

102

"We have been told in ancient tales many marvels of famous heroes, of mighty toil, joys and high festivities, of weeping and wailing, and the fighting of bold warriors—of such things you can now hear wonders unending!" Hatto, 17)

With this powerful opening stanza the *Nibelungenlied* poet boldly broke with the chivalric-knightly literary tradition in vogue around 1200. Instead, to relate his magnificent tale of murder, treachery, and revenge, the poet chose the popular and ancient legends as his raw material.

The tragic mood is already established in the first few stanzas. Many warriors will die because of one woman, Kriemhild. The impending tragedy is immediately reinforced by the young Kriemhild's troubling dream. Kriemhild lives with her mother, Ute, and her brothers (the three kings) Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher in Worms.

The setting shifts to Xanten, home of the accomplished knight-prince Siegfried and his parents, Sigmund and Sigilind. Although he sets off for Worms to woo Kriemhild, Siegfried initially challenges Gunther's kingship. The matter, however, is peacefully resolved, and Siegfried becomes an important ally in the Saxon war against Liudeger and Liudegast. Siegfried is at court in Worms one year before he sees Kriemhild. At the banquet celebrating the victory over the Saxons Siegfried and Kriemhild instantly fall in love with each other.

Before Siegfried can marry Kriemhild he must help Gunther win the powerful and formidable queen Brünhild. He accomplishes this by using a magical *Tarnkappe* (a cloak that allows its wearer to become invisible and gives him the strength of twelve men). Later Siegfried is forced to subdue Brünhild so that Gunther can consummate the marriage. With her virginity taken Brünhild loses her extraordinary strength.

Siegfried and Kriemhild depart for Xanten, where Sigmund renounces the throne in favor of his son. Years pass, and Brünhild convinces Gunther to invite his vassal Siegfried to visit Worms. At a tournament the two queens argue over the importance of their respective husbands, which later leads to a confrontation outside of the cathedral. Here Kriemhild tells Brünhild that Siegfried, not Gunther, took her virginity. Brünhild's public humiliation prompts Hagen, the chief vassal of the Burgundian kings, to seek revenge.

After tricking Kriemhild into revealing Siegfried's one vulnerable spot, Hagen slays the famous warrior while out on a hunt. Kriemhild dissuades Sigmund and his men from taking revenge, and they depart. At the behest of her relatives Kriemhild decides to remain in Worms, and eventually she is reconciled with her brothers, but not with Hagen. Kriemhild's brothers eventually convince her to have Siegfried's treasure

103

brought to Worms, but Hagen eventually takes it away from her and sinks it in the Rhine.

Years pass. Helche, the wife of Etzel, dies, and his advisors urge him to marry Kriemhild, who is reluctant until her kinspeople persuade her to accept Etzel's proposal. With Etzel's messenger, Ruedeger, Kriemhild journeys to Etzel. After a number of years Kriemhild convinces Etzel to invite her brothers and Hagen, to his court. Neither Ute's warning nor the sea nymphs' prophecy deters the Burgundians from their journey. Hagen now assumes a dominant role, singlehandedly transporting the vast army across the Danube. Only after destroying the raft does he finally inform them of their doom. A fight ensues when the Bavarians attempt to avenge the ferryman whom Hagen had slain.

Their stay with Ruedeger is the last happy occasion for the Burgundians. Giselher is betrothed to Ruedeger's daughter. At Etzel's court the tension becomes increasingly palpable until finally Kriemhild incites the Huns to attack. At a feast warfare breaks out, and Hagen beheads the son of Etzel and Kriemhild. Dietrich manages to save Kriemhild and Etzel, but all the other Huns in the hall perish. Ruedeger is forced to fight for his lord against his new kinsmen, the Burgundians, and is killed by Gernot. Both Hagen and Giselher refrain from fighting against Ruedeger.

Dietrich is finally drawn into the battle and takes the only two surviving Burgundians, Hagen and Gunther, prisoner. Kriemhild kills first her brother then Hagen. The slaying of such a great warrior as Hagen demands instant retribution: Kriemhild is slain by Hildebrand in front of Etzel and Dietrich, who mourn the great loss of life.

[Synopsis of *The Saga of the Volsungs*]

VÖLSUNGASAGA

The *Völsungasaga* was written in Iceland sometime in the thirteenth century. It is a relatively pedestrian retelling of the story of the Völsung family from its origins to its final end in the story of Svanhild.

114 The saga begins with a genealogy leading from the god Óðin to King Völsung, the father of Sigmund. Völsung's twin children, Sigmund and Signy, are featured in the first real story. Signy is forced to marry a king named Siggeir, who shows his gratitude to the Völsung family by killing the king and all of his sons. Sigmund manages to escape to the forest, where he lives in a cave. Signy sends her sons by Siggeir to Sigmund, but they fail a test of courage and he kills them at their mother's behest. Signy then arranges to exchange shapes with a sorceress and spends three nights with Sigmund. The child of this union is Sinfjötli, who aids his father in avenging Völsung's killing by burning Siggeir and his men in their hall. Signy comes out of the burning hall to tell Sigmund he is Sinfjötli's father and then returns to die beside her hated husband. After a number of adventures involving Sigmund's second son, Helgi Hundingsbani, Sinfjötli is poisoned by his stepmother. Sigmund is killed in battle when his sword is shattered by contact with Óðin's spear.

115 Sigmund's second wife, Hjordis, bears Sigurð after Sigmund's death. Sigurð is raised by a smith named Regin, who tells the story of his own family. He had had a brother named Ottr, who was in the habit of spending his time in the shape of an otter. Óðin and Loki killed the otter and afterward sought shelter with Ottr's father Hreiðmar. The father demanded compensation for his son. The gods were forced to cover completely the flayed skin of the otter with gold. Loki then went to a waterfall, where a pike named Andvari had a great horde of gold. Loki took all the gold including a ring, which would have allowed Andvari to build up his treasure again. Andvari cursed the ring when Loki took it away. When Hreiðmar had been compensated, his son Fáfnir killed him and took the gold, leaving Regin fatherless and destitute. Fáfnir then turned himself into a dragon to guard the gold, and Regin now wants Sigurð to kill him so Regin can be avenged for his father's death and receive his just portion of the settlement for his other brother. Sigurð agrees to do so, but only after he has avenged his own father.

After killing all those involved in the battle against his father Sigurð goes and kills the dragon. After tasting the dragon's blood he understands the language of the birds, who warn him about Regin's treacherous intentions. Sigurð kills Regin and rides away with all the treasure.

Attracted by a bright glow, he comes to a rampart of shining shields inside of which is a sleeping warrior. He cuts open the armor and discovers that it is a woman, Brynhild. The saga attempts to combine several different versions of the story, but they all end with Brynhild and Sigurð exchanging vows to marry no one else.

Sigurð goes to live at the court of King Gjuki, his sons Gunnar, Guttorm, and Högni, and his daughter, Guðrún. Gjuki's wife, Grimhild, brews an "ale of forgetfulness," and Sigurð forgets his oaths to Brynhild and marries Guðrún. Sigurð agrees to help Gunnar win Brynhild (who is now depicted as the daughter of Buðli and sister of Atli). Gunnar is unable to pass through the flame barrier around her hall, so Sigurð exchanges shapes with him. Sigurð spends three nights disguised as Gunnar with Brynhild with a drawn sword between them. Later, while bathing in the river, Guðrún and Brynhild quarrel about their husbands. Guðrún shows Brynhild the ring Sigurð had taken from her while disguised as Gunnar, making the deception public. Brynhild claims that Sigurð had betrayed Gunnar's trust while disguised and urges that he be killed. Guttorm kills Sigurð in his bed, but the victim is able to throw the sword back at his killer and avenge himself. Brynhild laughs when she hears Guðrún's cry, tells Gunnar she had lied about Sigurð's betrayal, and kills herself, joining Sigurð on his funeral pyre.

Guðrún is married against her will to Atli, who desires the treasure that had belonged to Sigurð. He invites the surviving brothers Gunnar and Högni to a feast, where they are attacked and killed. (The narration here attempts to follow both the *Atlakviða* and the *Atlamál* from the *Poetic Edda*, see below). Guðrún avenges her brothers by killing her sons by Atli and serving them to their father at his victory feast. When Atli is asleep, she kills him and burns down the hall.

Guðrún attempts to kill herself by wading into the sea, but she is buoyed up and washes ashore in the realm of a king named Jonák, who marries her. Her daughter by Sigurð, Svanhild, is married to King Jörmunrek (Ermanaric), who has her trampled by horses following trumped-up charges of adultery. Guðrún goads her three sons to go and kill Jörmunrek, but they quarrel along the way and the half-brother is killed. When they attack the king, they are able to hack off his arms and legs, but are kept from killing him by the king's retainers. They lament that the king would now be dead if they had not killed their brother. They are killed by stoning since weapons cannot cut them.