

The Nibelungenlied



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

'The Nibelungenlied.' Anonymous. Translated by A.T. Hatto

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Review

The story of Siegfried, the Rhinegold and the Nibelungenlied is universally considered to be one of the great epics of western civilization, on the same level as The Tale of Troy, the Greek Myths or the Arthurian Cycle. It has inspired many retellings. The anonymous Icelandic saga teller who created *The Saga of the Völsungs* (c.1260), Wagner's operatic *Ring Cycle* (1876), William Morris's epic poem *Sigurd of the Völsungs*, (1876) Arthur Rackham's illustrated retelling *Rhine Gold and the Valkyries* (1910) Fritz Lang's film *Kriemhild's Revenge* (1924) and Stephan Grundy's novel *Rhinegold* (1994) all rework the story in different forms. They all seem to be derived from a great work as the usual cultural pattern is that derivative works are less than the original: not this time.

At least in the anonymous early thirteenth century version, which is the apparent original or at least the earliest existent written version, so much disappoints. The earlier legends this writer worked from probably had more sense of epic power, vividness, insight into human motivation, imagination and internal logic than this version holds. Now and then these qualities gleam through his writings, as if they were in the original manuscript or oral retellings. What he seems to have done is to have fleshed them out with his dulled, unimaginative, prolix and boring verbiage.

The story itself has a narrative power which has drawn artistic creators who can see that. They wisely see the story's potential and strip away the medieval accretions and fleshy additions, get back to the plot and build on the original, adding atmosphere and rounded characters.

Those bare bones of the plot make for great drama. Siegfried, a royal hero, marries the royal Princess Kriemhild. A trivial disagreement

between Kriemhild and her sister in law Brünnhilde leads to insults. These snowball into a feud which leads to Siegfried's murder. Hagen, a devotee of Brünnhilde and her husband King Gunther, pretends to be Siegfried's protector so he can lure Kriemhild into divulging her husband's equivalent of Achilles' heel. This was a spot on his back where a leaf fell when he bathed in the dragon's blood which gave invincibility. Hagen murders Siegfried and temporarily gets away with it due to the power of his allies. This leaves Kriemhild with her great capacity for love festering into an eradicable hatred. Her plans for revenge have two effects, turning her into a malevolent villain and ultimately destroying her society. When Hagen tries to end the bloodletting he becomes heroic.

This theme and the reversal of personality traits has a great capacity for epic subtlety and sophisticated complex characterisation. Unfortunately such a level of complexity requires much more literary skill than this writer has. Instead of psychological insight, tension, subtlety and powerful prose we are given prolix descriptions of wealthy garments, exaggerated numbers of participants, and vainglorious boastings in a story with the pacing of a sleepy ox trudging through a quagmire. The endless reminders of the doom that is to come increase that feeling. These portentous reminders are a salient version of the worth of Walt Disney's adage "Don't tell me, show me." For on average about half the pages have the writer's reminder that a tragedy will unfold or a particular character is heading for tragedy. All this does is eradicate tension and finally bore. It is as if the writer thinks that by repeating the idea he will build up the tension, rather like increasing a pile of mud by shovelling more on. The characters here have as much psychological depth as the plastic action man figures they resemble – and perhaps were sometimes the original inspiration for.

For a contrast read the Icelandic Saga *The Burning of Njal*. The theme of snowballing revenge destroying a similar society is told with sparse, understated language. There are no exaggerated numbers, grandiose descriptions or plastic people. The straightforward, flowing logical

narrative has a power which snowballs as the action does. This story hasd with much less padding and reveals much more talent.

