

20th-century philologists. But on a more fundamental level, one may see the marriage in *Poor Henry* simply as "part of an optimistic ending," that need not be considered as a reflection of actual social conditions of the time.

Hartmann's story raises puzzling questions for modern readers. How was leprosy understood in 12th-century medicine and theology? What cultural and ritual practices account for the apparently macabre theme of virgin sacrifice? Did the idea that leprosy could be cured by the blood of a virgin form part of 12th-century medical practice? What the text reveals is a strange association of traditions about the magical properties of blood and the actual practice of medicine in the 12th century. Salerno was a respected medical center from the 11th century on; books from the city were widely circulated and it is possible that Hartmann knew about them. However, none of these writings contain references to superstitious beliefs concerning the properties of blood. Connected with the medical tradition of Salerno is a legend about the origins of the didactic poem *De conservanda bona valetudine* (*On Maintaining Good Health*). Robert, the son of William the Conqueror (11th century), is wounded by a poisoned arrow; he survives, but a fistula develops that will not heal. In Salerno, physicians tell him that he can only be healed if a person regularly sucks the poison from it. Robert does not believe at first that anyone could be found to perform this dangerous service until his wife does it at night. The structural parallels to *Der arme Heinrich* are obvious. Yet Hartmann diverges from medical practices of the day in several respects: while it was not customary for patients to be unclothed, the girl in *Der arme Heinrich* is naked as she prepares to sacrifice herself; and the idea that one person can be healed through the death of another was contrary to theological principles and the traditions of Salerno. Hartmann thus creates a highly individual mixture of ideas from ancient and contemporary medicine about the properties of blood and common customs.

The problematic theological and moral issues raised in *Der arme Heinrich* ensured it a broad reception, and the story has frequently served as a basis for subsequent literary works, including a retelling by Adelbert von Chamisso (1839), a novella by Ricarda Huch (1899), a play by Gerhart Hauptmann (1902), a "musical fable" by Gerhart Hermann Mostar (1928), and a radio play by Martin Beheim-Schwarzbach (1962).

See also 1150, 1184, 1943

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## Circa 1200

The *Nibelungenlied* is composed in the Bavarian town of Passau

### Contagious Violence

The *Nibelungenlied* (*Song of the Nibelungs*) tells the story of the murder of a Burgundian king and his brothers at a feast to which their sister, Kriemhild, had invited them. The tales retold in this epic are very old, dating back to the tribal migrations in the period called the Dark Ages. The epic combines material from several sagas, including those telling about the downfall of a Burgundian kingdom along the Rhine (A.D. 436–437), about Attila the Hun (died A.D. 453). Theoderic the Great (A.D. 455–526), and the hero Siegfried, who may have been a member of a Merovingian dynasty. As is customary in heroic sagas, very different sets of events are compressed chronologically and spatially, and linked to the actions of a few outstanding protagonists ("heroes"), resulting in memorable fables about elemental human passions: love, jealousy, envy, and the desire for revenge. For 700 years, the saga of the *Nibelungs* was passed down orally. In the beginning, it may have served to recall the fate of the kingdoms and their royal houses, later becoming a source for the origins of noble families who traced their lineage to the saga's heroes, and finally a history of events that shook the medieval political and social order to its foundations.

The bard who retold the saga in extended form, probably shortly before A.D. 1200, is thought to have lived near the court of the bishop of Passau. The poet did not have much freedom in shaping his material and was obliged to relate the story as it was preserved in the collective memory of the time. However, we know virtually nothing about the details of the version he worked from. He was free to add embellishments, shift accents, or alter the characters' motivation, but he could not change the basic plot. While there is a suggestion of a possible different outcome, he tells the story in the familiar manner, with the saga taking its ineluctable course: Kriemhild invites her brothers to Attila's court, concealing her real motive, and has them killed. But in *The Song of the Nibelungs* the murders are the culmination of a long story that at first appears to take a quite different turn. Kriemhild seems to be the heroine of a courtly romance, a princess living under the protection of her brothers at the royal court of Worms. Siegfried is a courtly knight, prince of Xanten, the son of a king in the Low Countries. He wants to marry Kriemhild and sets out for Worms to win her hand. Only when he arrives there do we learn from a remark by Hagen, the mightiest warrior in Worms, that Siegfried is a

they ignore Hagen's warning and accept. Their journey is accompanied by unfavorable omens. At Attila's court the situation is tense from the outset, and violence is narrowly averted on several occasions. But then Kriemhild orders her men to fall on the Burgundian retinue at a banquet. Hagen responds by killing the prince, Kriemhild's and Attila's son. A pitched battle ensues. The remaining characters are drawn in one by one: first Irinc, in exile at Attila's court; then Rüdiger, a relative of the Burgundians who feels legally bound to assist them; and finally Dietrich of Bern, who has tried to keep his retinue out of the fighting for as long as possible. When only Hagen and Gunther remain alive on the Burgundian side, Dietrich captures them both and hands them over to Kriemhild. The queen demands for the last time that they give back "what has been taken from her." Hagen interprets this as a reference to the treasure and refuses. In the hope that he would relent, Kriemhild orders Gunther executed first, but when Hagen remains silent she strikes his head off herself. Thereupon Hildebrand, another hero, hacks her to pieces.

At the core of the epic is the theme of betrayal and its opposite, loyalty (*triuue*). In the Middle Ages, a period of relatively weak and undeveloped political and social institutions, *triuue* was a central principle of order, based on personal relationships thought to be stronger and more reliable than others. The concept of *triuue* epitomized all the positive ties in the medieval family: between siblings, parents, and children, between man and wife, and among relatives in general. It also extended to the relationship between lord and vassal, allies and comrades in arms. The epic deals in part with cases in which such loyalty is maintained, but chiefly it is a story of betrayal, of loyalty undermined and perverted. Bonds of loyalty to one person or group can come into irrevocable conflict with obligations to another person, or they can be misused, since their only guarantee is the character of the person involved. In the case of Kriemhild, her loyalty to her husband, Siegfried, inevitably leads to her betrayal of her kin. The principle on which the heroic world rests is thus deconstructed.

This occurs in the course of an epidemic of destructive violence. The heroic, violent world clashes with a courtly, peaceful one for the first time when Siegfried arrives in Worms and, rather than courting Kriemhild, issues a challenge to the ruler. The rules of courtly conduct prevent the outbreak of open conflict. The king treats Siegfried as a guest, placing "everything at his disposal." The duel for power becomes an athletic competition, a tournament, instead. The war against the Danes and Saxons provides a means to channel the violent impulse toward an outside group in the form of self-defense against an arbitrary attack. The resolution of this conflict takes an exemplary form in the victory celebration: The aggressors have been defeated and taken prisoner, yet the victors are generous and release them without sanctions. This pattern of looming violence and its tenuous deflection and dissimulation continues throughout the epic until, in the end, the last remnants of courtly civility are overturned by bloody vengeance. Ironically, the conflict between courtly and heroic codes, between symbolic status and superior physical force comes to

famous hero, who once wrested an enormous treasure from the kings of the Nibelungs' lands and killed a dragon. In Worms, he announces not that he wants to win Kriemhild as his wife, but rather that he has come to challenge King Gunther to a duel for control of his kingdom. The looming conflict is avoided when Siegfried is persuaded to change his mind and submit to the norms of behavior at Gunther's court. He gets a first glimpse of Kriemhild only after he has successfully fought on the Burgundian side in a war against the Danes and Saxons. King Gunther then demands that before Siegfried can marry he must assist the king in his own suit for Brünhild. This Brünhild is not easily won. She will accept as a husband only the man who can show he is stronger than she is and a better fighter; any suitor who competes with her and loses must die. Gunther is too weak for the contest and asks Siegfried to stand in for him, disguised in the magic cloak he had acquired with the treasure of the Nibelungs. To conceal the deception, Siegfried identifies himself as Gunther's vassal. In this manner, Gunther wins Brünhild's hand. When asked at the wedding ceremony in Worms, he is unable to explain why he gave his sister in marriage to a vassal of lower rank. Brünhild refuses to consummate the marriage until he has told her the reason. Once again Siegfried is called upon to take the king's place and wrestle Brünhild into submission in the bedroom with the express promise to Gunther that he will not violate her.

Siegfried subdues Brünhild a second time, and all seems well. Siegfried returns to rule Xanten with Kriemhild. But Brünhild's suspicions give her no rest. She persuades Gunther to invite the couple back to Worms. At a tournament Brünhild insults Siegfried by calling him a serf. If this claim were true, it would also make his wife, Kriemhild, a serf; Kriemhild gets even by proclaiming that Siegfried had been Brünhild's lover before Gunther. The king's attempt to settle the dispute fails, and from then on the Burgundians are resolved to kill Siegfried. With Gunther's approval, Hagen devises a plan. Under pretense that a war was imminent, he persuades Kriemhild to reveal to him the one vulnerable spot where Siegfried can be wounded. The war is then called off, and Hagen sneaks up behind Siegfried while they are out hunting and murders him. There is no doubt about who committed the crime, for when Hagen and Gunther approach the bier, Siegfried's wounds begin to bleed again. The grief-stricken Kriemhild knows to delay her revenge. She becomes outwardly reconciled with Gunther and has the Nibelungs' treasure transported to Worms. As she distributes the gold to acquire a retinue of warriors, Hagen intervenes once more. He steals the treasure and sinks it in the Rhine, while her brothers do nothing to help her. Kriemhild now gives herself over completely to her grief.

At this point the scene shifts abruptly to the court of Attila, king of the Huns. His wife has died, and he seeks to marry Kriemhild. Despite Hagen's warnings, the kings in Worms agree, and Kriemhild also gives her consent, after another suitor, Rüdiger, has made vague promises to come to her aid if she should ever need help. As queen of the Huns, Kriemhild wields enormous power. She persuades Attila to invite her relatives from the Rhine; once again

light at the tournament, that is, in a situation in which all fighting has been reduced to a competition for the symbolic capital of honor.

In the queens' dispute over who ranks above the other, Kriemhild's courtly standards of honor conflict with Brünhild's heroic conception of political power. As the dispute escalates, Gunther's claim to being the legitimate holder of power is challenged, both as king and as husband, that is, subduer, of the queen. Up to this point, violence has been kept in check through courtly rituals or made invisible through Siegfried's use of his magic cloak or under cover of night. Now it emerges into the open; dangerous consequences threaten to follow, which the king hopes to avert by holding a trial. But since both Brünhild's and Kriemhild's interpretations are incorrect, an open discussion must necessarily fail, and the conflict descends again into the obscurity of concealed intrigues, ending in the treacherous murder of Siegfried. His corpse, placed by the killers at Kriemhild's door, where she will literally stumble over it, becomes an emblem of the latent violence that, although disavowed repeatedly, spins more and more out of control. Attempts to make peace continue, along with denial and cover-ups of the violence that has occurred, as seen in Kriemhild's reconciliation with Gunther, her recruitment of warriors loyal to her, disguised as hospitality; in Hagen's secret theft of the treasure hoard; and in the contradiction between the kings' leniency and imposition of punishments.

The final outbreak of violence at the court of Attila is ambivalent. Although celebrated by the heroes, the event, which they and Kriemhild have deliberately brought about, still marks the breakdown of all remaining forms of order. The truth emerges and the game of hide-and-seek comes to an end, but so do the last vestiges of mutual consideration and any possibility for peaceful relations. Hagen's murder of Attila's and Kriemhild's son signals an orgy of violence, in which blood flows instead of wine, and the hall resounds with the clash of weapons rather than music. One after the other, the protagonists are drawn into the fighting, until in the end only Dietrich, Hildebrand, and Attila remain. Heroic furor prevails over all attempts to make peace, at the cost of destroying the world as it had previously been constructed.

Once infected with this epidemic of violence, the figures undergo a complete transformation, even though the narrator does not make the changes in their psyche explicit. The courtly Kriemhild becomes adept at intrigue and betrayal; the weak king, whose claims to power rest solely on heredity, turns into a brave warrior; and Hagen, Siegfried's murderer, is transformed into an almost invincible hero. Even the positive figures—such as Dietrich of Bern or the margrave Rüdiger, the model of courtly behavior in the epic, who gives his feudal duty to Attila priority over his obligation to the Burgundian guests only reluctantly—become heroes in the end; they acquire *relies helden* *mot*, the "courage of a real hero," as they are swept into the frenzy of combat. Once Attila's surviving guests have left for Worms, the Burgundians are referred to more and more frequently as "Nibelungs." The inhabitants of the wild realm of saga conquered by Siegfried have infiltrated and infected the courtly world of Worms, so to speak, until the two merge into one.

It is striking that the poet should have linked the progression of the catastrophe with the abandonment of courtly manners. In this respect the *Song of the Nibelungs* takes up a stance in direct opposition to the contemporary courtly romance, although neither as a criticism of the latter's optimism nor as a confirmation of it *ex negativo*. Rather it makes a point of exposing what courtly romances omit: the fascination with violence and superior physical force, the hero's lack of ties to others, the selfish emotions under a veneer of courtly manners, the latent weakness of institutionalized rule, and contempt for mere appearances. As the catastrophic consequences of this abandonment of all rules of behavior are narrated, the process continues all the way to the annihilation of the established order. For the most part, the narrator refrains from commentary, withholding judgment and merely presenting the mechanisms of a growing inversion: from the courtly world at the beginning of the poem to the devastated battleground of the ending. However, he does not show them in a positive light. Gaming "the courage of a real hero" means lapsing into purely physical violence. The epic thus presents the ambivalent nature of the heroic world about the year 1200, at a critical moment of transition to a new political and social order, against the background of courtly society developing into a more complex civilization.

See also 830, 930, 1184, 1203 (Summer), 1876.

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## Post 1200

Classical Middle High German becomes the medium for a growing number of writers and readers and for an explosion in literary genres

### A Literary Language?

While the question mark in the title of this entry might apply most directly to the adjective "literary," it also pertains to the date assigned to the entry and to the phrase "Middle High German." Thus one may properly question whether 1200 is a realistic demarcation point in the history of the German language. What exactly does the term "Middle High German" denote? Was it a language at all, and if so, was it a literary one? And how should "literary" be defined?

A good place to start in answering these questions is with the traditional term "Middle High German," which breaks down syntactically into three components. Middle High German is a kind of High German, and High German is a kind of German. So to begin with, what is German?