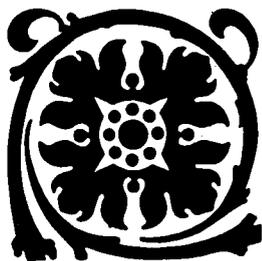

Ad

Feminam



Atlantis sometimes receives statements of a more personal nature than the usual scholarly article. Recognizing that the "personal is political" and can service as *prima materia* for further research and study, we are opening a new section, AD FEMINAM, on an occasional basis. We hope that such a section will stimulate debate and discussion and we invite responses from our readers.

Feminist Repercussions of a Literary Research Project

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The following experiences may show how a woman who never was much involved in feminism can suddenly be made aware of a multiplicity of problems that are peculiar to women.

Up to a quiet day in August 1977 I fulfilled my usual duties as a middle-aged part-time secretary to a small number of professors of German. Then I was given some lecture notes to type, the contents of which I found rather strange. They dealt with the *Nibelungenlied** (NL), an

extremely well-known medieval epic that had been meticulously studied for over 200 years, and about which large library shelves had already been filled. And yet the lecture notes stressed again and again that nobody really knew anything definite about the work in question. Not only was the author unknown but it was even impossible to categorize him. He could not very well have been a knight because the epic showed little familiarity with details of war and hunting; he could not have been a minstrel because he was far too well educated, and he could not have been a cleric because he did not show enough concern about theological or philosophical subjects. He clearly did not belong to any of the three groups from which the poets of that time emerged. He also showed a strange mixture of Christianity and "paganism" and gave a highly uneven characterization of the most important male figure (Hagen), so that there was never much agreement about that man. Some critics

*This article is not annotated in the usual manner since it is only a report about the genesis of another article that was published in a scholarly journal and has 57 footnotes (Berta Lösel-Wieland-Engelmann, "Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Niederrheinischen Nonne?" in: *Monatshefte*, Spring 1980, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 5-25). The article appeared in German and relies heavily on German sources. An English-speaking person who wishes to acquaint herself/himself with the NL, can do so by reading A.T. Hatto's *The Nibelungenlied: A New Translation* (Harmondsworth, 1969). A good example for a prejudiced commentary on the NL is provided by Werner A. Mueller's *The Nibelungenlied Today: Its Substance, Essence and Significance* (Chapel Hill, 1962). No person with whom I had personal dealings is named in this paper since I, for the time being, wish to protect the guilty.

declared him to be a superhero while others saw in him some cowardly traits or even designated him as a criminal. In addition the epic lacked any discernible “message” to its readers, since no firm opinions on anything could be abstracted. Obviously the author did not have any “Weltanschauung” to speak of.

Of all those “problems” and “enigmas” I found the last one hardest to believe. How could anybody write close to 10,000 lines and never divulge his likes and dislikes? Did the poet really never indicate what delighted him and what annoyed him?

I had become curious and soon read an English and a German version of the poem, as well as a considerable number of commentaries in both languages. My confusion and surprise grew with every page. There seemed to be an enormous gap between the things that I had noticed in the poem and the things that the commentators had discovered in it. Even in such cases where the experts disagreed among themselves, they hardly ever came close to expressing the thoughts and feelings which the epic had aroused in me. That huge difference in opinion worried me and made me unsure of my ability to comprehend what I had read. More and more I got the eerie feeling that something was profoundly wrong somewhere: either I was crazy or everybody else was. My boss was certainly right to some degree: there are lots of “enigmas” around the NL. In my view, however, the “enigmatic” things did not come from the ancient masterpiece itself—which I found simple and straightforward—but rather from the responses which it had generated in 98% of all German professors who had studied it in depth during the last two centuries. It amazed me that they could not feel the same sympathy for the heroine which I felt, and could not share my understanding of her thoughts and reactions and aspirations. Just why were nearly all their comments so strangely warped and twisted and upside-down?

It is very easy to sum up the main story: in a very underhanded and sneaky manner a woman (Kriemhild)

gets tricked by a man (Hagen) to give away a secret which is instrumental in facilitating the subsequent murder of her beloved husband (Siegfried). Afterwards Hagen, the murderer, proceeds to rob the widow of her immense personal fortune and to sink it into the Rhine. Quite naturally, such treatment makes Kriemhild furious and bitter and resentful and thirsty for revenge. Since she does not have any way of doing Hagen any harm, she remarries in the hope that her new husband—the powerful and immensely rich Hunnish king Etzel—might later supply her with the necessary means for getting even with her archenemy. When Kriemhild’s endeavours—after many years of waiting and many futile attempts—lead to success, this results in an extensive bloodbath, because too many men are on Hagen’s side and wish to protect and help him in thwarting justice.

This main plot is preceded by a sub-plot. A woman (Brunhild) gets tricked by a man (Siegfried) into giving up her original resolution of marrying only a man who is stronger than herself. Under a guise Siegfried subdues the strong Brunhild and then turns her over to his buddy, a weakling named Gunter. When Brunhild later finds out about this dirty deal she also becomes furious and bitter and resentful and thirsty for revenge. With the cunning help of Hagen she succeeds in getting Siegfried killed.

As can be seen from the above short synopsis, in each case a woman is terribly wronged and decides not to put up meekly with the outrageous treatment given to her but instead tries to make the guilty man pay for his crime. In the case of the main heroine, Kriemhild, this takes many years and an unusual amount of ingenuity and persistence.

The foregoing summary is completely my own and is probably the only one of its type. If a person reads one thousand descriptions of the contents of the NL, none will stress what I have stressed, i.e., the wrongs inflicted on the two women. As a rule, those incidents are either treated as minor matters or even as comic interludes.

The women's hatred and desire to strike back get treated as abnormal and as some strange and freakish aberrations. As the commentators see it, revenge is a "man's business," and women should suffer in silence whatever is being done to them. This type of thinking leads the critics to condemnations of Kriemhild and Brunhild as being "inhuman" monsters.

Parallel to this critical assessment of the two main female figures goes a continuous attempt by the professors of German to upgrade the real monster, the male protagonist Hagen. That man not only kills an unsuspecting and unarmed Siegfried but also a child and the child's tutor and he tries to drown a defenseless priest. Yet a great number of "heroic" qualities are still discovered. And when this "hero" taunts and mocks the poor Kriemhild in a most unchivalrous manner, Hagen gets one round of applause after the other from the male research community. Even for a non-feminist like me this glaring partiality was easy to recognize as male chauvinism. I consider it as an especially dangerous type since it is surrounded by the aura of academic research and professorial competence, and those circumstances have a strange after-effect: even female professors join the men in praising Hagen and trampling on the heroine. They do not seem to be able to resist a certain "brain-washing" effect to which they are subjected during their studies.

After a few weeks of reading I was in the mood of writing a scathing attack on male bias in literary research, illustrating it with the most glaring examples I have found in the secondary literature about the NL. It was, for instance, most illuminating to see how a murder was assessed. In the case of Hagen—who murdered a man who had not done anything to wrong him—the murderer was patted on the back as a far-sighted elder statesman and "realpolitiker" who wisely did away with a man that might possibly at a later time have become a danger to his king (a statement which is not supported by the text of the poem). In the case of Kriemhild—who selected as her target the man who had destroyed her

happiness by murdering her husband and subsequently taking away her fortune—her desire to kill made the commentators paint her as a depraved and despicable monster who had "lost her humanity." "Human" women are probably imagined as the willing and uncomplaining recipients of as many blows as the men wish to inflict.

My planned attack on male chauvinism in literary research, however, never got off the ground because I was severely sidetracked. It had bothered me all along that I seemed to be the only person who understood the poet and I did not relish the exclusivity and arrogance which was contained in such an assumption. Thus I kept asking further questions: why should I be singled out for having a better understanding of the poet's intentions than anybody else had obtained in two centuries? How could I lay claim to knowing more about the NL than the thousands of professors who had made it their main object of studies, some of them devoting literally their entire life to getting a peek behind its "mysteries"?

Then one day, out of the blue, an idea hit me like a tone of bricks: that poem must have been written by a woman! That would explain everything! How natural it would be that the poem refused to "make sense" to the male research community. When they tried to find out what that man was saying to them, it was actually a woman who was talking all along! And since the poet and the audience always operated on a different "wavelength," no clear "message" ever came across! It was, of course, different with me. Not only was I a woman, but in addition I had formed my first opinions about the poem before any professor was able to give me his "introduction" and to precondition me towards the things which I was to find in the epic.

My suddenly-aroused suspicion about female authorship gave me a great initial euphoria and I marvelled about all the unusual and even comic aspects of my possible discovery. But where should I go from here? How would the experts like it if one of their greatest

problems was solved single-handedly for them by a woman—who was not even a professor—and how would they like it if the solution meant heaping tremendous glory on another woman? After all, the NL is not some unimportant or recent work but holds a privileged position in the esteem of all educated German-speaking people. Its place is somewhat comparable to that of the *Iliad* for the Greeks, the *Beowulf* for the English, the *Song of Roland* for the French or *El Cid* for the Spanish. This epic is one of those lengthy works which sometimes appear early in a nation's life and are something like a "start-up signal" for a national literature.

And other questions popped up: what were my money and time requirements? Was it at all possible for an inexperienced person to attack a huge body of previous "scientific" evidence? No doubt, this project was a few sizes too large for me. Finally, how would my husband take it, if I wasted time and money and energy on a hopeless cause?

Despite all the doubts I did start because it was already too late to turn back. The project had somehow a life of its own that had taken hold of me.

Around the year 1200 the most literate ladies were to be found in convents. Already the Germany of the tenth century boasted a well-known female writer, a nun of the Benedictine order. If I wanted a solid foundation for my idea I needed a very old convent in the town of Passau in Bavaria (since Passau is believed to have been the locale for writing the NL). This basic requirement was soon met. Not only does the poem refer to a convent at the confluence of the three Passau rivers but such a convent stands there to this very day (in 1200 it was already over 400 years old). Subsequently I obtained a little brochure about the history of that place from the Bishop's administration. In that booklet I found amazing parallels between the female protagonist of the epic on the one hand and a much-venerated abbess of the convent on the other hand.

Each of the two women belonged to the Burgundian

royal family and each married a king who reigned in Hungary. On the way to Hungary each of them was counselled by a Passau bishop named Pilgrim. Each woman went through terrible heart-break when a hunt ended with the death of a person who was very dear to her (in the case of the real Hungarian queen it was her only living son whom she lost in a hunting accident and in the case of the fictitious character Kriemhild it was her husband who was murdered during a hunt.) Each woman went through nasty hierarchy struggles with another woman: the widowed Hungarian queen Gisela had to yield her place to the mother of her husband's nephew, and Kriemhild was expected to yield it to the wife of her brother. After the husband's death each woman was robbed of a considerable fortune.

Another remarkable point surfaced. During the years from about 1000 to 1161 the convent (consisting of about 30-40 noble ladies, mostly widows) owned a huge tract of valuable land and they also had important toll privileges. They were not only very rich but also had extreme independence, since they were accountable to nobody but the Emperor himself. For over 150 years this situation was a constant annoyance and challenge to the Bishop of Passau who wished to expropriate the nuns' lands and to get their toll concessions, and wanted them under his overall jurisdiction. Finally one of them, who happened to be the nephew of the Emperor Barbarossa, succeeded in 1161 to get the changes effected, and the proud and independent inhabitants of the convent were deprived of all their sources of income. It goes without saying that this transition from wealth and freedom to poverty and subservience will have aroused a lot of violent and unkind feelings, with the main antagonism being strictly along sexist lines. After all, the parties on both sides belonged to the same nation (Bavarian-German), to the same religion (Catholic) and to the same class (members of the nobility). The only conceivable reason for reducing the income and the influence of the nuns was the fact that they were women and, therefore, considered easy to handle, and had to put up with this type of land-switching. If there ever was any group of women being rudely made aware of the meaning of being "only" female, it

was this group of nuns at Passau-Niedernburg in 1161.

I had thus collected already three points in favour of my hypothesis, before I had even begun to look closely at the text. Not only had I pinpointed a group of women from whose midst could easily have come a great writer but I had also found a "model" for the heroine and had uncovered the fact that those women had been very drastically jolted into a new consciousness of their inferior position in matters of property and self-determination.

After having delineated the possible environment for the creation of the epic I turned by attention again to the text. Where did it contain indications of female thinking? Was there enough internal evidence to strengthen my hypothesis? There certainly was, and it was, moreover, easy to find. My research often was nothing more than scanning the comments of experts for things which were supposedly "unusual" or "strange" or "peculiar." In nine cases out of ten that designation did not apply any more as soon as the epic was seen as having been written by a woman. I found quite a number of such things but will give here only three examples of a sex-related viewpoint.

The German knights of 1200 were—like knights everywhere in medieval Europe—eager to prove themselves in all sorts of skirmishes and battles for their overlord or country or the advancement of Christianity. If no real battles were available they played games which were mock-battles, and they clearly enjoyed what they were doing. Fighting with weapons in their hands was more or less a normal state of affairs for a certain class during that time, and gave those men a sense of worth and fulfillment. Strangely enough the German NL is mostly devoid of any hurrahs in favour of fighting. Whenever the poet describes such scenes she puts considerable emphasis on the negative aspects. Instead of hailing the victors the narrator glumly reminds us that soon women and girls will again be shedding tears. Since the convents of that time were mainly inhabited by

widows, this negative attitude towards battles does most likely indicate a female point of view.

Another much-discussed peculiarity of the NL consists of a considerable number of stanzas devoted to the sewing of clothes (that part even got the nickname "the tailor stanzas"). It is a well-known fact that the nuns of that time were not only famous for creating beautiful tapestries but also luxurious vestments for the higher clergy and much-adorned clothes for festive occasions.

While the poet pays a lot of attention to the production of clothes, he/she never goes into any details about the production of weapons, and he/she has very little to say about horses. Whenever he/she describes such all-male excursions like a hunting party or a battle, he/she is rather fuzzy or makes factual mistakes. A knight would have had a better knowledge of such matters, and clerics and minstrels were close enough to their overlords so that they had access to second-hand information. Only a woman who was cut off from asking knowledgeable persons could make the blunders that appear in the NL.

There is another, rather amusing hint towards female authorship of Germany's one and only national (and so-called "heroic") epic: it is the way in which a man is sometimes named in a strictly matriarchal manner. If we, in our days, would treat Nixon or Kissinger or Carter or Trudeau in such a manner, we would have to refer to them as "Pat's husband," "Nancy's husband," "Rosalynn's husband" and "Margaret's husband." It is rather strange to hear when a famous super-hero is sometimes called "Sieglinde's child (Sieglinde having been his mother) and later "Kriemhild's husband."

These examples must suffice since another item remains to be listed. It is quite hard to explain (being highly technical) but is very suspicious.

Like many medieval works the NL has come down to us in several manuscripts. Although there is a considerable number of them, they fall into only two main

groups, which are called the B-group and the C-group. There are various differences between the two versions but one stands out: in the C-group the heroine Kriemhild is shown in the best possible light and her enemy is painted pitch-black. This character assessment has been changed in B, where Hagen has been morally "upgraded" while Kriemhild is provided with as many moral blemishes as could be added without touching the poem's overall structure. In other worlds, some time in the thirteenth century a thorough rewriting of the epic took place along sexist lines. The aim was to change the poem to such a degree that the poet's assessment of "good" and "bad" was weakened to a considerable degree. This does, of course, lead to the question: which one is the original version and which is the falsification?

I took the existence of the two versions as a further proof for my suspicion. In my view the C-version had come first (where the woman was good and the man terribly wicked). Since that version, admittedly, is rather biased in favour of the woman, and since this probably did not agree with the taste of the male audience, the story was obviously changed.

The experts do, however, say something different. On and off during the nineteenth century there were researchers who were sure that C was the early version, but somehow they got shouted down by the overwhelming majority of those scholars that were irresistibly drawn to the B-version. Without really bothering about the scientific basis for their decision, the scholars simply "knew" that the B-version was the original. Today that male-oriented version is the only one used and all teaching and research (and translations) are based on it. The existence of the C-version was explained as follows:

Only a few months after the B-version had been written, a tenderhearted scribe who could not bear seeing a woman maligned—super-knight in brilliantly-shining armour that he was—came to her rescue by beautifying her picture. The story of this unspeakably lofty example of male gallantry has been passed on from generation to

generation, and today everybody believes it. Except me. I do admit that there are kind men in existence and that some of them come to the help of women in need. But that type of men would most probably help some real-life woman and not waste an extreme amount of energy and many years of his life on the "rescue" of a paper-woman, a mere figure in a story. Even the most gallant and unselfish man likes to get a "thank-you" nod from his adored lady, and no fictitious heroine is able to grant even that much.

The first version of my article went to two journals. One editor—who happened to be a NL-scholar—stated in eight lines that I was wrong and did not bother to tell me where and why or to offer alternative explanations for the many details that I had observed. The editor of the second journal (also an NL-scholar) and his referees had another trick up their sleeves by pretending that they could not read.

The purpose of my article had been plainly stated: I wished that the previous question "Was the NL written by a knight, a minstrel or a cleric?" should henceforth be changed to read "Was the NL written by a knight, a minstrel, a cleric or a nun?" All that I wished was to include the woman in the *question*. I now was treated as if I had proclaimed a new unassailable dogma and, in the kind and paternalistic manner, I was told that such *statements* needed documentary proof. As soon as I had the documents together (has the Vatican a copy of the nun's invoice??) my article would certainly be printed. A really nice and neat way of turning me down and one which, moreover, sounded so extremely responsible on a scientific level. That decision, however, raised a number of immediate questions: what "documentary evidence" had all those previous scholars offered when they advanced their ideas about the poet having been a knight, a minstrel or a cleric? Why did they get into print if everything needs to be proven first beyond any doubt? How come that those three hypotheses had enjoyed a very long life of active discussion and all of a sudden the discussion was to be closed? Do century-old rules of the game have to be

changed as soon as a woman appears on the horizon?

Fortunately for me not all editors of journals on German literature have written books about the NL or are specialists on the Middle Ages, and so I did find one who was willing to take a risk with my very controversial subject.

Meanwhile a few other persons believe that my question should not be asked. A female graduate student in Germany with whom I exchanged letters wished to write her Ph.D. thesis on the subject of the author of the NL, with a view to investigating further my hypothesis about a woman. Her intended work was declared to be "irresponsible" from a scientific point of view. Since

grants are not given for the pursuit of irresponsible topics, the young lady in question is now looking for a more acceptable subject which does not pose a threat to her professors. Maybe they are afraid that they cannot sell their books any more if they are invalidated by some new development.

In addition they probably do not cherish the idea that a poem which they always praised and venerated as a national monument could possibly be unveiled as nothing more than a well-disguised feminist manifesto which was intent on exposing men's injustice and meanness, stone-heartedness and greed, solidarity and conspiracies in their dealings with women.