping Gunther can the two together pose any kind of challenge to Brünhild. He also describes her growing rage: at first, when the lance strikes her, she thanks him for the strong cast, but she is already angered (462). In the second stage of the contest, when Siegfried and Gunther win every challenge she lays before them, the text describes her anger graphically: 'Prünhilt diu scêne diu wart in zorne rô' (456) («Brünhilde the fair was red with anger»). But despite her anger, she immediately tells her people that they must now recognize Gunther as their new leader. So although her strength is described as supernatural and her behavior as satanic, Brünhild is shown as a woman of her word. She establishes a rule (not typical of women), then accepts the consequences and submits to Gunther who defeated her. She grants him Iceland and loses her status as a ruler of exceptional powers. His victory over her transforms her from an undefeated ruler into a vanquished woman. The fighting episode seems to intimate that if supporters of the Empire acted in concert they could overcome the intimidating power of the Church. Put differently, if the entire secular world were united in its opposition to the Church, they may curtail the power of the Church and limit it to its natural sphere.

When Siegfried arrives in Iceland openly, he redefines Brünhild's status by declaring that her pride has been humbled and that she has found her master

(474). He suggests that she should leave Iceland and go with them to Worms. But Brünhild, who at first appears to have accepted the decision submissively, suddenly wants to summon her friends and relatives before leaving Iceland to bid them farewell. The Burgundians, Hagen foremost among them, fear that this is a pretext and that Brünhild is assembling her people to fight them. Siegfried summons his knights, whereupon Brünhild, as someone who has accepted her fate, asks Gunther whether she should welcome them. Brünhild welcomes the knights and asks Gunther's people to hand out gold and silver to the guests. This action has a double meaning: on the one hand, this is an entirely traditional act, as seen in the discussion about the traditional women; on the other hand, the distribution of gold is a demonstration of her power in front of Gunther's people, intended to win them over. This aspect of the gifts of gold is confirmed by Brünhild when she discovers the amount of gold that has been distributed and tells Gunther that her money has been given away as if she were going to be sent to her death, whereas she intends to live for a long time yet and will need money to spend (517-518). She states emphatically that she will know how to use her money in the future. Hagen senses the concealed threat in her words (the same way in which he later draws the attention of the kings of Burgundy to the manner in which Kriemhild uses her money at court) and tells her that Gunther is sufficiently rich. But Brünhild insists on taking her own money. Again, just like Kriemhild insists on taking her share of her inheritance upon leaving for Xanten when she marries Siegfried, so Brünhild insists on having her own property when she marries, to retain at least partial independence at her husband's court. She states explicitly that she will need her wealth at court to be able to distribute it at will (520).

Although she was defeated and lost her status as an entirely independent ruler, Brünhild still tries to retain partial independence by taking along her money and two thousand of her people. And although she is to change from a queen into the wife of a king, she has not lost her physical abilities or her desire to be independent within the Burgundian court. The poet possibly alludes here to one of the many stages in the conflict when a truce seemed to be in sight, such as the Treaty of Constance between Friedrich Barbarosa and Pope Anastasius IV, in which the emperor promised to defend the *honor papatus* (the honor of the papacy) and the pope promised to help the emperor to extend the *honor imperii* (the Empire's honor). According to the Hohenstaufen point of view, the treaty broke down because the papacy wanted to retain its position within the secular world, just as Brünhild was trying to do at her husband's court.

In the scene of the double wedding Brünhild's status diminishes again, as she is offended by her sister-in-law marrying someone she considers to be her vassal. Her reaction comes in the bedroom scene where her physical abilities are still apparent. Having prohibited Gunther from touching her until she receives a satisfactory explanation regarding the marriage of Kriemhild and Siegfried, she reacts to Gunther's attempted rape by binding him to a nail in the wall (636-637). Once again, the narrator points out her physical prowess; Gunther should be grateful she did not kill him. When considering Brünhild's actions in this situation Jerold C. Frakes marks:

In the very fact that Brünhild refuses to consummate her marriage with the king, she challenges the entirety of male ideology and thus becomes by definition the aggressor. Since the conventional system only allows for one active role, Brünhild, in her independence and action for the sake of her own desire, in her defiant *clitorality* - as Gayatri Spivak and recent French feminism designate independent female action - political, sexual, and otherwise - for the woman's own purposes and desires, has by default assumed the active role (leaving only the passive role for Gunther and/or Siegfried), forcing her own will on the other party (Frakes 1994: 123).

To emphasize the irony of the situation, the narrator refers to Gunther begging for his life as 'der meister' («lord and master»). This act shows that Brünhild has not yet grown accustomed to her new status and that her honor is still more important to her than her husband's. Before freeing him, she taunts Gunther about his honor suffering if it becomes known to his people that he was tied up by a woman (640), and she unties him only after he points out to her that her honor will suffer no less.

Gunther regards Brünhild's conduct as a drastic deviation from the traditional norm. In telling Siegfried about the wedding night he again refers to her as a «Satan» he brought into his home: 'want ich hân den übeln tiuvel heim ze hûse geladen' (649) («I've taken the devil into my house»). Siegfried's solution follows naturally: he will help Gunther wrestle with Brünhild to defeat and subdue her. This wrestling eventually leads to a double development in Brünhild's character. Her statement at the end of the struggle alludes to her final submission to Gunther: he proves to her that he can vanquish her and be her master, and she consequently accepts his authority. She adds that henceforth he can love her, that is, have sexual relations with her whenever he pleases. At the same time, the narrator points out that together with her virginity Brünhild also loses her unique physical strength (682-683). It is at this point that Brünhild acquiesces in her new status, having been defeated first in Iceland, where she lost her status as an independent ruler, and again in the bedroom, where she lost her uniqueness as a woman of exceptional physical strength. She is no longer Queen Brünhild but Brünhild the queen, no longer a queen in her own right but the king's wife. Years later, in the course of the argument of the queens, Brünhild's status is further reduced and even her position as the king's wife is challenged when Kriemhild accuses her openly of being the mistress or harlot of her vassal. Kriemhild challenges the very validity of Brünhild's marriage to Gunther by claiming that it was Siegfried who first lay with Brünhild (sexual relations being one way of sanctifying marriage). Kriemhild comments that Brünhild knew who was lying with her, meaning that she agreed. These accusations undermine Brünhild's status, and from a respected king's wife she becomes a character of uncertain legal status. Similarly, the poet wishes the Church to be reduced to a vassal of the Empire, and not the opposite, as the Church claimed during the conflict. Horst Fuhrmann, in his book *Germany in the High Middle Ages c.1050-1200*, writes: «In a reply couched as a manifesto Frederick rejected the papal view of the Empire: "Whoever claims that we have received the imperial crown from the lord pope as a fief denies the divinely willed order and that of St Peter and is a liar»» (Fuhrmann 1986: 145).



Brünhild's reaction shows how she has changed from a rebellious woman into a traditional one: she does not attempt to wreak vengeance on Kriemhild by herself but arouses Hagen to action by crying. Brünhild is not even explicitly inciting for revenge<sup>6</sup> as her words to Hagen are not quoted but mentioned indirectly ('dô sagte im diu mære') (864) («and she told him what had happened»), whereupon Hagen takes an oath before her that he will carry out the revenge upon Kriemhild's husband. The initiative is therefore Hagen's, something Brünhild would not have tolerated at the beginning of the epic.

Brünhild makes a few more appearances in the epic under her own name. Hagen mentions that he committed the murder because of her great suffering (1001); Kriemhild accuses her of planning and initiating the murder (1010); the narrator mentions with restraint that this was Hagen's act in revenge for Brünhild's sorrow; Brünhild is shown to be indifferent and passive at the sight of her mourning sister-in-law (1100). In three of the four mentions, Brünhild appears as passive, with only Kriemhild alluding to any activity on the part of her sister-in-law.

In her last appearance, Brünhild is not mentioned by name but only by her function: «the king's wife» (1515). The narrator emphasizes the change in Brünhild's character not only by explicitly pointing out her passivity but also by drawing attention to the fact that she changed from a rebellious woman into a traditional one, to the point where there is no need to mention her by name any longer. She is now the «king's wife,» whose traditional status is determined by her husband and by his status and not by her personality and uniqueness. In the same way the poet wishes that the rebellious Church turn into an obedient mate to the Empire and resume its traditional place behind the emperor or perhaps beside him. Brünhild's disappearance represents this aspiration.

In sum, although Brünhild and Kriemhild develop in almost opposite directions in the course of the epic, at one time or other in their careers they both serve as complete opposites to the women in the traditional group. This contrast is most prominent if we compare the relationship of the two groups of women with the men. The traditional women serve as a support group to the men by living in the shadow of the male world and by strictly observing their position and role in the feminine world. The rebellious women exceed the bounds of their female roles and gradually invade the male world, breaching the existing social structure. The narrator looks upon this breach with disapproval. In the case of Brünhild, he forces her back into the feminine world through various acts of deceit and violence (the concealed contest in Iceland and the bedroom wrestling at Worms). In the case of Kriemhild, he resorts to a quick ruling for an execution. The narrator clearly favors the group of traditional women, which is understandable if we consider the two groups of women as representing the Church in the two stages of its relationship with the Empire.

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<sup>6</sup> Jenny Jochens distinguishes between women in Nordic literature who take revenge themselves and those who cajole others to do it (JOCHENS 1996). Brünhild does not fit the model of the cajoling woman because she does not openly tell Hagen that she would like him to avenge her.



### 3. Conclusion

Critics in the past have suggested several readings of the *Nibelungenlied*,<sup>7</sup> but none regarded the manner in which the female characters were disposed as the key to the text. Why did the narrator choose to portray the political situation through the women characters? The answer, I believe, is concealed between the lines. The narrator uses this presentation of the female characters to allude to an extra-literary reality.

Using women to represent the Church is not foreign to medieval art. For example, in the Strasbourg cathedral Ecclesia is depicted as a woman. Religion is mentioned only on rare occasions, such as the argument in front of the cathedral between the two queens, and the initial refusal of Kriemhild to marry Etzel because he is pagan – which turns out to be a weak pretext. The text notes later that it was Kriemhild who baptized their common son, Ortlieb. In each case it is the female characters that relate to religion. Hagen, as the representative of the male gender, adopts a dismissive attitude toward religion (during the journey to Hunland he throws the priest into the river).

The traditional women represent the first stage in the relations between the Church and the Empire. They are presented as supportive of their men and not trying to change their own secondary status. The men treat them with respect because they know exactly what their status is. Legally, the woman is *consor regni* or ruling partner. In her husband's absence she takes his place, but with his return she relinquishes her position, he resumes his role as the main ruler, and she resumes her passive role at his side (Vogelsang 1954). Relations between the Church and the Empire were of the same nature in the first stage. The Church was cognizant of its domains and did not attempt to invade the realm of temporal rule. This stage, in which the Emperor is superior to the Pope in temporal matters, is the Hohenstaufen ideal. Similarly, in the way in which they relate to their men, traditional women are the narrator's ideal of womanhood.

The rebellious women do not accept their secondary roles as *consor regni* but want to take their place next to the men as equals. They are no longer satisfied to stand in for their husbands in their absence, and at times try to take the men's place by force. The Church acts the same way during the second stage, trying to curtail the Emperor's traditional rights while retaining her own status. The Church tries to abolish the Emperor's right to grant fiefdoms and it acts to undermine the Emperor's status, so that the Emperor no longer holds sway over temporal matters but is subordinate to the supreme power of the Church. The Pope, in whose election the Emperor had a say until recently, now becomes the supreme power, and the Emperor can no longer affect his election or removal. From the Hohenstaufen standpoint, the Church acts entirely in contradiction to the blessed cooperation between Empire and Church before the reign of Henry III. The author warns against the Church gaining excessive power and alludes to his proposed remedy: decapitation, as reflected in the situation of the rebellious women at the end of the work: Kriemhild, who overstepped her limits, loses

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<sup>7</sup> A very thorough survey of the different critical attitudes on the meaning of the *Nibelungenlied* is in Elizabeth Lienert's «Prespektiven der Deutung des *Nibelungenliedes*» (LIENERT 2003: 91-112).

her head. Brünhild, who is presented from the outset as someone who exceeds the limits of proper feminine conduct, disappears from the work as a result of male violence inflicted upon her, to be mentioned only with respect to her function as the king's wife. Brünhild is reduced to the position she deserves as a woman, or as a representation of the Church, to her function as the Emperor's passive spouse. Naturally, the poet cannot express this view openly, but his audience would understand from his presentation that his solution to the situation is crisp and cruel: violence against the Church and ultimately the removal of its head, the Pope.

The author chooses not to voice openly his clear political leanings but to hide them under the representation of the characters. Like all figurative texts, the *Nibelungenlied* has an independent intra-literary meaning and a plot, but also an extra-literary one that is rooted in the time and place of its genesis. The Hohenstaufen political opinions of the author are formed in an atmosphere that favors the Empire, but for reasons understandable at a time of political conflict, the author chooses to present them indirectly.

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