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A Homerist on Looking into the Nibelungenlied: Cortés or a Panamanian?

Beginnings

Sing, goddess, of the destructive wrath of Peleus' son, Achilles, ... from the time when Atreus' son, king of men, and brilliant Achilles first parted in strife. Who then of the gods was it that brought these two together to contend? (*ll.* 1-9)

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

Engagement with audience

'Never, dare we assert, were so many ladies seen together' (X 82)

'Siegfried stood in the courtyard among the warriors to pass the time, as people still do today' (III 32)

'We have since learnt what these ladies did' (VII 60; cf IV 39)

Siegfried and Kriemhild walk together, 'if a white hand were pressed there affectionately ... then I was not told so, yet I cannot believe that it was not' (V 49).

'such gifts encourage one to tell such news to great ladies' (IV 43)

Authorial comment

Kriemhild 'divulged some matters that had better been left alone' (VI 121).

'many fine robes that became their great beauty to the full, so that a man who nursed ill will against any must have been a half-wit' (X 80).

(XIV 118); 'Günther that faithless man in his perfidy thanked him with a low bow' (XIV 120); 'I fancy no warrior will ever again perpetrate such treachery as Hagen contrived. Never should a man practise such monstrous treachery' (XIV 122-3)

The fantastic

'Siegfried slew a dragon and bathed in its blood ... but a broad leaf fell from the linden between his shoulder-blades' leaving him vulnerable there (III 28, XV 121).

Description

On Paris' shoulders he bore the skin of a panther, his bow, and his sword, and he brandished two spears shod with bronze as a challenge to the bravest of the Achaeans to meet him in single fight.

Trojan lavoirs, where 'the wives and fair daughters of the Trojans used to wash their bright garments in the past, in the time of peace, before the sons of the Achaeans came (22.154-6),

Kriemhild is 'so fair that none in any land could be fairer ... her noble person was beyond all measure lovely. Such graces did the young lady possess that she was the adornment of her sex' (I 17).

Similes

'Siegfried stood there handsome as though limned on parchment with all a master's skill' (V 48).

'Now lovely Kriemhild emerged like the dawn from the dark clouds ... she outshone many good ladies as the moon the stars' (V 47-8; cf. XIV 111)

Sirius, 'the star that cometh forth at harvest-time, and brightly do his rays shine amid the host of stars in the darkness of night, the star that men call by name the Dog of Orion. It is the brightest of all, yet it is also a sign of evil, and brings many fevers upon wretched mortals' (*Il.* 22.27-31).

Religion, fate

Kriemhild, after Siegfried's death, prays 'may God let them prosper as they have deserved of us' (XVII 136; cf 137, XIX 145))

'What if the Lord should ordain that death should take me too?' (XVII 138).

'God in Heaven knows that I (Gernot) was guiltless of Siegfried's death' (XVIII 143) (Liudeger) 'the Devil accurst has sent him (Siegfried) here to Saxony' (IV 40).

'The Burgundian kings and their vassals would have been glad to escape their fate if any had wished to show them mercy, but they found no pity among the Huns and so it was with great goodwill that they avenged their deaths in advance' (XXXVI 263). The Burgundians encourage each other with the notion that 'only those who are doomed to die will fall' (*ibid.*; cf. IV 34)

'It was not destined to happen' that Hagen was to enjoy the Nibelungs' treasure he threw in the Rhine (XIX 149).

'What a thing to say! Do you wish to free from painful death a man who is mortal and long ago doomed to his fate? Do it, but the rest of us will not approve' (22.179-81).