

LYRIC LOVE AND THE EPIC HERO: NOTES ON SIEGFRIED'S WOOING OF KRIEMHILD IN THE *NIBELUNGENLIED*

In pre-courtly narrative poetry men would appear to have little regard for the feelings of women. For the warrior knights of this literature there is little art to the wooing of a lady; a common way to find a wife is to abduct her: stories of *Brautraub* had animated audiences throughout the earlier Middle Ages. However, the audiences of the *courtly* epic were interested in *minne* and preferred their heroes to pay greater respect to the feelings of members of the opposite sex; in the courtly romances of Chrétien, and of Veldeke, Hartmann and Wolfram, where gallant knights engage in adventure for the sake ladies — where *dienst* is rewarded with *lôn* —, love and the art of wooing were central.

The *Nibelungenlied*, which tells the gruesome story of Siegfried's murder, his widow Kriemhild's revenge, and the subsequent bloody massacre of an entire race — the Burgundians —, evidently does not follow the same type of story-line as the typical courtly romance; however, it was composed at a time when that *genre* was in fashion, and *minne* does play a not insignificant rôle in the poem. The *Nibelungenlied* not only recounts the grim fall of the Burgundians, but also the *minne* relationship of — among others — Siegfried and Kriemhild: it has been stated that Siegfried and Kriemhild's relationship represents “die bei weitem schönste und innigste Liebesgeschichte, die uns die mittelalterliche Dichtung Deutschlands geschenkt hat”¹. This assertion is obviously questionable, yet any analysis of this point will naturally turn our attention to an issue close to one of the central questions of *Nibelungenlied* research: to what extent has the ethos that

¹ PANZER, Friedrich — *Das Nibelungenlied. Entstehung und Gestalt*, Stuttgart, Köln, 1955, p. 465.

underlies the courtly romance influenced the poet(s) composing the *Nibelungenlied*? It is well known that love is a component vital to that ethos². It is the intention of this short article to look into the rôle that *minne* plays in this poem, particularly in regard to the amorous relationship between Siegfried and Kriemhild; the main focus will here be on the scenes of Siegfried's courtship of Kriemhild, since through an analysis of these episodes, and a comparison of them with similar scenes in other contemporary narrative poetry — and also in *Minnesang* — it is hoped that a clearer picture of the way that *minne* has been introduced into this poem will be achieved.

Siegfried's *minne* interest in Kriemhild begins conventionally: after, in the second *âventiure*, having told of Siegfried's background and of his courtly investiture, in the third *âventiure* the narrator goes on to explain how Siegfried is attracted to Kriemhild:

Do gedâht ûf hôhe minne daz Siglinde kint.
 ez was ir aller werben wider in ein wint.
 er mohte wol verdienen scœner frouwen lip. (*Nl.*, 47,1ff.)³

Thoughts of conventional *hôhiu minne* lead Siegfried to Kriemhild: if we are to believe the narrator, Siegfried is already well practiced in the courtly art of *winning* (cf. *verdienen*) a lady's love. His entourage and family advise him — if he is indeed interested in *stætiu minne* (cf. *Nl.* 48,2) — to

² The body of critical bibliography on the *Nibelungenlied* is vast. On the problem of the poem's *genre*, cf., among others: EHRISMANN, Otfried — *Nibelungenlied. Epoche — Werk — Wirkung*, München, 1987, pp. 224 - 228 (which also contains an overview of other critical literature); HAMBURGER, Käthe — *Zur Erzählhaltung im Nibelungenlied*, in K.H. — *Kleine Schriften*, Stuttgart, 1976, pp. 59-73; HAYMES, Edward R. — *The Nibelungenlied: History and Interpretation*, Urbana, 1986, pp. 35 - 44. On the question of *minne* in the *Nibelungenlied* cf. among others: DÜRRENMATT, Nelly — *Das Nibelungenlied im Kreis der höfischen Dichtung*, Bern, 1945; NAGEL, Bert — *Das Nibelungenlied. Stoff — Form — Ethos*, Frankfurt, 1965, pp. 182 - 204. On Siegfried's wooing of Kriemhild cf., among others, RENOIR, Alain — *Levels of Meaning in the Nibelungenlied: Sifrit's Courtship*, in «Neuphil. Mitt.», 61 (1960), pp. 353 - 361.

³ Editions of text used: *Des Minnesangs Frühling*, Karl Lachmann; Moriz Haupt; Moser Hugo; Helmut Tervooren, eds., Stuttgart, 1982 (= *M.F.*); AUE, Hartmann von — *Erec*, Thomas Cramer ed. & tran., Frankfurt/M., 1972; VELDEKE, Heinrich von — *Eneasroman*, Etmüller Ludwig ed., Kartschoke, Dieter, tran., Stuttgart, 1986 (= *En.*); *Das Nibelungenlied*, Helmut de Boor; Karl Bartsch eds, Wiesbaden, 1979²¹ (= *Nl.*); ESCHENBACH, Wolfram von — *Parzival*, Karl Lachmann ed., Berlin, 1926 (= *Pz.*); ESCHENBACH, Wolfram von — *Willehalm* Werner Schröder ed., Berlin, 1978 (= *Wh.*).

earn the love of one of his own social condition (cf. *Nl.* 48,3). This might appear — at first sight — to accord well with the courtly love ethic (i.e. the knight falls in love after having heard of — not seen — the lady's beauty, the lady's love must be *won*, and that love must be *constant*)⁴; yet, *hōhiu minne* generally requires that the lady be of a higher social standing than the serving knight. It is possible to argue, of course, that since in other narrative poems of the period (cf. *Parzival*, *Willehalm*)⁵, a relationship between a man and a woman of the same social position is sometimes (although not often) also referred to as *hōhiu minne*, this term has — to an extent — become a commonplace in narrative poetry for describing courtly *minne* relationships.

In the *Nibelungenlied*, however, Siegfried's reaction to the advice of his relations that he should win the love of one of his own standing is far from courtly. He declares emphatically «*sô wil ich Kriemhilden nemen*» (*Nl.*, 48,4). The use of the word *nemen* might imply that Siegfried is ready to use violence to achieve his objectives (i.e. he does not speak of *werben*). This interpretation is upheld by Siegfried's subsequent conversation with his father. Siegmund explains that, in order for Siegfried to win Kriemhild he will have to contend with Gunther and his men (cf. *Nl.* 53,4 - 54,4). This, of course, does not present a problem to Siegfried, as he tells his father:

«swaz ich friwentliche niht ab in erbit,
daz mac sus erwerben mit ellen dâ mîn hant.
ich trouwe an in ertwingen beide liute unde lant.» (*Nl.*, 55,2ff.)

The use of such violence would not be acceptable in traditional *Minnedienst*, and is more reminiscent of *Brautraub* than of the courtly ethic. The possibility that Siegfried means to take Kriemhild by force of arms must also occur to Siegmund, since he refers to it (cf. *Nl.* 57,1); however, and somewhat illogically, such violence is immediately discounted by Siegfried: *daz wære mir viel leit*, he says (*Nl.* 58,3).

Thus, on the one hand, Siegfried would appear to be upholding the courtly code, dismissing any thought of abducting Kriemhild, yet on the other hand, he intends — if needs be — to use force to achieve his objectives. This would not, however, necessarily imply using violence directly against Kriemhild — but against her family; Siegfried would then not be seizing her, but her brother's lands: Kriemhild would simply be part of the prize... In any

⁴ Cf. NAGEL — *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁵ Cf. *Pz.*, 731,8; *Wh.*, 95,13.

case, such behaviour does not accord well with courtly etiquette, even though the *primum movens* behind it (i.e. the desire for *hōhiu minne*) does.

In the courtly narrative poetry contemporary to the *Nibelungenlied*, the knight begins paying his *Minnedienst* to his lady in a number of ways: he might assist her, personally offering the lady his services and then going on to defeat his lady's enemies: thus, in Book I of Wolfram's *Parzival* Gahmuret's *Minnedienst* for Belakane is undertaken to help her, as her lands are under siege — as *lôn* he marries the heathen queen and becomes the lord of her domain; or the knight might simply carry out the lady's wishes: thus, in Books X-XIII of *Parzival* Gawain will do Orgeluse's bidding for the sake of her *minne*; messengers might also be sent, asking the lady if she would be ready to accept the knight's *minne*, as in the 20th *âventiure* of the *Nibelungenlied*, where courtly Atila will send Rüdiger to ask Kriemhild if she will marry him. It is also possible for the lady to send emissaries to the knight: thus Ampflise — the Queen of France — tells Gahmuret in a letter, carried by her messengers, that she wishes him to be her *Minneritter* (cf. *Pz.* 76,23 - 77, 18). Similarly, it is through his emissaries that Eneas, in Veldeke's *Eneit*, learns of Dido's willingness to receive and care for him (cf. *En.*, 32,21 - 33,18).

In the *Nibelungenlied*, however, Kriemhild is in no danger, and therefore requires no armed help; she makes no formal request for *Minnedienst* — indeed, she does not wish to engage in *minne* — (cf. *Nl.*, 15,2 and 18,1); nor does Siegfried send messengers to her, either to show her that he yearns for her, or to ask her if she is interested in him. So, how does Siegfried in fact start his "*Minnedienst*"?

Modern critics of the *Nibelungenlied* have found it difficult to understand Siegfried's uncourtly arrival at Worms in the third *âventiure*:⁶ he appears, it will be remembered, in the Burgundian court, not asking for Kriemhild's hand in marriage, and requesting leave to serve her as a *Minneritter*, but as a challenger, demanding that Kriemhild's brother — King Gunther — should fight in single combat against him; the prize which Siegfried intends to win is Gunther's kingdom. From this scene it would appear as if Siegfried never had any intention of acting as a courtly

⁶ Cf. SCHULZE, Ursula — *Nibelungen und Kudrun*, in «Epische Stoffe des Mittelalters», Volker Mertens; Ulrich Müller eds., Stuttgart, 1984, pp. 111-140; p. 119. For a review of the critical literature cf. EHRISMANN — *Op. cit.*, pp. 117f.

Minneritter; in the first speech he directs at Gunther, he concludes by proclaiming:

«ich wil an iu ertwingen, swaz ir muget hân:
lant unde bürge, daz sol mir werden undertân.» (NL., 110,3f.)

Thus, at first no mention is made of Kriemhild — Siegfried merely announces his intention of conquering *lant unde bürge*: i.e. he reiterates the declaration he had made to his father in Xanten. Siegfried's demand is — judging by Gunther's reaction (cf. NL., 111,1 - 112,1) — clearly unexpected; from the way the Burgundians respond, it is quite evident that Siegfried's challenge does not follow the established rules of the court in Worms (cf. NL. 115, 1 - 4). Thus, although ostensibly it is a desire for *hôhiu minne* which leads Siegfried to Worms, he does not appear ready to play by the rules which govern it. Is Siegfried being politically shrewd by not mentioning Kriemhild on his arrival in Worms — or does he simply forget Kriemhild here, and behave in a naïve and insultingly arrogant manner?

The text seems to uphold the second interpretation, since after having displayed a notable lack of modesty and diplomacy in his dealings with the Burgundians, demanding that they fight with him over *their* birth-right, Siegfried remembers — quite suddenly — what in fact had brought him to Worms in the first place, i.e. Kriemhild. *dô gedâhte ouch Sîvrit an die hêrlîchen meit* (NL., 123,4) the narrator notes, and because of this Siegfried subsequently (although not immediately — cf. NL., 125,1 - 3) changes his approach. He accepts Gunther's offer of hospitality (cf. NL., 127,4) and becomes — somewhat astonishingly perhaps — a valued and welcome guest (cf. NL., 128,4), whom nobody in Worms can dislike (cf. NL., 129,4). He now thinks - surprisingly when we remember his arrival in Worms — exclusively of *hôhiu minne* (cf. NL., 131,4), and proclaims, in verses which seem to have been taken from *Minnesang*:

«wie sol daz gescehen,
daz ich die maget edele mit ougen mûge sehen?
die ich von herze minne und lange hân getân,
diu ist mir noch vil vremde: des muoz ich trûric gestân.»

(NL., 136, 1ff.)

Siegfried has apparently forgotten completely his desire to conquer Gunther's lands: he has changed rôles, and now plays the part of an earnest

Minneritter unable to see his beloved: the power of *minne* holds such a sway over Siegfried that he is willing to remain in the court in Worms for a year without ever catching sight of Kriemhild (cf. *Nl.*, 138,1 - 3). Courtly love has — it would appear — tamed Siegfried: *minne* has thus served its social purpose of turning the uncourtly warrior into a courtly knight. Does the rest of the text uphold this reading of the function of *minne* in this part of the *Nibelungenlied*?

The fourth *âventiure* tells of the war with the Saxons: how Siegfried helps the Burgundians, takes the Saxon leaders Liudegast and Liudiger prisoner, and finally returns to Worms in triumph. Surprisingly, Siegfried does not seem to think of Kriemhild while he is away fighting, although she *does* think of him (cf. *Nl.*, 240,4 - 241,3). Siegfried's offer to help Gunther fight the Saxons is not apparently linked to Kriemhild: the text does not lead us to believe that Gunther's words «*Nu lôn' iu got, her Sîvrit*» (*Nl.*, 157,1) are meant to imply that Siegfried's service to Gunther will be repaid with Kriemhild's love. There is, therefore, no textual evidence to sustain Nagel's (*Op. cit.*, p. 192) claim that the war against the Saxons represents "eine Fortführung der Minnehandlung mit anderen Mitteln". Initially, Siegfried does not apparently view his aid to Gunther as *Minnedienst* for Kriemhild⁷. Equally, the text cannot support Nagel's claim (p. 193), that Siegfried's attempt to leave at the end of the fourth *âventiure* is a "Fluchtversuch' aus dem Bannkreis der Minne": Kriemhild is not given as a reason for him wanting to go, but as a reason for him wanting to stay (cf. *Nl.*, 258,4).

It is only in the fifth *âventiure* that Siegfried and Kriemhild finally meet: their encounter is described amidst a wealth of terminology which we

⁷ It is therefore not possible to accept Ehrismann's (*Op. cit.*, p. 121) assertion that Siegfried does not receive "den versprochenen Lohn". There is no textual evidence to suggest that Gunther here considers Kriemhild to be the *lôn* for Siegfried's *dienst*: it is only in the fifth *âventiure* that a direct connection is made between Siegfried's *Minnedienst* and his obligations towards the Burgundians; here, after having been presented to Siegfried, Kriemhild thanks him for the way he fought ahead of her relations, and goes on to announce (she begins by repeating the phrase already spoken by Gunther; cf. *Nl.*, 157,1):

«Nu lôn' iu got, her Sîvrid» sprach daz vil scœne kint,
 «daz ir daz habt verdienet, daz iu die recken sint
 sô holt mit rehten triuwen, als ich hœre jehen» (*Nl.*, 303,1 - 3).

During the journey to Isenstein, Siegfried does state quite specifically that his service for Gunther is undertaken for the sake of Kriemhild (cf. *Nl.*, 388,1): during the war against the Saxons, Siegfried makes no such assertion.

— and doubtless also the courtly audience — link to *Minnesang*. Thus, Kriemhild is characterized with metaphors common in courtly lyrical love poetry: she is as the light of dawn coming through the dark clouds (*alsô der morgenrôt / tuot ûz den trüeben wolken*, *Nl.*, 281), and compared to the other ladies of court, the light which shines forth from her is like that of the moon appearing before the backdrop of the stars:

Sam der liehte mâne vor den sternen stât,
 des schîn sô lûterliche ab den wolken gât,
 dem stuont si nu gelîche vor maneger frouwen guot. (*Nl.*, 283,1ff.)

The effect this meeting has on Siegfried is described in those terms which we expect from *Minnesang*. On finally being able to see his beloved Siegfried is brought *lieb âne leit* (*Nl.*, 291,2): this contrast of love and pain in a *minne* relationship is a topos of courtly love poetry.

On beholding Kriemhild Siegfried's complexion changes colour (*Nl.*, 292,2), and after she has spoken to him, the narrator notes: *dô wart im von dem gruoze vil wol gehæhet der muot* (*Nl.*, 292,4). In the classical theory of *Minnesang* the reward for service by a knight is not — it will be remembered — of a physical nature: the *minnesinger* consider the hope of sexual gratification an illusion — *wân*⁸. However, the serving knight in *Minnesang* should have *lôn* for his *dienst*; in one of Albrecht von Johansdorf's poems the lady, questioned by her knight as to the nature of the reward he can expect, explains: 'daz ir dest werder sint unde dâ bî hôchgemuot.' (*M.F.*, 94,14). Thus, Siegfried also finds his *muot* heightened by his *Minnedame*.

When Siegfried holds Kriemhild's hand the joy or — *vreude* — he feels is more than his heart could bring forth in spring or summer (*Bî der sumerzîte und gein des meien tagen* — *Nl.*, 295,1). After they have come back from mass, Siegfried declares that he will always serve her relations — and for the first time he gives the motivation for this service as Kriemhild: «daz ist nâch iuvern hulden, mîn frou Kriemhilt, getân.» (*Nl.*, 304,2ff.). Thus, as the knight of many a lyrical courtly love poem, Siegfried is willing to do service for the favour of his chosen lady.

⁸ For the *minnesinger* Hartmann von Aue, the illusiveness of the physical reward is one of the weaknesses of classical theory of courtly love (cf. *MF.* 218,21f.).

Siegfried and Kriemhild's first meeting is also characteristic of *Minnesang* in that they cast *furtive* glances at each other:

mit lieben ougen blicken ein ander sâhen an
der herre und ouch diu frouwe. daz wart vil tougenlîch getân.
(*Nl.*, 293,3 - 4)

In the classical theory of *minne* one of the possible rewards for the knight is a brief glance from the lady: however, the lovers must look at each other secretly (as do Kriemhild and Siegfried), because in *hôhiu minne* theirs is a secret affair. Love in *Minnesang* is adulterous; however, Siegfried and Kriemhild's is not: why then do Siegfried and Kriemhild have to exchange such *furtive* glances?

The fact that there are so many elements in the scenes of Siegfried's courtship of Kriemhild which have come from *Minnesang*, has led critics to speak here of stylization⁹. A certain degree of stylization is common in love scenes in all narrative poetry: Veldeke, Hartmann and Wolfram — all of whom are also lyrical poets — use certain elements from the lyric love convention in their narrative poems. Naturally, the convention is adapted by the narrative poets to suit the form of the courtly romance¹⁰, since, while adulterous love is the norm in classical lyric love poetry, this is not the case in the narrative poetry of the classical period, where *minne* leads to marriage and not to adultery¹¹. The *Nibelungenlied* poet, however, has used these stylized forms, including those which are clearly connected to adulterous love, — without adapting them — to describe a relationship which will not be adulterous.

Thus, Siegfried's *lôn* is not only a heightening of his *muot*; Siegfried and Kriemhild have no actual need to exchange furtive glances, as theirs is a public love — one well known to the other members of the court: they do not need to fear the *merkære*. Siegfried and Kriemhild's relationship is not one

⁹ Cf., among others, Nagel (*Op.cit.*, p. 204), for whom, in the *Nibelungenlied* "Minnesang und Minnedienst erscheinen als ... die vollkommene Einstilisierung eines vorzeitlichen Geschehens in die gesellschaftlichen Gegebenheiten der hochmittelalterlichen Gegenwart".

¹⁰ Thus, Wolfram — one of the masters of the classical *tageliet* — will mould that lyrical form to make it acceptable to the ethos of his *Parzival*: cf. GREENFIELD, John — *The tageliet in Wolfram's Parzival*, in «Neophil.», 71, 1987, pp. 154 - 157.

¹¹ Cf. BUNKE, Joachim — *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, Munich, 1986, vol. II, p. 557.

typical of the lyric poems of *hôhiu minne*, since Siegfried will — after having married Kriemhild — be given a physical reward for his *Minnedienst*. It is clear, therefore, that the description of their meeting is ill-fitting to the nature of their relationship. But what of the *Minnedienst* itself?

As we have seen, Siegfried does not apparently view his aid to Gunther in the Saxon War of the fourth *âventiure* as *Minnedienst* for Kriemhild: where he does, however, undertake to help Gunther for the sake of Kriemhild is in the expedition to Isenstein. Siegfried states quite clearly that he will help Gunther win Brunhild «*niht sô verre durch die liebe dîn / sô durch dîne swester*» (NL., 388,1f.). Indeed, Siegfried had already given his agreement to help Gunther in return for the hand of Kriemhild (cf. NL., 333,2). Such an exchange of partners (Siegfried will help Gunther win Brunhild, if Gunther gives him Kriemhild) is obviously not part of the courtly ethic.

It will be remembered that, in order for Gunther to conquer his future bride, Siegfried must help him in a number of ways: it is only through Siegfried's *conscious* use of deceit and trickery that Gunther is able to win Brunhild for himself. Siegfried first pretends that Gunther is his liege-lord; he then puts on the magic cloak, making himself invisible and thus helps Gunther vanquish Brunhild in the contests. After the weddings, Siegfried will help Gunther again to deceive Brunhild, this time taming her in her bed until Gunther can deflower her: Siegfried will then steal Brunhild's girdle and her ring — the symbols of her power and her love; Kriemhild will later display these symbols in public.

Clearly Siegfried's behaviour in Isenstein and Worms is not in accord with the precepts of the conduct of a courtly knight: a *ritter* does not lie to and trick a Queen — and steal from her —, even if he does that for the sake of his own loved one. Given the above, it is impossible to believe that courtly *minne* has in fact changed Siegfried. The *Nibelungenlied* poet may attempt to present Siegfried as a courtly *ritter*, but it is clear from his arrival in Worms, from his behaviour in the Saxon War, from his pact with Gunther and from the way he is ready to deceive Brunhild, that *minne* (in this poem and with this character) has not achieved its social purpose of turning an uncourtly warrior into a courtly knight.

The *Nibelungenlied* poet is obviously conditioned by the expectations of his courtly audience: they want the protagonists of courtly poetry to act as courtly heroes. However, the poet is also conditioned by his source material, and that would not allow him to present Siegfried as perhaps he would have liked. The courtly poets do not feel at liberty to change the *substance* of their source material: they can and do, however, change the *manner* in which it is

described¹². The *Nibelungenlied* poet has therefore attempted to give Siegfried's actions courtly motivation; however, these motivations are not appropriate. Thus, Siegfried is presented as a lover of lyric *hôhiu minne* (where love is adulterous) who wants to *marry* his bride; he is presented as a *Minneritter*, but he acts not like Gawain when serving Orgeluse — as a knight ready to follow the rules which govern the noble art of love, but as — in courtly terms — a rogue, ready to betray a Queen. This analysis of the scenes of Siegfried's wooing of Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied* leads us to conclude that the manner in which this courtship is described is not simply stylized: it is artificial and inappropriate, since it does not fit in with the characters' actions. In this poem Siegfried is an epic hero — a warrior knight — whom the *Nibelungenlied* poet has, in part, attempted to portray as a courtly *Minneritter*: the inconsistencies and contradictions of the character Siegfried here are not, however, due to any "weakness" of the poem — they are a result of the organic process through which this poetry has evolved from its pre-courtly tradition¹³.

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¹² Cf. LOFMARK, Carl — *The Authority of the Source in Middle High German Narrative Poetry*, London, 1981, pp. 67 - 87.

¹³ In a recent study of the differences between the fictionality of heroic literature and Arthurian literature, Ulrich Wyss formulates the following hypothesis: "Das Heldenepos ist ... mit dem sozialen Schema der Familie verbunden, der Roman dagegen mit der Kultur. Heldenepik trägt die Züge eines infantilen Charakters, während zum Roman die seelische Disposition der Adoleszenz gehört" (Wyss, Ulrich — *Fiktionalität — heldenepisch und arturisch*, in «Fiktionalität im Artusroman», Volker Mertens; Friedrich Wolfzettel eds., Tübingen, 1993, pp. 242-256; p. 254). If this is indeed true, it would also perhaps be possible to argue that the *Nibelungenlied* poet has — in his description of the scenes of Siegfried's wooing of Kriemhild — attempted to disguise the infantile characteristics of his source material, so that it might appear to be a(n) (adolescent) romance, but he does that *not* with elements from the romance, but with those from *Minnesang* of the classical period. Therefore, from the point of view of its fictionality — in those scenes referred to in this article —, the *Nibelungenlied* is perhaps a child pretending to be an adolescent, but using the artifices of an adult.