

The Ideology of Heroes in The *Nibelungenlied*

Dr. U. Fathima Farzana

Assistant Professor of English

Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur

farzusman1992@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-2744-6200

ABSTRACT

The heroic attributes that go into the making of epic heroes in grand narratives are derived from history and myth. Legends and folklore create this stereotype - a man of royal lineage gifted with supernatural abilities and a vast fortune who has to take a quest or kill a monster to save his people and realise his own potential. The 'Epic of Gilgamesh', 'Iliad', 'Odyssey', 'The Song of Roland', 'Beowulf', 'Mabinogion', 'Shahnameh', 'Heike Monogatari' or 'Ramayana', to mention a few of the world epics, all have the same traits in their heroes. However, the Germanic *Nibelungenlied* is unique in its depiction of the hero Sivrit as he has none of the heroic qualities. He dies an ordinary death and he does not fight in any war of historic importance. Contrary to the epic tradition, he is vengeful, mendacious, violent and greedy. He murders innocents and forces people into slavery. The *Nibelungenlied* also breaks open the hinges of cultural hegemony and feudalism. This metanarrative questions the existence of the hero/demigod and proves historical sources.

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Epic metanarratives immortalize heroic qualities by creating typical and ideal archetypes to represent metahuman beings who actually relate to the historical conventions of the ages. These heroes have superhuman strengths, royal lineage and immeasurable wealth but they are not free from faults. They have many fatal flaws that lead them and the historic period they are a part of to come to a rampage. History makes legends and heroes make men but metahistory questions both. An otherwise ordinary man Achilles gets the status of a god but is killed by a coward in battle. Beowulf, a mighty hero, slays dragons but cannot protect himself. Gilgamesh, a legendary tyrant, overcomes even the great gods but fails to protect a herb that would give him immortality. The ideology behind creating these men-gods proves that history breaks up their clouds of immortalization and reveals the truth in plain sight. This

paper is a study on the source and deconstructs the idealism of heroic characters in the Germanic epic *Nibelungenlied*.

The *Nibelungenlied* (“*The Song of the Nibelungs*”) is a Middle High Germanic epic with Scandinavian influences popularized through the oral tradition but written down in the thirteenth century and found in the eighteenth century in the form of forty manuscripts. The text is divided into thirty-nine *Aventiuren* (“Adventures”). “The title under which the poem has been known since its discovery is derived from the final line of one of the three main versions, *hie hât daz mære ein ende: daz ist der Nibelunge liet* (‘here the story takes an end: this is the lay of the Nibelungs’) [1]. The poem inspired the Romantic poets and was taken up by Richard Wagner for his *Ring* series. The epic can be compared with the Arthurian legends of Chrétien de Troyes, the epics of Homer and the Norse *Saga of Burnt Njal*.

The anonymous text recounts the history of 6th century Germany and fuses it with Norse mythology to create an ideology of heroism. The plot is constructed around Sivrit, the supernaturally strong and handsome prince of Netherlands, the son of King Sigmunt and Queen Siglint and the slayer of a dragon, who irrevocably falls in love with the beautiful princess Kriemhilt of Burgundy through hearsay. What follows is a saga of war, magic, revenge, bloodlust and death. The very first adventure begins with the line “In ancient tales many marvels are told us: of renowned heroes, of great hardship, of joys, festivities, of weeping and lamenting, of bold warriors’ battles - now *you* may hear such marvels told!” [2]. The juxtaposition of heroism, hardship, happiness and lamentation proves the human nature of the characters and the time though supernatural qualities are infused into the characters. The poet’s comments like “They afterwards died wretchedly because of two noble ladies’ enmity,” “how joy in the end may be rewarded by sorrow,” “how quick he was to speak!” and the repeated “heroes in great numbers were doomed” [2] warns the listeners and readers of a life-like fate to which every person is bound, whether he be a god, demigod or a superhero.

Kriemhilt’s symbolic and ominous dream of a falcon torn to pieces by two eagles in the first adventure hints at the ordinary fate of an extraordinary hero. Her brother Gunther and the Royal Advisor Hagen of Tronege would be slaying her husband Sivrit and she can do nothing about it. The fact that Sivrit is invincible because he slew a dragon and bathed in its blood is of no consequence to the foul play by his own kinsmen. The magical sword Balmuc is of no protection either. Hagen, and many others, had heard of Sivrit because of his possession of the Hoard of the Nibelungs. He had come upon it with trickery and blood upon his hands, and that was why the treasure would be lost forever. Sivrit had slain Schillbunc

and Nibelunc to get the hoard. He had fought the dwarf Albrich who came to avenge the Nibelungs and forced him to be his bond slave and also took his Tarnkappe or the cape of invisibility. The dragon's blood had made his skin impregnable to any weapon. But like Achilles, he had a weak spot that would be innocently revealed by his wife to his enemy.

All the time that Sivrit spends at Gunther's court at Worms by the Rhine goes without him talking to Kriemhilt, though he believes he is in love with her. Gunther understands that a political union with Sivrit will protect them from the warring Saxons and Vikings. He could also coerce Sivrit into getting him married to the powerful Prünhilt, Queen of Iceland, so he could soon conquer the whole continent. The gullible Sivrit falls prey and agrees to help Gunther win the challenges set by Prünhilt. The Tarnkappe comes in handy to defeat Prünhilt in her own challenges and Gunther soon becomes the proud husband of the Queen and takes over her eighty-six towers made of green marble. Sivrit comes to poor Gunther's rescue in his bedchamber as well but he goes too far and takes Prünhilt's girdle and ring as tokens and gives them to Kriemhilt. As the poet warned in the very first page, the two noble ladies soon get into a quarrel and Prünhilt is humiliated as she is called "a vassal's whore" [2]. Prünhilt vows revenge and Hagen has been waiting for the bait. The slaying of Sivrit is no accident and is so predictable.

Hagen makes quick work of Sivrit's pride and lures him in with a pseudo-invasion and a hunting expedition. He gets Kriemhilt to stitch a cross over the hero's vulnerable spot so he could protect him but uses it to target his arrow. Yet again Kriemhilt has a dream of wild boars chasing Sivrit and flowers drenched with his blood. Sivrit dies, cursing the Burgundians and their descendants, thereby unknowingly cursing his own as well. Hagen takes the Hoard of the Nibelungs and drops it into the Rhine. The Tarnkappe is lost forever. During the funeral, the corpse bleeds afresh as soon as Gunther and Hagen come near affirming foul murder. Kriemhilt accepts her fate and marries King Etzel of the Huns leaving her son Gunther to the Nibelungs. But the real reason behind her marrying a pagan was that she wanted revenge on her brother for Sivrit. She plans a blood revenge and invites her brothers and Hagen to the Traismauer, Etzel's castle. Her fury bursts open when she sees Hagen carrying Balmunc and showing off the green blade to her.

The Huns and the Burgundians fight around the mead hall of Etzel. Hagen and Volker, the fiddler, throw out seven thousand slain Huns. When Kriemhilt sets the hall on fire, Hagen and the others survive by drinking the blood of the corpses. A furious Kriemhilt promises red gold and castles to anyone who

would bring her the heads of Gunther and Hagen. Etzel aids he and refuses a truce because Hagen had murdered their son Ortliep right before their eyes. Legendary heroes like Irinc of Denmark, Infrid of Thuringia and Wolfhart die in vain, slain by the Burgundians. The noble Ruedeger of Pöchlarn refuses to kill his guests. Aided and abetted by Kriemhilt and his King, he has no choice. He is slain by Gernot, Kriemhilt's brother, with the very sword he had gifted him. Kriemhilt is by now a tyrant and termagaunt; she beheads Gunther and shows his head to Hagen. He refuses to divulge the location of the Hoard. She draws Balmunc from the scabbard and beheads Hagen in one swing. King Etzel, foe though he is, grieves over a hero meeting death at the hands of a woman: "How is it that the very best warrior that ever entered battle or bore a shield now lies dead at a woman's hands!" [2]. At the closure of the epic, Hildebrant, a knight of the Huns, hews Kriemhilt to pieces because she has stepped out of her bounds with revenge.

Though mythology and folklore play their hands in the epic, the characterization of Sivrit and Prühilt are influenced by sixth to eighth century historical sources. King Sigibert I (AD 535 - 575), the Merovingian King of Austrasia and his Queen Brunichilde stand as the first historical objects behind the idealization of the legends. Most of his life was spent with civil wars against his half-brother Chilperic. Brunichilde, princess of Visigothic Spain and daughter of Athanagild, became Sigibert's wife because Chilperic wanted to marry her sister Galswintha. Historian Gregory of Tours records that Chilperic soon abandoned his wife and had her murdered so he could marry his mistress Fredegunda, unleashing Brunichilde's hostility which soon became a civil war that led to the assassination of Sigibert. Book IV of *History of the Franks* by Gregory of Tours records Sigibert's assassination as follows:

Then two slaves who had been placed under a charm by Queen Fredegunda, carrying strong knives with poisoned blades - of the sort commonly called scramasaxi - approached him on some pretext and stabbed him one on each side. He cried aloud and fell and died in a short time. [3]

The second historical source is Sigfred, King of the Danes in the eight century, sent by Carloman to instigate peace with the invading Normans in AD 884. Edward Fichtner in his *Constructing Sigfrid: History and Legend in the Making of a Hero* asserts that twelve thousand pounds of silver were given to Sigfred for maintaining diplomacy. This fortune could well be the Hoard of the Nibelungs. Carloman died of a spear wound while hunting for wild boars:

The first point of similarity with this event is obviously the fact that the Danish

emissary Sigifridus and the Sivrit of NL have the same name. A second is the enormous tribute of 12,000 pounds of silver, which along with other payments, may well be a source for the legendary Nibelungen hoard. And third and finally, the wounding with the spear during a hunt for boar, though here it is accidental and not intentional, being followed by the death of the young king from the wound, recalls Hagen's slaying of Sivrit in the NL under similar circumstances. [4]

Fichtner records the place of death as the forest of Bezu in Normandy while the *Nibelungenlied* mentions Sivrit's assassination in the Vosges Forest in Eastern France. The proximity of the places suggests that the emissary Sigifridus/Sigfred and King Carloman were assimilated into one person Sivrit for the epic. The mythological elements incepted into the characters of Sivrit and Prünhilt are from the *Völsunga Saga* and the *Poetic Elder Edda* - both old Norse anonymous texts of the twelfth century. The Niflung Cycle of the *Poetic Edda* mentions the tale of Sigurd in "Reginismál" (The Lay of Regin), "Fáfnismál" (The Lay of Fáfnir), "Sigurðarviða hin skamma" (The Short Lay of Sigurd) and "Helreið Brynhildar" (Brynhild's Ride to Hell). The *Völsunga Saga* depicts Sigurd as a war-mongering and bloodthirsty man. The plot common to both sources is this: Regin, the guardian of Sigurd tells him the lay of his brother Fáfnir who murdered their father to steal the cursed ring Andvaraut and the treasure of the dwarf Andvari. His greed drove him to become a dragon and Regin asks Sigurd to kill Fáfnir and get hold of the treasure. The same greed drives Sigurd to commit the same crime for which the descendants of Sigurd are cursed forever. Sigurd drinks Fáfnir's blood, roasts and eats his heart after which he can listen to the birds talking about Regin's secret plot to kill Sigurd. He kills Regin and runs away to the land of the Franks where he sees a barrier of shields. He penetrates the supernatural flames and wakes the sleeping warrior up. Upon removing the armour, he finds that the warrior is actually a woman named Brynhilde. She was once a Valkyrie condemned by Odin to sleep till a noble-born warrior who can walk through fire can wake her.

Brynhilde was cursed to marry a man and she tries to make the best of it by teaching Sigurd navigation and the art of writing runes. She was fated to fall in love with Sigurd:

She asked what was so strong that it could slash through her coat of mail and "rouse me from sleep. Or is it that Sigurd the son of Sigmund has come, the one who has the helmet of Fafnir and carries Fafnir's bane in his hand?" [5]

Brynhilde knew all about Sigurd's greed and what it would lead him to. They exchange oaths which Sigurd promptly forgets when the witch Grimhild gives him a magic potion and makes him marry her daughter Gudrun. Brynhilde interprets Gudrun's dream of the hawk and prophesies that her husband will be killed by her brother. Though Brynhilde has a daughter by Sigurd named Aslaugh, he forces her to marry Gunnar, Gudrun's brother. Gunnar stabs him in his sleep to possess the cursed treasure. Brynhilde burns herself alive on the same pyre as Sigurd. True to Andvari's curse, the treasure and the ring become the death of all who possess it. The *Nibelungenlied* hints at Prünhilt/Brynhilde being the lover of Sivrit and that the challenges were planned by her in such a way that Sivrit would be the only one to defeat her. Being a Valkyrie, she is a woman of superhuman strength and an equal to Sivrit. But in the epic, her strength is tied to her virginity and she loses it after marrying Gunther. The element fire represents her maidenhead in the *Völsunga Saga*. It is through Odin's impenetrable fire that Sigurd walks to wake up Brynhilde. He shapeshifts into Gunnar and quells down the barrier of fire around her castle. Ultimately, Brynhilde dies by burning herself upon Sigurd's pyre. This fire is a metaphorical code of humanity lorded over by destiny.

A Viking shield-maiden, Brynhilde is keen to ride into battle assisting kings and warriors in the *Nibelungenlied*. She is not at all eager to live as a woman, pledged to domestic servitude. The *Völsunga Saga* draws a beautiful portrait of Brynhilde as a Valkyrie making a tapestry in a tower. The tapestry shows all the past glorious deeds of Sigurd, yet she "wants to go warring and win all kinds of fame." [5] When Sigurd proposes to her taking her to be an ordinary woman though he understands her skill with the sword and runes, she simply says, "It is not fated that we should live together. I am a shield-maiden. I wear a helmet and ride with warrior kings. I must support them, and I am not averse to fighting." [5] Under the influence of the ale of forgetfulness, Sigurd does not even remember her name. Brynhilde remains a noble woman when she says "And sooner would I die before I would deceive King Gunnar." but Sigurd's lust for power and wealth forces him to say, ". . . I would forsake Gudrun and marry you." [5] Brynhilde decides that Sigurd has corrupted and dishonoured her through his foolish trickeries. She asks Gunnar to kill her or himself or Sigurd and "do not raise the wolf cub." [5]

A shield-maiden had the privilege to choose her mate but would have to surrender her armour and weapons once she got married. Valkyries never married mortal men though they had sexual relationships with them. Valkyries chose the most valiant heroes to live in Odin's Valhalla and enjoy immortality till the fated Ragnarok. Brynhilde is by far the most powerful among both shield-maidens and Valkyries. The *Nibelungenlied* characterizes Brynhilde as Prünhilt, a shield maiden who ruled Iceland with her

military prowess. Sivrit is an ordinary man, hero though he is, and he encounters Prünhilt just because he sees her as an obstacle between his love for Krimhilt. Historically, Sigibert/Sigfred was a king who died for his faults because of a personal squabble that soon became a civil war. As Hayden White documents in his *Metahistory*, history is a matter of philosophy and historians used philological and intuitive insights to classify historical events and people, much like artists. Benedetto Croce in his *Theory and History of Historiography* avows that an object or person is aesthetic not for pleasure but concrete idealism. In writing what is “actual rather than possible,” [6] historians deconstruct their own history through their flaws. These flaws are noticeable in the depiction of characters or historical objects, politics, science and religion.

Croce defines history thus, “the eternal return of man to the task of constructing an arena in which he could display his individuality.” [6] It is this assertion of individuality, the desperate desire to immortalize one’s culture and nationality through heroic objects that drives epic poets to create their heroes. Sivrit and Prünhilt do not represent individual beings or heroic qualities but Germany and German culture. The *Nibelungenlied* obviously individualises Scandinavian elements like the gifting of swords, the swearing of revenge oaths and corpses bleeding anew before murderers but Christianity underlies most of the action like the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*. This process is a simplification of native cultural objects, one which Benedetto Croce calls “masonic mentality” [7]. The triumph of religion over history, culture and reason ultimately leads to hegemony. The *Nibelungenlied* hints at hegemony of the Germans over the Huns, the pagans and even foreigners like Icelanders.

The individual mythical traits of heroes are deconstructed by Metahistory. Sivrit is invincible to weapons; he cannot be wounded in battle. Bathing in dragon blood does the trick but the dragon actually represents his ancestors who had a particular disease called ichthyosis. According to Edward Fichtner, the “diseased skin is similar to fish scales” [4]. The coat of invisibility or the Tarnkappe regards the aristocratic right to masquerade as anyone for pleasure and war. While Sivrit is bathing in dragon blood, a linden leaf falls between his shoulder blades and creates a vulnerable spot. That is where Hagen’s arrow hits him hard. The linden tree “was associated with the goddess of love, Freya, because of the heart shaped leaves” [8]. This proves that Sivrit is going to suffer because of his love much like an ordinary man. Feudalism is also satirised in the epic where Prünhilt orders Krimhielt around because she is a vassal’s wife and is thus slave to the king, though he may be her brother. Ideological manipulation of heroes has led to deification and hero worship, thereby unconsciously leading the people into hegemony. Albrecht Classen justifies the death of a hero thus

In many cases of heroic literature, the protagonist experiences envy and jealousy, but his heroism is confirmed even in his noble handling of such hostile emotions. Siegfried, on the other hand, does not even know, as it seems, what he has done to Hagen's pride and the Burgundians' honor. Consequently, this hero does not die a worthy death in battle or in a fight against a monster, instead, he is simply murdered from behind, whereas Beowulf succumbs to the dragon and Roland to the Saracens. . . [9]

The hero of the *Nibelungenlied* has none of the heroic traits of an epic hero. He is ambitious, greedy, deceitful, vengeful and proud. He lies to Prünhilt, forces Albrich into slavery, steals his treasure, kills the inheritors of the treasure and slays a dragon just because he could. In fact, Hagen, though he is a murderer and a criminal, does everything for the sake of his lord, his king and his people. Sivrit is just a manipulative tool in the hands of Hagen and Gunther who change the course of history through him. James George Frazer in his *The Golden Bough* describes how an old and weak priest-king was often killed by his young and capable successor to appease the gods and the people. Sivrit, Krimhilt and Ortliep are all killed, thus clearing the throne for Gunther, Sivrit's capable son who also has the same name as Krimhilt's brother.

The legendary Sivrit, though immortalised and glorified, is based on real historical figures and their tyranny. None of the heroic traits observed in other epics are embodied by Sivrit and he dies dishonourably confirming his ordinary human disposition. Prünhilt is based on both the historical shield maidens of ancient Scandinavia and the Valkyrie. Such women were considered equal to male heroes and had the choice of selecting their mate or remaining unmarried. If they did choose a mate, they gave up their armour and lost their strength. Wisdom, knowledge of the runes, battle strategies and physical prowess establish Prünhilt as the real hero of the epic. However, she remains subject to the manipulations of patriarchal power politics. Characters in the *Nibelungenlied* are personifications of various cultures of different lands. Strangers and foreigners are either vassals or slaves under feudalism. A capitalist-imperialist reign is challenged by the epic poet through the subtle descriptions of blood flowing in battle, women giving away their husbands' treasure to show off their status, quarrels among vassals and the discrimination of the Huns. Thus, the *Nibelungenlied* remains a deconstruction of heroism and nationalism.

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