Between Heroic Epic and Courtly Romance

Blending Genres in Middle High German and Middle English Literature

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Student name: Kjeld Heuker of Hoek

Student number: s2093588

Date: 01-06-2018

First reader: Dr. M.H. Porck

Second reader: J.M. Müller Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

When the eponymous hero of Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* rides out to meet his enemy, duke Morgan, he hides his and his men's weapons and armour. The parley between Morgan and Tristan is cut brutally short when Tristan draws his sword without warning and kills Morgan by piercing his skull. This foul unchivalric blow might make the reader believe that he is reading one of the Middle High German heroic epics that regale their reader with stories of large-scale battles, backstabbing traitors and tragic last stands. Yet Gottfried's *Tristan* is not commonly regarded as an epic, but one of the more revolutionary courtly romances of the High Middle Ages. It is a romance that deals primarily with the transcendental power of love. This example shows that lines separating the two major secular literary genres of the High Middle Ages are not very clearly drawn.

The dominant secular aristocratic literary genre during the Early Middle Ages was the heroic epic. This genre described the adventures of heroic heroes and followed the values and ethos of the aristocratic audience. Good examples of the heroic epic include *Beowulf* from England and *Chanson de Roland* from France. During the High Middle Ages, around the eleventh century, the new aristocratic genre called courtly romance developed in France. It quickly spread from France over Europe and replaced the heroic epic as the foremost secular aristocratic genre. The heroic epic did not die out but adapted many characteristics from the courtly romance. Determining whether a text is a heroic epic or a courtly romance is problematic. Scholars, such as W. P. Ker in his authoritative and landmark study *Epic and Romance*,[1] have tried to label literary works as either epic or romance with the help of a list of characteristic features of both genres. Yet, many works sit uncomfortably somewhere in between these categories, sparking debate on what characteristics should or should not be included. John Clifton-Everest shows that even the longest and best-known epic in Middle High German, *Das Nibelungenlied*, contains romance elements that are crucial to its plot.[2] On the other hand, there are romances such as *Tristan* by Gottfried von Straßburg which also contain epic elements. So how to decide whether a text is a heroic epic or a courtly romance? Can we be sure that there were two genres and that medieval authors were aware of the differences? How did authors during

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[1] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (New York: Dover, 1957).
[2] John Clifton-Everest, "The Nibelungenlied: Epic vs. Romance," *Syndney Studies in Society and Culture* 11, (1994): 162-175.

the Middle Ages handle these two genres and did they themselves distinguish between them?

There are several theories that deal with the question of how to deal with the problem of the genre of the courtly romance and the heroic epic. While some scholars, such as Hans Naumann, Bodo Mergell and Helmut de Boor, try to invent different types of genres to account for the works that do not easily fall into the category of the epic or the romance,[3] most scholars do accept the existence of the two genres. A new approach, proposed by Sarah Key and Karen Pratt, argues that the two genres represent two different ideological worldviews which are linked to different ideological classes the authors and readers belonged to. These ideologies work unconsciously, as it is decided by the class the author belonged to. Identifying the heroic epic and courtly romance elements in texts will allow the scholar to identify the ideological construction of the text and author.[4]

This post-modern approach has been refuted by E. Donald Hirsh in general and K.S. Whetter specifically in relation to Medieval literature. They argue that genre is a function of communication, which implies that genre has a heuristic influence, and that therefore the medieval author intended his audience to recognize his work as either a courtly romance or heroic epic. The author uses certain overt or covert signals to make sure the readers understands that they are reading an epic or romance.[5] The author is consciously using genre and its characteristics in his work.

Putting Hirsch and Whetter's claims to the test, this study will show that *some* medieval authors did recognize two genres, the heroic epic and the courtly romance, and furthermore, that they used these two genres consciously. The analysis of *Das Nibelungenlied* and *Tristan* will show the authors of these works consciously using the characteristics of the heroic epic and the courtly romance for dramatic effect, as they tried to create tensions in the texts. However, consciousness of the heroic epic and the courtly romance is not evident in all literature of this time period. While authors of Middle High German works did use the heroic epic and the courtly romance, we will see that Middle English authors seem not to use the heroic epic and its characteristics. As we shall see in

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[3] Hans Naumann, „Stand der Nibelungenforschung," *Zeitschrift für Deutschkunde* 41 (1927): 1-17; Bodo Mergell, „Nibelungenlied und höfischer Roman" *Euphorion* 45 (1950): 305-336; Helmut de Boor, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich 1953), 156.
[4] Key, *The 'Chansons de Geste' in the Age of Romance*, 4-7.
[5] E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

the case study of *Havelok the Dane*, despite fitting source material and subject matter, no conscious use of the characteristics of heroic epic is made.

This study will focus on Middle High German and Middle English works. Because the courtly romance developed out of the heroic epic in France and only then spread all over Europe, the courtly romance was a new genre in places such as Germany and England. In Germany and England any elements of the epic in a romance or vice versa were brought about through adaptation and borrowing, not through the evolution and development of the romance out of the epic. This study will therefore restrict itself to Middle High German and Middle English medieval literature, to see how authors consciously adapted elements from another genre.

The first chapter will focus on the theoretical background, discussing epic moments, episodic narrative and the selection of the primary works. What are the origins of the heroic epic, how did the courtly romance develop and what are the differences in terms of ethos, themes and structure? It will also address the problem of genre and the uncertainty of the authorial intention. The last part of this chapter will focus on the differences between the Middle English and Middle High German literary and social contexts.

The second chapter will analyse a Middle High German heroic epic, *Das Nibelungenlied*, to demonstrate how its author consciously used characteristics of both the epic and the romance to criticize both courtly and heroic values and to criticize and to show the reader how an excess of both will lead to tragedy and disaster. The author synthesized the two value systems: the values do not only operate independently, but it is precisely when they function together that the real tragedy is inevitable. The author could only have made his point clear when the audience consciously understood and recognized the characteristics of the heroic epic and the courtly romance.

In chapter three, this study will analyse Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*. In this courtly romance, Gottfried uses heroic elements to make the transition in the middle of his work more dramatic. This transition emphasizes the change from the first part of the story, which is heroic in nature, to a courtly romance. His goal is to reinforce the central moral or message of the story: the power of love over other social values. This chapter will also show that a recognition and conscious use of both genres by author and audience are needed for such a message to be made.

In chapter four will see that not the conscious use of the heroic epic did not extend to the whole of Europe. in some areas of Europe, this method of creating meaning in a work was not possible. In Middle English the heroic epic tradition seems to have died out and disappeared. We see this most clearly in the oldest secular aristocratic poetical work in Middle English: the romance *Havelok the Dane*. The subject matter of this romance is precisely right for use in a heroic epic, but the author has not decided to make use of the heroic epic or its characteristics consciously. In terms of the characteristics, the work only follows the elements we associate with the romance. This study will suggest two possible explanations for the fact that no Middle English author, including the one of *Havelok the Dane*, chose to use the heroic epic or its characteristics, or the Middle English authors lost their knowledge about the heroic epic.

CHAPTER 1 – HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction

The twelfth century saw the introduction of numerous courtly romances. While the older heroic epic remained popular in some parts of Europe, the new courtly romance quickly became the most popular genre. As we shall see, the spread of the courtly romance, and the tradition of the heroic epic differed per region in Europe. Wherever the courtly romance spread, it mixed with the heroic epic. Many works contain therefore characteristics of both genres, problematizing the identification of genre of these works. As we will see below, the use of elements of both genres does not mean that the authors at the time did not recognize the epic and the romance as two different genres. What characteristics did differentiate the two genres will be discussed in the last sections of this chapter. Form, structure, ethos and themes play an important part in identifying in how far works contain an heroic or courtly essence.

The development of the heroic epic

The heroic poetry of the Early Middle Ages has either survived in a few fragments or is known to us through later adaptations, with the exception of only a few larger works such as *Beowulf.* We know that much more heroic poetry must have existed, since we have eyewitness accounts that mention heroic poetry being written down, sung, listened to and read. In his biography of Charlemagne for instance, Einhard speaks of the emperor's educational programme that sought to preserve as many texts as possible. Not only the classical texts of Ancient Rome and Greece were written down, but also the "age-old narrative poems, barbarous enough, it is true, in which were celebrated the warlike deeds of the kings of ancient times' to be written down and in this way preserved for posterity."[6] There clearly was a vast corpus of age-old narrative poems that Charlemagne and his court valued highly.

Unfortunately, the poems Einhard and other eyewitnesses such as Alcuin mention have not survived. In his letter of 797 to the bishop of Lindisfarne, Alcuin accuses the monks of Northumbrian monasteries of preferring vernacular heroic lays above the holy books of Christian religion. Alcuin asks "What has Ingeld to do with Christ", furthermore

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[6] Karl Reichl, "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55.

nothing that "The house of the Lord is narrow, it cannot hold both."[7] This letter shows us the existence of a group of heroes that was associated with this type of literature. It also points to the oral nature of heroic poetry.

Ingeld, the hero mentioned in Alcuin's letter, can be found in many heroic poems and even Latin chronicles written in countries as far apart as England, Iceland and Denmark. The heroes of heroic poetry belong to a tradition that was spread over a large area that encompassed large parts of Western Europe. Heroic poetry written in this *kulturraum*, or culture area, incorporated common heroes and narratives.[8] Narrators used and reused certain heroes and the narratives attached to them in different forms and in different contexts, but the names stayed the same. These heroes and narratives belonged to a 'Germanic' tradition, which used Germanic heroes and legends. As scuh, heroic poetry resembles the courtly romance, where figures such as King Arthur, Gawain and Tristan also return in different stories.

The oral nature of heroic poetry and the sparsity of textualized fragments means that scholars are unsure what form heroic poetry took during this early period. One theory developed by Andreas Heusler suggests that heroic poetry developed from the heroic lay into the heroic epic. The heroic lay was, according to Heusler, a short terse Germanic song that consisted of a mixture of narration and dialogue. It was moreover typified by a swift narrative pace and was focussed on a situation of conflict.[9] Heusler's theory has been criticised by many scholars[10], especially because besides *Das Hildebrandslied* and *The Finnesburg Fragment*, very few literary examples survive. The hypothesis does, however, give us some idea of the older form of heroic poetry.

Heusler partly based his theories on the fact that older heroic poetry was performed and transmitted orally. Scholars, using the theories of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, have come up with the theory of the oral-formulaic nature of heroic poetry. The bard would perform his poem by using formulas that would allow him to rapidly compose his verse during the performance. Traces of this practice can still be seen in longer heroic epics, which, arguably, developed out of the heroic lay. In the written copies of works

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[7] Reichl, "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages," 55.
[8] Alois Wolf, *Erzählkunst des Mittelalters* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1999), 88.
[9] Reichl, "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages," 58.
[10] Reichl, "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages," 58.

such as *Beowulf*, *Chanson de Roland* and *Das Nibelungenlied*, these formulas can still be seen in the text.[11]

Scholars now agree that only through textualization and the spread of literacy could longer heroic epics such as *Beowulf* have been composed in their entirety. The idea that works such as *Beowulf* had been created in the process as described by Parry and Lord is no longer believed.[12] The author of *Beowulf* did, however, still use formulas to simulate an oral style. Textualization created a new form of heroic poetry, the heroic epic, which was not simply a transcript of an oral performance. Alois Wolf has argued that textualization allowed the creation of longer texts with new possibilities in terms of narrative and structure.[13] The narratives of the short heroic lay would have been merged into longer stories. This process eventually also opened up these heroic epics to influence from other genres.[14] Wolf mentions the *chanson de geste*, Old French heroic epics, as an example of epics that contain new ideas not found in the older tradition. In epics such as *Chanson de Roland*, new political conflicts, such as the religious wars between Christians and Muslims, are part of the new narrative.[15]

Finding characteristics that define the heroic epic is difficult, because of the influence from other genres. An important influence was the courtly romance, a secular genre that like the heroic epic was written for the warrior classes. The textualization of the heroic epic coincided with the rise of the romance; as a consequence, the epic became permeated by courtly themes. Heroic epics like *Das Nibelungenlied* contain romance elements, which adds to the difficulty of finding characteristics that define purely and only the heroic epic.[16] This influence was reciprocal, given that the courtly romance was also influenced by the heroic epic.[17]

The courtly romance was a new genre which developed during the twelfth century. It was quite different from the heroic epic in terms of its ethos, subject matter, style and structure, something we will go into in the last section of this chapter. The first romances were written in France, which remained the most important centre of early romance

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[11] Reichl, "Heroic epic poetry in the Middle Ages,"72.

[12] Hermann Reichert, "Heroic Epics and Sagas," in *Handbook of Medieval Studies*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 1813.

[13] Wolf, *Erzählkunst des Mittelalters*, 87-89.

[14] Wolf, *Erzählkunst des Mittelalters*, 87-89.

[15] Wolf, *Erzählkunst des Mittelalters*, 88-90.

[16] Clifton-Everest, "The Nibelungenlied: Epic vs. Romance," 164.

[17] Roberta Krueger, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

production. From France the romance genre spread to other parts of Europe, including England and Germany, where it was adapted with great enthusiasm. The production of new romances remained centred on France. English or German authors of romances, unlike the authors of epics, looked to France for new inspiration. Very many English and German romances were adapted from a French romance.[18]

Although the romance was a new genre without the deep roots of the heroic epic, it was certainly influenced by older genres. Many of the stories and characters of the earliest romances had been adapted from the *chanson de geste*, Old French heroic epics. Although there are differences, both genres, the heroic epic and the courtly romance, also have various characteristics in common: the life of the warrior or knight, the importance of weaponry, the importance of fighting and duelling, the same social group of nobles and aristocrats and the existence of a lord-vassal relationship structure. Another important influence upon romances was hagiography, with its emphasis on Christian values such as kindness, moderation and supernatural occurrences.[19] These other influences explain the differences in the ethos of the epic and the romance. The twelfth century saw the rise of a nobility which had different values than the warrior classes that favoured the epic. Although the heroic epic did not die out and remained an important genre, the courtly romance spoke to its audience on another level. Its audience became more Christian, more literate and more civilized. Although the life of the nobility was still brutish and centred around war, the rise of chivalry, a new ethos, became apparent in the new genre.[20]

With the spread of the romance, different matters or cycles were developed which a romance author could use. Each of these matters contained a group of narratives, each marked by its own characters and themes. The earliest matter, developed out of the *chanson de geste*, was the Matter of France. Its narratives are located in France and focus on either the war between the Christians and the Muslims or the struggle between king and nobility. The Matter of Britain is the best known and most widely spread romance cycle. It centres on the court of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. It is in general more fantastical and less related to history than the Matter of France. Another important cycle was the Matter of Rome, which used the stories of ancient Greece and

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[18] Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

[19] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 17.

[20] Ann Marie Rasmussen, "Medieval German Romance," In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185.

Rome. It relates important classical stories such as the Fall of Troy. A fourth cycle sometimes added is the Matter of England, which combines English folkloric stories with the Romance material. Figures such as Robin Hood are part of this cycle. These cycles and their examples show us the adaptiveness of the romance and its authors. Ancient Latin stories, fantastical Celtic myths, historical political memory and folklore were all adapted in courtly romances.[21]

Discussion of genre

Since this study will focus on the influence of one genre on another, it will have the face the problem of identifying the boundaries between the heroic epic and the courtly romance. It will also have to address the question whether the medieval audience perceived the romance as a different genre from the epic. Did narrators, singers and authors of the romance and epic keep certain characteristics in mind when they wrote or composed their works? This section will deal with the questions surrounding genre.

The study of genre is an area of literary criticism which, according to K. S. Whetter, has been "consistently ignored or belittled."[22] Postmodern thought, inspired by Fredrich Jameson's 'ideology of modernism', has ignored or condemned genre studies. Postmodern scholars believe that genre is not useful for understanding a text as it will only restrict the reader.[23] Other scholars, like Alastair Fowler and Ernst Robert Curtius, have not condemned genre studies, but have claimed that an awareness of genres disappeared almost completely during the Early Middle Ages. The classical thought on genres and genre studies was only gradually rediscovered.[24] Both influences have led scholars to believe genres and genres studies are not useful in the study of early and high medieval literature.

Other scholars, such as K. S. Whetter, have disagreed with such claims and have studied medieval literature through the lens of genre and genre studies. Whetter agrees with Donald Hirsch, who argues that genre is a function of communication. Genre has a heuristic task for the reader and author. The author uses certain overt or covert signals to

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[21] Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 323.
[22] K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, (Aldershot: Ashgate 1988): 151
[23] Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, 153.
[24] Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, 153.

make sure the reader understands that he is reading an epic or romance.[25] The author can, as this study will show, also use these signals to create extra meaning in his texts.

Using genre to understand texts is not only useful for modern readers, but was also important for the reading experience of medieval readers. As the quotations by Alcuin and Einhard tell us, the corpus of heroic poetry was seen as different from, and in Alcuin's case worse than, the other literature being transcribed and textualized. Only through the development of the courtly romance did a second secular genre come into existence. These romances were seen as different by medieval readers from the older heroic poetry that remained popular. We see this most clearly in the manuscript compilations that clearly distinguished between heroic poetry and romance as two different sorts of texts. The heroic epics are set apart from the courtly romances in such compilations. The authors and scribes clearly saw the epic and romance as two different types of texts.[26] An example is the Codex Sangallensis 857, in which *Das Nibelungenlied*, the heroic epic, is clearly separated from the courtly romances like Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and *Willehalm*.

Yet epic and romance existed side by side and interacted with each other as well. The romance adapted and used the epic to create new situations, stir up debate and dialogue about the values that the two genres did and did not share. Simon Gaunt discusses the way in which the values of the romance, which as we discussed in the last section used a different ethos from the epic, are being questioned by using epic elements dynamically.[27] Authors of romances adapted epic elements in order to comment upon certain values in the same way as authors of heroic epics employed courtly elements. Gaunt argues furthermore that by seeing the two genres as distinct, we can see what the differences are, and how they comment on each other. By focussing on the similarities we can become blind to the differences and presume the two genres to be the same. We must also be aware of the many differences that divide the two genres. We must be sensitive to moments when romance and epic borrow in order to comment. Certain social conditions

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[25] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 68-111.
[26] Simon Gaunt, "Romance and Other Genres," In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 49.
[27] Gaunt, "Romance and Other Genres," 53.

can lead to new ideas which results in new dialogue between different ideas.[28] We can see this process at work in *Das Nibelungenlied*, which we will analyse in chapter two.

Borrowing in order to comment is only one reason for the similarities between epic and romance. The romance was also developed from the epic. In France, the similarities between the Old French *chanson de geste* and the earliest courtly romances are far more numerous than in other countries. As mentioned before, many themes and figures has been taken from the former and used in the latter. Gaunt describes the older epic as being overtaken by the newer courtly romance, which introduced new elements, courtly love, courtly ethos, but also used older epic elements and combined them.[29] Sarah Key however stresses the dual nature of the development of the romance and the epic. The epic was not replaced by the romance, but coexisted with the romance. Key suggests a dialectical relationship between the two genres.[30]

This research will, however, focus on the development of the two genres outside France. There the situation was different, because the romance was imported from outside. In England and Germany, the romance genre did not grow from its local form of the heroic epic, but was translated and adapted from the French. The *chanson de geste*, which resembles the romance in many ways, as Sarah Key has shown, is a heroic epic, but one which is closer to the romance than would have been possible in England or Germany. As this research will discuss, the older heroic epic tradition in England seems to have been completely dismantled by the new French romance tradition. There are no heroic epics in Middle English as the Norman Conquest created a completely new literary context that broke with the Old English tradition. Middle English works after the Conquest very much resemble French courtly romances. In how far the folkloric Matter of England contains some elements of heroic epic will be discussed in the last chapters of this study. Germany, by contrast, is unique in the existence of a strand of heroic epics that coexisted with the romance in the twelfth and thirteenth century. The romance was a foreign French import, which did not grow out of the German heroic epic. The relationship between epic and romance in Germany was therefore possibly more removed. Those epics that did adapt romance elements and romances that did adapt epic elements in Germany will therefore be the subject of study in this research.

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[28] Gaunt, "Romance and Other Genres," 51.
[29] Gaunt, "Romance and Other Genres," 57.
[30] Gaunt, "Romance and Other Genres," 48.

The heroic vs. courtly ethos

Since this study addresses the influence of the epic on the courtly romance and vice versa, it would be necessary to give some characteristics that typified either genre. There is some general consensus among scholars as to what characterizes the heroic epic. One important element that differentiates the epic from the romance is the heroic ethos. This ethos defines the values of heroes of the heroic epic. It partly corresponds to the courtly ethos, but there are some major differences. Overall the heroic ethos is characterized by the importance of courage, pride, glory and loyalty, meaning loyalty to the lord, loyalty to one's own honour and loyalty to one's comrades.[31] The courtly ethos also contains these elements and Christian values, such as pity, love and moderation, values that have no place in the heroic epic.[32] Forgiveness is not valued in the heroic world, death is preferable to defeat and no mercy is given or expected. This darker worldview is clearly apparent in many heroic epics, especially when compared to courtly romances. This is especially apparent in a work such as *Das Nibelungenlied*, where the darkness and pessimism of such a worldview comes to the foreground.

A very important distinction between the courtly romance and the heroic epic is the theme of courtly love and the central role it plays in the narrative of the courtly romance.[33] The courtly love is the romantic-erotic relationship between knight and lady, in which the knight tries to serve the lady. The relationship between knight and lady was often described in feudal terms. This relationship mirrors the feudal relationship that was the reality of courtly life. The lady is a passive figure who does not act of her own accord in the narrative, but is only there to be served. The tasks the knight has to perform for her can be military, duelling with other knights, slaying dragons or other beasts, or moral, showing moderation, justice or kindness under duress. The relationship between knight and lady is often one of subservience, platonic and unrequited, although marriage between knight and lady is also common.[34]

Courtly love was only one part of the new courtly ethos. Although this new ethos incorporated parts of the heroic epic, including bravery, loyalty to lord and companions, the new courtly ethos demanded more from its followers. Not only is courtly love an

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[31] Reichert, "Heroic Epics and Sagas," 1808.
[32] Reichl, "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages," 58.
[33] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 17.
[34] Rasmussen "Medieval German Romance," 185.

important new driving force for courtly heroes, the courtly ethos also demanded a different type of behaviour towards other knights. More than in the heroic epic, we see an emphasis on moderation and forgiveness. Uncontrolled wrath is not a strength in battle, but a serious sin. This new ethos can be seen in the story of romances: duels between knights do not always end in death and, after a fight, forgiveness is possible.[35]

Heroic vs. courtly themes and setting

The heroic epic is also often characterized by certain themes. A variety of these themes are used and reused in different epics, in which certain details are changed, but the general outline remains the same. A good example of such a theme is the 'Last Stand', in which the warriors fight to the end, not accepting defeat or surrender. By going down fighting, they show their courage in the face of death. Both *The Battle of Maldon*, *Chanson de Roland* and *Das Nibelungenlied* contain such a last stand.[36]

The heroic epic also almost always takes place in an heroic past; the so-called 'Heroic Age'. This heroic age corresponds to the era in history known as the Age of Migrations, the era of the migration of Germanic tribes into the Roman Empire, that took place from roughly 300 till 700 AD. The story and characters of the heroic epic are often loosely based on events and important figures of that age.[37] Important historical events and figures therefore return in many heroic epics. This is the reason for the appearance of figures such as Theoderic the Great, Attila the Hun and Gunther of Burgundy in various heroic epics spread all over Europe.

The world of the courtly romance is different from that of the heroic epic. It is far less realistic and historical. It often takes place in less historical world which seems to be divided between either the court or the wilderness. Most romances take place in a fantasy world. The court is the place where the knights live and feast, while the wilderness is the place for adventure. The knight leaves the court to go on quests in the wilderness. The fantastical and the mysterious plays an important part in both the court and the wilderness. Both wild creatures and strange supernatural knights play a role in both

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[35] Rasmussen "Medieval German Romance," 185.

[36] Hatto, Arthur Thomas, "Towards an Anatomy of Heroic and Epic Poetry," In *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry Volume II*, ed. Arthur Thomas Hatto (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1989), 173.

[37] Reichl, "Heroic Epic Poetry in the Middle Ages," 66.

spheres. The heroic epic, although not without its own supernatural elements, is less extreme in this respect.[38]

The development of the individual knight, the growth of his skills, conscience and morals is an important theme in many courtly romances. The plot of the romance is therefore often didactic, focussed on the education of the knight, and the dual world of court and wilderness supports this. The knight has to leave society, the court, and go into the world where dangers lurks, the wilderness, to learn and show his qualities. This process is often repeated to emphasize the development of the individual.[39] The epic on the contrary is often more static. It does not focus on a hero and his own development, as is the case in the courtly romance, but on a hero who fights for a group of people, his tribe or nation.

Heroic vs. courtly form and structure

Form is also a distinguishing elements of the heroic epic is the oral origins that produced the formulaic language of many epics. Although many epics were written down and were no longer produced orally, the narrator still opens the story by stressing the supposed oral origins of the story. The work is a story passed down to the current narrator by other narrators. The language itself could also be heroic. Archaic words were more often used in epics while the newer words were used in romances. The appearance of archaic words in romance are often associated with heroic characters or heroic behaviour. In *Tristan*, one of the characters, Morold, is described using archaic heroic terms such as 'veiclîcher'.[40]

Another important structural characteristic of the heroic epic is the epic moment structure. A. T. Hatto defines the heroic epic by its use of epic moments, a highly specific trait that typifies the heroic epic.[41] The epic moment is connected with the oral history of the epic. The narrator of old heroic poetry had to know the narrative by heart. While formulas would be useful to fill up the line, the larger overarching narratives needed to be remembered as well. Hatto suggests that the narrator used certain fixed moments in the narrative of the poem, around which the dramatic turning point is based. This moment is

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[38] Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 5.
[39] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 20.
[40] Rüdiger Krohn, "Stellenkommentar," in *Tristan: Band 3*, ed. Rüdiger Krohn (Ditzingen, Reclam, 1991), p. 39, vers. 283.
[41] Hatto, "Towards an Anatomy of Heroic and Epic Poetry," 165.

the culminating high point of a stretch of an increasingly suspenseful narrative line towards which the story progresses. The poet then remembers these moments as the goal of a stretch of narrative. These epic moments are the turning points in the narrative as something dramatic happens which changes the course of events. Examples are Roland blowing on his horn, something that symbolizes a turning point in the battle and the war, Hagen's spear piercing the unsuspecting Siegfried and Kriemhild's revenge on Hagen at the end of *Das Nibelungenlied*. These epic moments structure the heroic poem in a way that is recognizable and memorable. This structure has remained in the textualized heroic epics, showing the foundational nature of this characteristic. Such a structural characteristic has the advantage of being consistent and not easily borrowed or dropped. It lends the epic the quality of tension that the heroic epic thrives on, but is ill suited to the more leisured courtly romance. The epic moment plays an instrumental part in the structure of the heroic epic. In a romance, by contrast, such an epic moment works alongside the more essential episodic structure. Analysing the epic moment of the text will be a starting point with which one can analyse the heroic epic and the courtly romance.

The courtly romance has a textual origin and tradition which has influenced its structure and content. The heroic epic was originally an oral genre and only gradually became a textual genre. The romance has no oral history and was written down from the start. This textual foundation is reflected in the structure of the romance, where the narrator is far more present. Not only do many romances start with a prologue, the narrator also often comments on the story he tells. This prologue has the effect of creating an extra layer of narration.[42]

The structure of the romance is, however, more influenced by this textual tradition. Unlike the epic, which consists of epic moments, the romance is based on episodes. This episodic layout is also very important to its plot and the didactic element of it described above. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner points out: "The pleasure of romance is usually to be found in the play of resemblances spiced with differences"[43]. The romance consists of several episodes, each of which discloses a variation on the first episode. So unlike the dramatic changes of the epic moment, the episode structure is less

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[42] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 14.
[43] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 23.

climactic and more predictable. The goal of this structure is to create "the use of analogy to build intra- and intertextual patterns, the interlacing of narrative segments or lines."[44]

Each episode is self-containing, as it contains a narrative with a clear beginning, a development and resolution. The following episode repeats the same structure, but with variation of the details. For example, a fight between the hero and some robbers in *Erec* is repeated several times, each time the number of robbers rises and the dangers grow. This gradual increase raises the tension, shows the hero's battle prowess and builds up the episodic narrative.[45]

It is through the repetition and variation of small details that the meaning in the romance is generated. Unlike the epic, which is more dramatic, the meaning of the romance is reinforced with each episode. Patterns are created through repetition and variation that impress upon the reader the lesson involved in the narrative. These repetitions deprive the romance of much logical causation. Logical causation is far less important than the subtle message produced by the episodes, even though this might come across as illogical to a modern audience. The heroic epic often makes a more logical impression upon modern readers in this respect.[46]

The episodic structure of the romance is radically different from the epic moment structure of the epic. Like the epic moment, it can be seen as a distinctive mark or characteristic that is consistent throughout all romance works. Analysing the primary literature and studying how a work contains what structure will be an important part of this study.

Conclusion

In this chapter the development of the heroic and the courtly romance has first been discussed. We have seen how both secular aristocratic poems have different roots, but also influenced each other. Both genres were seen by the medieval audience as different, even though authors used characteristics of both genres in their texts. To differentiate between the characteristics of the heroic epic and of the courtly romance is therefore important if we want to study how authors consciously appealed to both genres in their

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[44] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 23.
[45] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 24.
[46] Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," 24-25.

work to create tension. We have seen that the epic is different from the romance in ethos, themes and structure.

CHAPTER 2 – DAS NIBELUNGENLIED

Introduction

Das Nibelungenlied is a heroic epic written during the flowering of Middle High German literature between 1170 and 1230. Unlike the courtly romances of the time, *Das Nibelungenlied* is an anonymous epic based on older Germanic traditions. It was probably written around the year 1200 at the court of the Bishop of Passau.[47] It is also unlike the courtly romance in that it is essentially a tragedy. The work starts out with characters who through their decisions, which are determined by the heroic or courtly ethos they follow, create strife. This strife between the characters leads to further struggles and an escalation of the situation that ends with the death of nearly every character. It is not the free decisions of the characters that are responsible for the tragedy, but the extreme heroic and courtly ethos these characters decide to follow. It will become clear that the author of *Das Nibelungenlied* is critical of both the heroic and courtly ethos, for it is the combination of both that is responsible for the escalation and final disaster. The first section will discuss the path to this tragedy. After that the heroic and courtly ethea in *Das Nibelungenlied* will be further analysed and elucidated. The last three sections will focus on the three main characters, Siegfried, Hagen and Kriemhild, and will discuss how they are responsible for the development of the tragedy and what heroic or courtly ethea has influenced them.

The path to tragedy

The tragedy of *Das Nibelungenlied* is the result of a series of decisions made by the characters that, like a multiple-vehicle collision, develops and propels the tragedy forward until almost all the important characters are dead. These characters are motivated to make these decisions on the basis of the heroic and/or courtly ethos. The tragedy of this epic is not caused by an attack from the outside, by beast or foreign enemy, but by the inability of the value system of the characters to deal with problems brought up by the world they live in. This inability is common in some other heroic poetry as well, for example in *Das Hildebrandslied*, an Old High German heroic poem of the ninth century. As A. T. Hatto explains:

> The Hildebrandslied unfolds a drama within the souls of two men caught in a tragic web of circumstance interacting with their formed characters, with the

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[47] Ursula Schulze, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997): 11-20.

> audience as a mute chorus apprised from the outset of the truth which the father soon learns but can share with his son only when it is too late.[48]

The father, despite knowing that he is facing his son in battle, cannot tell him the truth. His heroic ethos forces him to fight, even when this means he has to fight his son. Although the end of *Das Hildebrandslied* is not known - only a fragment has been found - the tragic tenor of the work indicates a calamitous ending. In *Das Nibelungenlied* this same structure is enlarged to an epic scale, as becomes clear when we analyse the plot.

The first mover in the tragedy is Siegfried, who is intent on marrying Kriemhild, who is the sister of Gunther, the king of the Burgundians. He moves to the court at Worms, where in return for Kriemhild's hand, he helps Gunther to marry Brünhild. Brünhild is the extremely strong warrior queen of Iceland who will only marry the man that defeats her in three athletic competitions. Since only Siegfried has the strength to subdue her, he first helps Gunther win the competition, and afterwards tames her so that Gunther can sleep with her on the first wedding night. Problems arise, however, when the two ladies, Kriemhild and Brünhild, clash over whom has the higher rank. Kriemhild shocks the court by claiming that not Gunter, but Siegfried 'deflowered' Brünhild.[49] Hagen, loyal vassal of Gunther and Brünhild, swears revenge and kills Siegfried. Kriemhild is then married off to another king, Etzel, and from his court she plans her revenge. Inviting Gunther, Hagen and the rest, she ruthlessly stirs up trouble at Etzel's court, unleashing a full-scale battle between the Burgundians and Etzel's men. At the end, after only Hagen and Gunther are left, she orders Gunther to be killed, and beheads Hagen herself with Siegfried's sword. Kriemhild is then killed in her moment of triumph by one of her own allies, Hildebrand, who is sick of the slaughter and of Kriemhild, who is responsible for all this tragedy. And that is how *Das Nibelungenlied* ends.

Scholars have noticed the division between courtly and heroic behaviour in *Das Nibelungenlied*. Schulze notices that the backbone of the story is heroic in nature, but that the author has introduced courtly elements whenever the plot allows this.[50] In her analysis, she shows were the author of *Das Nibelungenlied* has adapted the story in a courtly way, but she also focusses on the elements of the story that are decidedly heroic in nature. She furthermore stresses the problems the presence of these two genres bring.

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[48] Arthur Thomas Hatto, "Medieval German," In *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry Volume I*, ed. Arthur Thomas Hatto (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1989), 169.

[49] Kriemhild is actually lying, unwittingly or not. Siegfried had only tamed Brünhild.

[50] Ursula Schulze, *Das Nibelungenlied*: 142.

Schulze points out that the story is multi-layered, with the heroic and the courtly ethea problematizing any attempt to create a final interpretation of *Das Nibelungenlied*. This chapter will, however, attempt to show how these contrasting genres are the key to understanding the message the author of *Das Nibelungenlied* wanted his work to convey.

The heroic and courtly ethos

As the short summary above shows, one decision leads to another; one character is killed and another takes revenge. The need to take revenge, to protect one's honour and the honour of your lord and lady, reveals the heroic ethos that underlies the decisions of most of the characters: "'der vorhte ist gar z evil,/swaz man im verbiutet, || derz allez (lâzen) wil,/daz kan ich niht geheizen || rehten heldes muot.'"[51] This focus on bravery against social pressure to desist, the need to take revenge for the death of a friend or lord, the importance of honour are all important aspects of the heroic ethos that permeates most decisions of most characters in the work.

Yet the work also contains a courtly element that is essential for the tragedy to work. The opening of the first part of *Das Nibelungenlied* in many ways resembles a courtly romance. The hero goes to a court to marry the woman he loves, but has never seen before. He first has to show his worth by helping the king and to fight his battles. After these tribulations he is at last able to marry her. This actual beginning of *Das Nibelungenlied*, from which the rest develops, is more in line with the courtly romance than with a heroic epic. In the heroic epic, the hero fights for land, people or king. In *Beowulf* the hero is not driven by anything so selfish as his love for a woman. That there are courtly elements in *Das Nibelungenlied* should not be surprising, given the historical and cultural context of the work.

The genre of Das Nibelungenlied

Das Nibelungenlied was written down around the year 1200, a time when many German authors were writing courtly romances, which in the preceding century had spread from France to Germany. As scholars have noted, *Das Nibelungenlied* has clearly been influenced by this new genre, some even claim that *Das Nibelungenlied* should in fact be

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[51] *Das Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013), stanza 2265: trans. Burton Raffel:"Tis all too much of fear,/For that a thing's forbidden, || meekly to forbear./Scarce may I deem it valor || worthy good knight to tell."

seen as a romance and not an epic.[52] Indeed, as we have seen as and will see, *Das Nibelungenlied* contains numerous romance elements that influence its plot, structure, language and ethos. The world of *Das Nibelungenlied* is both a heroic and courtly world, as we move from the kingdom of warrior queens in Iceland to the courtly setting of Worms. Sometimes the heroic ethos drives characters to action; sometimes love is the motive. The complexity has led some scholars to claim that *Das Nibelungenlied* belongs to a completely new genre, *höfisches Epos* or *höfischer Heldenroman*.[53] However, this designation, which brings the two genres together in an apparently harmonious whole, obscures the fact that they interact and cause the tragedy of the work. As we shall see, however, it is the existence of two genres and the value systems attached to them that drives the tragedy of *Das Nibelungenlied*. The characters, especially the three main characters discussed in this section, are guided and motivated by these value systems.

Siegfried

The central character of *Das Nibelungenlied*, the greatest hero of them all, the prime mover, is Siegfried. He encapsulates and symbolizes the struggle between heroic and courtly elements and values. He is both the utmost heroic warrior and ultimately driven by nothing but courtly love. He has two sides, each of which can be seen shining forth in some scenes, and it is the interplay between the two sides that activates the destruction that follows in this tragedy.

Initially, Siegfried is presented as a perfect hero and knight. However, his heroic supernatural side is revealed relatively quickly in the third adventure, or episode,[54] when he arrives in Worms. Before he is granted an audience with the king, Gunther calls for Hagen, the wisest and strongest vassal, to provide the Burgundians with some information about Siegfried. Hagen tells us of Siegfried's heroic exploits in defeating the Nibelungen, a mighty dwarf and even a dragon.[55] This heroic image is further emphasized through the confrontation between Siegfried and the Burgundians when he is finally granted an audience. Siegfried, who intends to gain the hand of Kriemhild, starts by challenging Gunther to a duel, the winner taking the other's land and kingdom. The Burgundians are stunned, not really knowing how to respond to such a threat: "Den kunec hete wunder ||

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[52] Clifton, "The Nibelungenlied: Epic vs. Romance," 164.
[53] Clifton, "The Nibelungenlied: Epic vs. Romance," 173.
[54] *Das Nibelungenlied* is sorted into 'aventiure', adventures, which in this study will from now on be called episodes.
[55] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 84-97.

und sîne man alsam/um disiu maere."[56] Siegfried's heroic ethos of 'might is right' conflicts with Gunther's ethos of legitimate rightful kingship: "'Wie het ich daz verdienet', || sprach Gunther der degen,/'des mîn vater lange || mit êren hât gepflegen,'"[57] Gunther is baffled by Siegfried's perception of legitimacy. For him, the legal right of inheritance trumps claims based on force. Siegfried remains committed to his strategy, however, and cannot be persuaded to retract his challenge until he is suddenly reminded why he came to Worms in the first place: his love for Kriemhild. He is persuaded by the Burgundians to join the court on a friendly basis and forego his challenge.[58] Both the brazen, fierce, headstrong, heroic side of Siegfried and the courtly impulses that motivate him are clearly revealed in this scene.

Yet, it is not only this heroic action, but also the heroic world he brings with him that reveals Siegfried's heroic nature. Siegfried comes from a world which seems at odds with the courtly ordered world of Worms. It contains dragons, magical objects, amazon queens, fabled treasure and a ring that gives power.[59] Siegfried's strength derives largely from his literally thick skin, that protects him from physical attack. He was bathed in the blood of a dragon he killed, which made him virtually invincible, except for one spot on his back. This power together with his strength and the "tarnhelm", an instrument which allows invisibility, is essential for the unfolding of the tragedy.

For the tragedy to develop, Brünhild needs to be tamed and married to Günther. In many ways, Brünhild also belongs to Siegfried's heroic world. As Hagen reveals: "sît im daz ist sô kündec, || wi ez um Brünhild stât"[60], only Siegfried knows about her and her world, a world to which Gunther does not belong. Only Siegfried has precise knowledge about Brünhild's enormous strength and he warns Gunther to forget about marrying her. Only he knows the way to Iceland, allowing Gunther to challenge her at all. Eventually, Siegfried's epic qualities and attributes allow him to defeat Brünhild in the guise of Gunther. As remarked earlier, this marriage further unfolds the scandal between Kriemhild and Brünhild and therefore drives the tragedy of *Das Nibelungenlied*. The

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[56] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 109: trans. Burton Raffel:"The king was thunderstruck, || and so were all his men,"

[57] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 110: trans. Burton Raffel:"'Have I deserved to hear,' || said Gunter the brave, at length,/'that what my father fought || so long and well to save/is now to be taken away || by any man's raw strength'"

[58] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 118.

[59] After one reference, the ring is never heard from again in the story.

[60] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 329: trans. Burton Raffel:"He certainly seems to know || a lot about Brünhild that no one here knows'"

peculiar heroic nature of Brünhild is essential for the tragedy to develop and only Siegfried had the strength and attributes to first tame her and then unleash her upon the court of Worms.

A third attribute of Siegfried's world is the fabled treasure which Siegfried brings with him. This treasure, which once belonged to the dragon, belongs to the heroic world of which Siegfried is part. This great wealth greatly upsets the balance of power at the court of Worms. Although Siegfried does not use the treasure, it would possibly allow him to buy warriors and increase his power at the expense of Gunther. This is also what Kriemhild is intent on doing when she inherits the treasure after Siegfried's death. Hagen is therefore required to add injury to insult by stealing Kriemhild's treasure, for he cannot allow such a large treasure to fall into the hands of an enemy. This insult further increases Kriemhild's drive for revenge. The further escalation of the conflict after the death of Siegfried is therefore assured.

Yet, for all his heroic characteristics, Siegfried is also a courtly character. This is especially clear when we analyse the question why Siegfried takes certain decisions. Throughout *Das Nibelungenlied*, he is always driven by love. It is love that drives him to leave his kingdom and go to Worms: "Dô gedâht ûf hôhe minne ‖ daz Siglinde kint"[61]. It is the thought of Kriemhild that interrupts the wild heroic state he is in when he confronts Gunther for the first time.[62] The actions of Siegfried encapsulate the interplay between the heroic and the courtly. He is the only hero, by virtue of his heroic qualities, who can bring Brünhild to Worms, thereby allowing the tragedy to further develop. Yet he is driven by love to come to Worms in the first place. If he had only followed the heroic ethos, he would never have come to Worms. If he had only been a courtly knight, he would not have had the abilities and instruments to beat or even reach Brünhild. The irony of *Das Nibelungenlied* is therefore that its greatest heroic hero is not driven by any heroic thought to act or fight, but by courtly love.

Hagen

The tragedy, now set on its track by Siegfried, is helped along by the actions of another important character, Hagen. Hagen becomes more and more important as the story of *Das Nibelungenlied* progresses. He is the most ruthless and heroic character second only

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[61] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 45. trans. Burton Raffel:"Then Siegfried started to think about courtly love"
[62] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 121.

to Siegfried. He follows a clear heroic ethos which places loyalty towards his people, his king and his own honour above all other things. This heroic ethos is influenced by his respect for rank, for the hierarchical position and for the relationship between lord and vassal. His sensitivity for social and legal niceties can be construed as being inspired by a more courtly feudal ethos, although he clearly shows his ability to transcend the moral niceties of the courtly ethos when the situation demands it.

Hagen's heroic character shines through on numerous occasions. He is the only person in Worms who knows about Siegfried and his exploits and who is also known and feared outside Worms. Siegfried's father, Siegmund, warns him to beware of Hagen: "Ob ez ander niemen waere || wan Hagene der degen,/der kan mit ubermüete || der hôchverte pflegen, daz ich des sêre fürhte, || ez mug uns werden leit,".[63] He is above all singled out as the foremost vassal of King Gunther. Hagen's main motivation is to protect the state and the people against foreign threats. As such, he does not limit himself by courtly considerations of mercy or moderation. His willingness to act decisively is clearly shown by his attack upon Siegfried. Knowing full well that he cannot handle Siegfried in a fair fight, he attacks Siegfried's weak spot, his back, and pierces him with a spear when the latter is drinking from a spring: "Dâ der herre Sîfrit || ob dem brunnen tranc,/er schôz in durch daz kriuze, || daz von der wunden spranc/daz bluot im von dem herzen || vaste an Hagenen wât."[64] The ruthlessness with which he attacks fits Hagen's nature, who unlike other knights at court is prepared to let the end justify the means. His attempt to protect his own people and kingdom, if not the method he uses, might be deemed heroic.

Hagen takes other steps to provide for the safety of the kingdom. He steals Kriemhild's treasure to prevent her from buying the loyalty of warriors: "Ir sumeliche eide || wâren unbehuot./dô nâmen si der witwen || daz kreftige guot./Hagen sich der slüzzel ||aller underwant."[65] He is not only willing to take action against men, but also against women to protect his interests. His death, when it comes, is brave and heroic. He fights to the last to resist Kriemhild in order to take as many men with him as possible. He goes to extremes to make sure that Kriemhild does not get her way. She wants revenge for

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[63] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 52: trans. Burton Raffel:"just one of whom, Hagen, || might serve, just him alone,/ to block your path, for he's || too proud ever to yield."
[64] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 978: trans. Burton Raffel:"And while Sifried was drinking deep, || bending over/the water, Hagen's spear || ran him through, aimed/at the cross. Heart's blood spurted, || Hagen's clothes were stained."
[65] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 1129: trans. Burton Raffel:"So both of them, once more, || broke their solemn word./They took the enormous treasure || out of the widow's control./Hagen collected the keys, || and Hagen kept them all."

the death of Siegfried and also wants to know the location of the treasure which was hidden by Hagen. He tricks Kriemhild into killing Gunther first, who also knows the location, and then refuses to reveal the hiding spot. He dies taking the knowledge with him into his grave, accepting death without fear: "den schatz, den weiz nu niemen || wan got âne mîn./der sol dich, vâlendinne, || immer verborgen sîn.'"[66]

Yet Hagen is not entirely motivated by heroic values. There are some elements in his character that can be described as courtly. He is certainly not, like Siegfried, a warrior who believes in might above right. He has an important place in the feudal hierarchy in the Burgundian kingdom.[67] He has a high regard for the law, and attaches great importance to the loyalty he owes to the king and the monarchy as an institution "want ir doch wol bekennet || der Tronegaere site:/wir müezen bî den kunigen || hier enhove bestân./wir suln in langer dienen, || den wir al her gevolget hân.'"[68] The emphasis on the feudal relationship, in contrast to the personal loyalty between warrior and warlord of the heroic epic, gives this loyalty a courtly feeling. He refuses to desert Gunther and follow Kriemhild and Siegfried because his family has always served the kings. As Siegfried brings the heroic world of dragon treasures and tarnhelms with him, so is Hagen's world the world of feudal service: "mit den sînen mâgen; und sîner bruoder man,/die si wolden füeren; durch urliuge dan,/ und ouch di Hagenen recken.; des gie den helden nôt."[69] He is required to help his king in battle. His role is emphasized by the advice he gives in the royal council. At the beginning of the poem he is the foremost vassal, often giving the decisive advise to the king. Siegfried's arrival brings his position in danger as his position is being threatened by a man who has far more strength and wealth.[70]

What eventually drives Hagen to take revenge on Siegfried is a mix of heroic and courtly motives. Although Siegfried poses a threat to the Burgundian state, the most apparent named reason is Hagen wish to defend the honour of his queen, Brünhild: "er lobt ir sâ zehant,/daz ez erarnen müese || der Kriemhilde man,/oder er wolde nimmer || dar

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[66] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 2368: trans. Burton Raffel:"Now no one knows the treasure's || hiding place but God/and me— and you, you fiend || from Hell, will never see it again."
[67] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 116.
[68] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 696: trans. Burton Raffel:"You know/perfectly well how the knights || of Troneg do these things./We always stay with our lords, || and our lord is always the king./We'll go on serving those, || and only those, we've served until now.'"
[69] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 169: trans. Burton Raffel:"calling on friends and family, || and on his brothers' men,/to lead them all in desperate || battle, along with Hagen's knights."
[70] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 152-153 & 310-312.

umbe vrôlich gestân."[71] He as the vassal has to protect the honour of his lady, a truly courtly sentiment. How he performs this feat is however far removed from the courtly ethos. He ruthlessly attack Siegfried through a stealth attack. Although a stealth attack is not heroic per se, the ruthlessness of the attack and Hagen's will to defeat the otherwise invincible Siegfried is closer to the heroic than the courtly ethos.

Kriemhild

Lastly, there is one important character, the opponent of Hagen throughout the second part of the poem, Kriemhild. She, unlike Siegfried and Hagen, starts out as a character completely guided by courtly sentiments. Through the wrong done to her she is driven towards a heroic stance, which is all the more surprising and terrible because of her gender. The courtly values she follows are replaced by the heroic ethos by the second part of the story. At first, her role is, as might be expected from a woman in courtly romances, limited. She plays the breathtakingly beautiful woman who awakens Siegfried's love, and for whom Siegfried undertakes his battles and tribulations. She has the role of a magnet, drawing Siegfried into the orbit of Worms, where he will, as we have seen, create a great amount of damage. The tragic aspect of her character is that she has partly herself to blame for the disaster in *Das Nibelungenlied*, especially since she is responsible for the major escalation in the first part of the poem. Through her impulsive behaviour, she challenges and humiliates Brünhild in front of the court. These courtly struggles of precedence and hierarchy between woman are instigated by Kriemhild's behaviour.

Her heroic side is of course not difficult to spot in the second part of the story. She plans her revenge upon Hagen and Gunther carefully over many years. She invites them to a feast, ruthlessly provokes the Burgundians and even endangers her own son to provoke the Burgundians. In the end she orders the death of her brother without remorse and personally kills Hagen with her own hands. These are highly dramatic actions, especially since they are taken by a woman. Here, the pattern we have seen before seem to work as well. Inspired by the heroic ethos, she thirsts for revenge upon her enemies. Yet, throughout the second part of *Das Nibelungenlied*, in which Kriemhild's heroic side is shown, the real reason for her revenge is made clear. Her revenge is ultimately driven by a courtly sentiment, her love for Siegfried: "daz truoc mîn holder vriedel, || dô ich in

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[71] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 861: trans. Burton Raffel:"He promptly promised that he/would make sure Kriemhild's husband || paid for what he'd done./He swore he'd never be happy || until he himself had righted her wrong."

jungest sach,/an dem mir herzeleide || von iuwern schulden geschach.'"[72] For Kriemhild as well, the explosive combination of courtly love and a heroic ethos leads to tragedy.

Conclusion

So, as we have seen, the tragedy of *Das Nibelungenlied* is caused by the decisions the characters in the epic make. These decisions are informed by the heroic or courtly ethos the characters follow. Character are, as we have seen in the case of Siegfried and Kriemhild, and partly in the case of Hagen, driven by courtly sentiments to take momentous actions. How a character approaches a certain situation is however often inspired by the heroic ethos. Siegfried goes to Worms for love, but upon arrival immediately starts by challenging Gunther for a duel. This example shows us the nature of the heroic ethos. Siegfried's original intention was to marry Kriemhild, but once there he react to the situation in the only way he knows, with threats of violence. The courtly sentiment drives the characters to take decisions, the original first mover being the courtly love that inspired Siegfried, while the heroic ethos decides the precise action that the character will take. Hagen, for example, is driven by his feudal obligation to Gunther to take action against Siegfried. But his manner of doing so is inspired by the heroic ethos. Kriemhild as well is driven by her love for Siegfried to take revenge against Gunther and Hagen, but the way she achieves this revenge, by plotting and murder, is once again inspired by an heroic worldview.

It is therefore not unreasonable to suspect, as other scholars have done, that the author of *Das Nibelungenlied* wants to criticize both ethea. Clifton-Everest in his article on *Das Nibelungenlied* points out that Christian thought, which could have prevented the tragedy to occur, has been left out deliberately.[73] This leaves only the ethea of the secular aristocratic classes. The author of *Das Nibelungenlied*, whom most scholars believe to have been a clergyman, perhaps tried to show that a world with only the ethea of the aristocratic classes, a world without Christian values, will end in the tragedy. To make this clear he shows us the interplay of the courtly and heroic ethea.

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[72] *Das Nibelungenlied*, stanza 2369: trans. Burton Raffel:"The very last time I saw || my sweetest, dearest man,/he wore it. But then you brought || endless grief to my heart, you tore him.'"
[73] Clifton, "The Nibelungenlied: Epic vs. Romance," 174-175.

CHAPTER 3 - TRISTAN

Introduction

Although one of the most famous courtly romances of the Middle Ages and the inspiration for numerous later works, *Tristan* by Gottfried von Straßburg also contains elements of the heroic epic. This section will show that Gottfried von Straßburg uses the heroic and the courtly romance and their characteristics deliberately and consciously to reinforce the great transformation in the middle of the poem. As we shall see, *Tristan* is a revolutionary, even humanistic in its message about love. However, the first part of the work contains three important confrontations which give the work a clear heroic structure. Gottfried manipulates the expectations of the audience, the last of the three confrontation ends with an anti-climax as courtly love overpowers the need for revenge. From that point onwards, the problems of courtly love take centre stage, not the heroic values that we see in the first part.

Historical background

Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* is seen as one of the foremost courtly romances in Middle High German. This romance was composed somewhere before the year 1210. It is a German adaptation of a widely spread tradition surrounding the figures of Tristan and Isolde. The Tristan legend, although based on Celtic myths, was first adapted into a romance in France. Different versions developed as the Tristan story spread throughout Europe. Gottfried's version is interesting for its far-reaching courtly romance themes of the power of courtly love and the problems it can bring.[74] Gottfried's version of the Tristan legend is also seen as being far more developed in terms of its treatment of courtly themes than other versions.[75] Unlike Eilhart's *Tristan*, which was written a generation earlier, Gottfried's *Tristan* focusses far more on the psychological aspects of the story.[76] Some scholars have even characterized Gottfried's *Tristan* as an early humanistic work. Alois Wolf stresses the revolutionary nature of the work, noting that love in Gottfried's *Tristan*, in contrasts to other romances, completely trumps any other desire. In Wolf's estimation, Tristan foregoes power and wealth; instead, he focusses on his sole desire:

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[74] Will Hasty, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan"*, ed. Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 6.
[75] Hasty, "Introduction," 6.
[76] Hasty, "Introduction," 6.

Isolde.[77] These revolutionary ideas about courtly love are reinforced by the contrast between the first part of the work, which is heroic, and the second part, which is courtly.[78] Especially the structure of the first part plays an important role, as it is based around three epic moments, each of them raising the tension. The structure of the first part makes clear to the readers that they are reading something in the style of the heroic epic. While the first two epic moments end in bloodshed, a typically heroic outcome, the third and last ends in the confrontation between Tristan and Isolde. From this confrontation, as we shall see, the heroic epic is transformed into a courtly romance. A typical characteristic of heroic epic is used to heighten the great change that comes over Tristan when he confronts Isolde.

Morgan

The first epic moment is the confrontation between Tristan and Morgan. The epic moment itself occurs when Tristan suddenly and unexpectedly uses his sword to stab Morgan to death. The events leading up to this point further emphasise the ruthlessness of this action. Tristan's father, Riwalin, has started an unjustified war with Duke Morgan and successfully conquers some land. He then marries Blanscheflur in secret and they conceive a child, Tristan. Duke Morgan unexpectedly returns before Tristan's birth, and Riwalin rides out to meet him. He is killed and his land taken back by Morgan. Tristan is born, but Blanscheflur dies during childbirth. Tristan then grows up hidden, only to be kidnapped and ending up at the court of King Marke, the brother of Blanscheflur. After gaining the favour of King Marke, Tristan returns to take his revenge upon Duke Morgan and to reclaim his lands.

These scenes, especially the scenes of confrontation between Riwalin, Tristan and Morgan, have many heroic characteristics. The hero following a heroic ethos does not fight for the development of his own individual conscience, as is the case with the courtly hero, but for the glory and reputation of himself and of his tribe, people, king or family. Riwalin and Tristan both take on Morgan to enlarge the fortunes of their family and in Tristan's case take revenge on his father's killer. The language used to describe these expeditions is heroic. Riwalin is depicted as a wild bear:

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[77] Alois Wolf, "Humanism in the High Middle Ages: The Case of Gottfried's Tristan," in *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan"*, ed. Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 26.
[78] Hasty, "Introduction," 7.

und ist ein veiclîcher site,
hie vâhet man den bern mite:
der richet einzele schaden,
unz er mit schaden wirt beladen.[79]

The word "veiclîcher" is especially important, for it is a word only used in heroic poems and it means devilish, to be doomed to die or ill-fated.[80] This meaning and his action also reflect the heroic ethos that Riwalin seems to follow. Like Tristan, he uses violence to take revenge when he is slighted or insulted and the blood feud that develops between Tristan and Morgan is an example of this heroic ethos.[81] Gottfried is well aware that Riwalin's and Tristan's behaviour is not proper and courtly. Riwalin's and Tristan's behaviour is not moderate and merciful, but vengeful and harsh: "übel mit übele gelten,/craft erzeigen wider craft:/dar zuo was er gedanchaft".[82] Gottfried also doubts the legality of Riwalin's attack on Morgan, pretending to not know the precise reason for Riwalin's attack: "weder ez dô nôt alde übermuot/geschüefe, des enweiz ich niht".[83] Riwalin is furthermore characterised by 'übermuote',[84] another word often used in heroic poems, a famous example being *The Battle of Maldon*.[85] This heroic behaviour of revenge and unwarranted aggression is in conflict with the laws and morals of the society of Gottfried's time.[86]

The portrayal of Tristan not as a courtly knight, but as a heroic warrior is reinforced in the confrontation between him and Duke Morgan. Tristan rides out with a group of trusted men to attack Duke Morgan. Unlike Riwalin, he plans his revenge carefully, hiding his and his men's weapons and armour.[87] He confronts Morgan when he is out hunting with his court, demanding his lands back. Morgan coolly and firmly denies

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[79] Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 1993), vers. 283-286:trans. A. T. Hatto: "It is a fatal style of living – one catches bears with it. For a bear gives blow till he is overwhelmed with blows."

[80] Rüdiger Krohn, "Stellenkommentar," in *Tristan: Band 3*, ed. Rüdiger Krohn (Ditzingen, Reclam, 1991), p. 39, vers. 283.

[81] Arthur Thomas Hatto, *Eine Allgemeine Theorie der Heldenepik* (Düsseldorf: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990), 17.

[82] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 272: trans. A. T. Hatto: "returning evil for evil, matching force with force: to this he gave mucht thought."

[83] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 342-343: trans. A. T. Hatto: "whether he was provoked or whether it was from arrogance I do not know but (so his story tells) he attacked Morgan as if Morgan had done him some wrong"

[84] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 293-300.

[85] Richard Hamer, "The Battle of Maldon Introduction," in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. Richard Hamer (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1970), 48.

[86] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 118, vers. 5415.

[87] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 5314-5319.

Tristan's claims to his father land, remarking that Tristan does not have any claim on the land[88] and declares that no one in the forest will be harmed:

> 'ûz' sprach Morgân 'in gotes haz!
> iuwer bereden waz sol daz?
> iuwer slac engât ze keinem man,
> der ie ze hove reht gewan'[89]

Tristan reacts quickly and mercilessly to this remark:

> 'diz wirt wol schîn' sprach Tristan./er zucte swert und rande in an./er sluoc im obene ze tal/beidiu hirne und hirneschal,/daz ez im an der zungen want./hie mite sô stach er ime zehant/daz swert gein dem herzen în."[90]

Not only the language used, the graphic detail of the sword piercing Morgan's skull, but also the contrast with the expected courtly behaviour is telling.[91] Gottfried seems to emphasize the shocking and confrontational nature of Tristan's attack. Duke Morgan's remarks that no one at his 'hove' will be hurt indicates that he sees the hunting grounds to be his court, certainly not a place of duelling and fighting. The shock of Tristan's attack becomes especially clear when we compare Gottfried's version with *Sir Tristrem*, a Middle-English version of the Tristan legend:

> Thi fader thi moder gan hide;/In horedom he hir band./Hou comestow with pride?/Out, traitour, of mi land!'/Tristrem spac that tide:/,Thou lext, ich understand/And wot.'/Morgan with his hand/With a lof Tristrem smot./On his brest adoun/Of his nose ran the blod./Tristrem swerd was boun,/And ner the douke he stode./. . . . ./. . . . . . . /With that was comen to toun/Rohand with help ful gode/And gayn./Al that ogain hem stode/Wightly were thai slayn.[92]

In this version of the story, Morgan insults Tristan repeatedly, calling his mother a whore and thereby making Tristan's revenge far more sympathetic. Although it is still direct and

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[88] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 119, vers. 5447.

[89] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 5445-5449: trans. A. T. Hatto: "'Away!' said Morgan. 'Devil take you! What good is your attestation? You may not draw sword on anyone who was ever of a court!'"

[90] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 5449-5455: trans. A. T. Hatto: "'That we shall see!' said Tristan. He whipped out his sword and ran at him. With a downward sweep he struck through skull and brain, ending only at the tongue, then at once plunged the sword into his heart."

[91] Hatto, *Eine Allgemeine Theorie der Heldenepik*, 18.

[92] "Sir Tristrem", in *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem*, ed. Alan Lupack, http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/lupack-lancelot-of-the-laik-and-sir-tristrem-sir-tristrem-part-i (06-04-2018), vers. 859-880: my own translation: "Your father cohabited secretly with your mother;/he fornicated with her/What right do you have?/Out, traitor, out of my land!'/Tristrem spoke then:/'you lie, I understand/and know.'/Morgan with his hand/with his palm struck Tristrem./down on his breast/the blood of his nose ran/Tristem's sword was ready/and near the duke he stood./…/…/with that he had come to twon/Rohand with ful good help/and useful./al who against them stood/quickly were they slain."

unlawful, we can at least understand Tristan's reaction to a certain extent. The ruthlessness of Gottfried's version, which is masked in *Sir Tristrem*, shows us that the Middle High German author in no way tries to make Tristan make sympathetic. The comparison shows us that Gottfried deliberately and consciously emphasizes the heroic nature of this confrontation.

Morold

The second epic moment is the confrontation between Tristan and Morold. Morold is the champion of the King of Ireland, Gurmun. He is sent to England, to the kingdom of King Marke, to collect tribute. Only by waging war upon King Gurmun, a war which King Marke cannot win, or by defeating Morold in a duel can demand for this tribute be lifted. Tristan, who has returned to the court of King Marke challenges Morold to this duel and kills him, thereby ridding England of the tribute.

The story leading up the confrontation with Morold also contains heroic elements. As mentioned in chapter one, one defining element of the heroic epic is the use of real historical figures.[93] *Tristan*, although belonging to the Matter of Britain, also contains historical figures. King Gurmun is the ruler of Ireland: "der dô z'Îrlanden künic was,/als ich'z an der istôrje las/und als daz rehte maere seit,/der hiez Gurmûn Gemuotheit/und was geborn von Affricâ/und was sîn vater künic dâ."[94] This king is based on Geiserich, King of the Vandals, a Germanic tribe that conquered parts of northern Africa. Once again it is only Gottfried's *Tristan* that contains this historical character.[95]

The language and choice of words of this part of the story is also very heroic. Especially Morold is described with heroic words and language: "des vierden sô kam Môrolt/der starke von Îrlanden dar/ze wîge und ouch ze kampfe gar."[96] The word "wîge", meaning battle, was an archaic word only used in heroic poems, not in romance.[97] Morold is also described as having the strength of four men:

Môrolt, als uns diu wârheit

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[93] Hatto, *Eine Allgemeine Theorie der Heldenepik*, 14-15.

[94] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 5879-5884: trans. A. T. Hatto: "As I read the history and as the authentic story says, the man who was king or Ireland was called Gurmun the Gay and he was a scion of the house of Africa, where his father was king."

[95] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 124, vers. 5882.

[96] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 5950-5952: trans. A. T. Hatto: "in the fourth year Morold the Strong arrived from Ireland armed both for battle and single combat."

[97] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 125, vers. 5952.

> ie hât gesaget und hiute seit,
> der haete vier manne craft,
> diz was vier manne ritterschaft"[98]

Not only is he supernaturally strong, the narrator also describes him as an heroic warrior, not a courtly knight. He is often described as a 'vâlandes': "Wider disen vâlandes man"[99], which is an archaic word that means devil, also only used in heroic poetry.[100] In general, whenever the narrator describes Morold, he uses archaic words and emphasizes his strength, "Môrolt der sêre starke"[101], rather than his courtliness. Although Tristan is more of a courtly knight than Morold, the narrator also uses some heroic adjectives to describe him. For example, we are told his shield bears a depiction of a boar: "ein eber dar ûf gesniten was".[102] The boar was a heroic symbol of bravery and recklessness.

The heroic ethos is also clearly present in this part of the story. Tristan acts as the defender of the realm. He takes up the defence of the people, who are being subjected to harsh tribute, and also defends the honour of his lord King Marke. He confronts Morold by shouting his challenge to Morold for a duel in front of the entire court: "ir hêrren alle, hoeret her:/der künec mîn hêrre und sîne man!".[103] His challenge and boasts are heard by all. This boasting is an important and essential part of all heroic poetry, including *Beowulf* or *Das Nibelungenlied*.[104]

The duel between Tristan and Morold is also far removed from the conventions we recognize in courtly romances. Both Tristan and Morold show their ruthlessness during the fighting. Tristan first mortally wounds Morold and then proceeds to decapitate him: "daz swer daz nam er und gab daz/ze beiden sînen handen./er sluoc sînem anden/daz houbet mit der cuppen abe."[105] Neither man shows any mercy or nobility in the fight: Morold uses a poisonous sword and Tristan decapitates Morold showing it to Morold's men, who are watching from a distance:

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[98] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 6877-6880: trans. A. T. Hatto: "As the true version has always said and says today, Morold had the strength of four men."

[99] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 6213: trans. A. T. Hatto: "against this most monstrous man!"

[100] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 126, vers. 6213.

[101] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 5873: trans. A. T. Hatto: "Morolt, the very strong,"

[102] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 6613: trans. A. T. Hatto: "A Boar had been cut out over it"

[103] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 6257-6259: trans. A. T. Hatto: "Listen to me, all you nobles – my lord the King and his vassals"

[104] Elizabeth Solopova, *Key Concepts in Medieval Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), 86.

[105] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 7082-7085: trans. A. T. Hatto: "He then strode up to Morold and taking his sword and laying it in both hands, struck off his enemy's head, together with the coif."

'ir hêrren' sprach er ,kêret hin,/enpfâhet jenez zinsreht,/daz ir dort ûf dem werde seht,/und bringet iuwerm hêrren heim/und saget im, daz mîn oeheim/der künic Marke und sîniu lant/diu senden ime den prîsant/unde enbieten ime dâ bî:/swenne ez an sînem willen sî,/daz er's geruoche unde ger,/daz er sîne boten her/nâch solhem zinse sende,/wir enlâzen s'îtelhende/niemer wider gekêren./mit sus getânen êren/sende wir s'im hinnen, swie kûme wir'z gewinnen.'[106]

Without any reason except to strike fear into the heart of the enemy and to boast of his own exploits, Tristan shows Morold's head. No other version of the Tristan story contains this amount of cynicism and savagery.[107] As in the Morgan confrontation scene, other authors have tried to make Tristan here more courtly and noble. Gottfried, however, deliberately stresses the heroic and savage aspects of Tristan and his adventures.

Isolde

The last epic moment is the confrontation between Tristan and Isolde, the turning point of the story that indicates the transformation from the heroic first part to the courtly second part. It is during this transformation that Tristan changes into a recognisably courtly knight. Although he managed to kill Morold, he is wounded through Morold's poisonous sword and the Queen of Ireland can heal him. Tristan now travels twice to Ireland, first in secret and undercover for his healing, the second time openly to gain the hand of Kriemhild for King Marke. He succeeds by killing a dragon that afflicts Ireland, but is wounded once more. While he is being healed by the Queen of Ireland, Isolde suddenly realises who he is, the killer of her uncle. She resolves to kill him with the sword that once belonged to Morold:

diz swert daz muoz sîn ende wesen!
Nu île, rich dîn leit, Îsot!
gelît er von dem swerte tôt,
dâ mite er dînen oeheim sluoc,
sô ist der râche genuoc![108]

Once again Tristan finds himself in a life-threatening situation.

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[106] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 7114-7130: trans. A. T. Hatto: "'My lords,' said Tristan, 'go and collect the tribute which you see there in the island, take it home to your lord and tell him that my uncle, King Mark, and his two peoples send them this present. And proclaim to him further that whenever it is royal will and desire to send his messengers here for tribute of this king, we shall not let them go empty-handed. We shall send back to him with such honors as these, whatever it costs us to do so.'"

[107] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 133-134, vers. 7085ff.

[108] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 2*, vers. 10138-10142: trans. A. T. Hatto: "If the sword with which he slew your uncle lays him low in turn, ample vengeance will have been done.'"

Women take up far more active roles in *Tristan* than we would expect in a courtly romance. In fact, it is in heroic epics such as *Das Nibelungenlied* where we also see women take up such important roles. The Queen of Ireland is a healer and a seer. She intervenes in the political struggles at court and manipulates her husband, the king, to change things to her liking.[109] She plays a far more active role than the King, of whom we learn very little. Isolde of course goes even further and like Kriemhild in *Das Nibelungenlied* takes up a sword to take revenge, a shocking thing to do for a woman. Unlike in the courtly romance, where the women have very little to say, the machinations of the two Isoldes [the Queen of Ireland is also called Isolde] come across as uncourtly. We also see such active woman in heroic epics such as *Das Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsunga saga*.

The final confrontation reaches its climax or epic moment when Isolde the younger confronts the vulnerable Tristan in the bath chamber. She carries Morold's sword, ready to strike the hero who killed her uncle:

> nu habe wir guoter state genuoc,
> daz wir uns an im rechen
> und diz swert durch in stechen.
> ez enkumet uns beiden niemer baz."[110]

Isolde is ready to strike despite Tristan's pleas for forgiveness: "nu haete ouch Îsôt ûf gezogen/daz swert und trat hin über in."[111] At this moment however a courtly sentiment overtakes her:

> diu süeze, diu guote,
> diu siure an wîbes muote
> noch herzegallen nie gewan,
> wie sollte diu geslahen man?"[112]

Right when the ultimate revenge seems to happen, a women taking revenge upon the hero of the story, the inner struggle within her, between revenge and love, heroism and courtliness is decided in favour of mercy:

> sus was ir herze in zwei gemuot,

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[109] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 1*, vers. 9298-9305.

[110] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 2*, vers. 10178-10181: trans. A. T. Hatto: "Now is our opportunity to revenge ourselves by plunging this sword through him – we shall never have a better chance!'"

[111] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 2*, vers. 10196-10197: trans. A. T. Hatto: "But now Isolde went and stood over him with poised sword."

[112] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 2*, vers. 10236-10240: trans. A. T. Hatto: "How could the good, sweet girl, who had never known bitterness or rancor in her womanly heart, ever kill a man?"

> ein herze was übel unde guot.
> diu schoene warf daz swert dernider
> und name ez aber iesâ wider.
> sine wiste in ir muote
> under übel und under guote,
> ze wederem si solte".[113]

The struggle between heroic and courtly sentiments is won by the latter.

Conclusion

The comparison with *Das Nibelungenlied* shows us many similarities and differences. As in *Das Nibelungenlied* a woman, Kriemhild, tries to take revenge for the death of a loved one, Siegfried, striking with the sword that belonged to him and was stolen by his killer. Unlike in *Das Nibelungenlied* it is Isolde's inner morality which turns against such an idea. Here *Tristan* turns away from the heroic epic and changes into a courtly romance. The decisions taken by the characters in *Das Nibelungenlied*, and which leads to its tragedy, are not repeated in *Tristan*. The story continues with Isolde and Tristan travelling back to England in order for Isolde to marry King Marke. They drink from the love potion provided by Isolde's mother and the two fall in love. The story now turns from heroic encounters to the hidden illicit relationship between the two. It relates the tale of love between the two, despite social pressure and observation. Although the potion is the cause for the love between Tristan and Isolde, Gottfried's version seems to suggest that the potion only awoke something that was already there.[114] In this respect, the bath chamber scene gains new importance, in that it gives some depth to the feeling inside Isolde, the feelings of hate and love. The hatred for Tristan mixes with her love for him. In this respect, the bath chamber scene and Isolde's moral inner struggle completely change the tenor of the story. While Tristan's adventures before this point emphasize the heroic virtues of revenge, ruthlessness and lust for political power, Isolde's forgiveness and mercy of Tristan after a long inner struggle seem to emphasize the courtly virtues of mercy, humbleness and love.

We see this change of ethos in the structure as well. The early epic moment structure is replaced by an episodic structure, the one growing from the other. The first

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[113] Von Straßburg, *Tristan: Band 2*, vers. 10267-10273: trans. A. T. Hatto: "Thus her heart was divided in purpose – a single heart was at one and the same time both good and evil. The lovely girl threw down the sword and immediately picked it up again. Faced with good and evil she did not know which to choose. She wanted and yet did not want, she wished both to do and refrain."

[114] Krohn: "Stellenkommentar", p. 161, vers. 9997.

part reaches at least three epic moments, the last of which ends in an anti-climax. While the last epic moment in a heroic epic completes the tale of tragedy and death, as in *Das Nibelungenlied*, the anti-climax in *Tristan* opens up a new future of courtly virtue. Courtliness defeats the heroic in Gottfried's version and brings to an end the heroic phase of the story. As we have seen, Gottfried heightens the drama of this defeat through the use of heroic elements, such as language, subject matter, ethos and structure. Tristan does like Siegfried die in the story, not by a spear in his back, but through the 'liebestod' the love death. This manipulation of heroic and courtly themes, content, language and structure for aesthetic effect shows us the ability of medieval authors such as Gottfried von Straßburg to consciously and deliberately use genre and its characteristics in their works.

GENRE BOUNDARIES IN MIDDLE HIGH GERMAN LITERATURE

It is during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that a large number of important aristocratic secular works were written in Middle High German. Authors of this period produced not only courtly romances which discusses themes about courtly love and chivalry, but also wrote heroic epics, relying on a tradition that goes back to at least the Early Middle Ages. The story of secular Middle High German literature does not simply revolve around these two separate genres, but also around the blending of the two genres in one work. Many scholars have pointed out the heroic and courtly elements in works such as *Das Nibelungenlied*, showing us that authors at the time were not strict in separating the two genres. This does not mean, however, that the two genres did not really exist separately at the time. My analysis of two key works in Middle High German, *Tristan* and *Das Nibelungenlied*, shows the conscious use of courtly and heroic elements. The author of *Das Nibelungenlied* also uses courtly and heroic elements as two opposing concepts in his work. The conflict between the heroic and the courtly ethos drives the tragedy of the work. It is courtly love that urges Siegfried to Worms to gain the hand of Kriemhild, it is courtly love for Siegfried that drives Kriemhild to take a horrible revenge and it is Hagen's sense of his loyalty to his king, which is described in feudal terms, that drives him to take kill Siegfried. Partly therefore the tragedy is driven by courtly values. However, the way the characters perform their tasks are inspired by a heroic ethos. Siegfried makes himself suspect by his attempts to dethrone Gunther, his ability to defeat and humiliate Brünhild, which as we have seen is essential for the plot, and his great treasure that threatens the social structure. The same counts for Kriemhild and Hagen, both following heroic actions to fulfil their goals; Kriemhild's revenge ends in great epic

fighting and bloodshed, Hagen's assassination of Siegfried is done effectively and remorsefully, without mercy or moderation. The author explicitly sets up both values as being destructive, but is also careful to divide the two, emphasising the different qualities. In the chapter on *Tristan*, we have seen that the contrasts between heroic and courtly values find their way back into the structure of the work. Gottfried was deliberately creating a contrast between the heroic first part and the courtly second part, as comparison with other versions of the Tristan legend has shown. Gottfried clearly expected the audience to know the difference between heroic and courtly characteristics, for otherwise an important part of the transformation in the middle of the work could be understood. Both *Tristan* and *Das Nibelungenlied* therefore embody a deliberate conscious attempt to create works in which the courtly and the heroic oppose and fulfil each other. Al this would only be possible if the readers of these works were aware of the two genres, heroic epic and courtly romance, and recognized the differences.

CHAPTER 4 – HAVELOK THE DANE

Introduction

A large part of the most important heroic poems of the Early Middle Ages were written in Old English. Old English heroic epics, such as *Beowulf*, form a large part of the corpus of Germanic epics we know of today. Unlike in parts of Europe such as Germany, the heroic epic seems to have disappeared completely by the time of the High Middle Ages. Unlike in Germany and France, where the heroic survived through works such as *Das Nibelungenlied* and *Chanson de Roland*, the Middle English corpus contains no works that are heroic epics. As this chapter will show, the authors of Middle English literature either had no knowledge of the heroic epic and its characteristics or simply chose not to use the genre at all. This is not only supported by the absence of any Middle English heroic epic, but also by one of the earliest secular aristocratic poems; the romance *Havelok the Dane*. This romance deals with local legends and folkloric stories, which contain traces of Nordic mythology and is based on historical events of the Viking age. The subject matter of *Havelok the Dane* is very similar to the subject matter of the heroic epic. Nevertheless in *Havelok the Dane* we see the subject matter being adapted as a courtly romance. The Old English heroic tradition seems to have been replaced by the new courtly romance tradition that came from France. This chapter will first focus on the historical background of the work. Important aspects that will be discussed are the historical events on which the story is based, the folkloric sources for the work and the influence of Nordic mythology. This chapter will then analyse how the work compares to the characteristics of the heroic epic and the courtly romance.

Historical background

The Middle English romance *Havelok the Dane* is dated around 1280, early in the reign of Edward I. Although it shares similarities with the older Anglo-Norman Romance *Lai d'Haveloc*, which also deals with the adventures of Havelok, the Middle English version is based on a source independent of its French antecedent.[115] Although they both tell roughly the same story, the older Anglo-Norman version is clearly written for a French-speaking baronial audience.[116] The Middle English version, on the other hand, was

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[115] Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 28; Nancy Mason Bradbury, "The Traditional Origins of 'Havelok the Dane'," *Studies in Philology* 90, no. 2 (Spring, 1993): 117.

[116] Ramsey, "Chivalric Romances," 28.

intended for a lower class audience. There is a different message in *Havelok the Dane*, a message that condemns the unjust rule of usurpers and that stresses the importance of the rule of law. The romance is also in favour of strong legitimate royal government. It furthermore features lower-born characters.[117]

Havelok the Dane is far more focussed on real history, in this case the history of England, than we would normally expect from a courtly romance. *Havelok the Dane* is associated with Gaimar's *Estoire*, the oldest known French historical chronicle, which deals with the history of England. Havelok and his story are featured in this chronicle, which shows us that the medieval audience saw Havelok as a historical figure. *Havelok the Dane* is therefore about historical events, which became "more and more encrusted with legendary material."[118] As we have seen in chapter one, the adaptation of historical events in a secular literary work was normally done in an heroic epic. Epics such as *Das Nibelungenlied* or *Chanson de Roland* are good examples. In this case, the Middle English author decided to adapt this historical material as a courtly romance.

The historical background of *Havelok the Dane* is the period in Anglo-Saxon history, when both England and Denmark were united under a single king. The story itself starts with the death of two kings: Athelwold of England and Birkabein of Denmark. They both leave the power in the hands of unworthy men, Godrich in the case of England and Godard in the case of Denmark. The rightful heirs, Athelwold's daughter Goldebru and Birkabein's son Havelok, are mistreated by the usurpers: Havelok is imprisoned, but later manages to escape with the help of the fisherman Grim, while Goldebru is married of to a commoner in order to disqualify her from inheriting the throne. This commoner, however, is Havelok, who had escaped to England and who pretended to be a lowly peasant. Eventually the two defeat and depose both Godrich and Godard and rule the two kingdoms together. As mentioned earlier, the story of Havelok was seen as part of history and was incorporated in numerous fourteenth-century chronicles.[119] Although there is no evidence for Havelok actually having existed, a king ruling over both Denmark and England is comparable to the reign of Canute, a Danish king who ruled over England from 1016 to 1035. This Danish connection is strengthened by the fact that the *Havelok*

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[117] Ramsey, "Chivalric Romances," 29.

[118] Edmund Reiss, "*Havelok the Dane* and Norse Mythology," *Modern Language Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1966): 2.

[119] Robert Mannyng, *The Chronicle*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 499.

the Dane originated in the Northeast Midlands, an area were the Danes once ruled and were linguistically dominant.[120] The historical origins of the story is furthermore reinforced by the thirteenth-century seal of the town of Grimsby, which features Grim, Havelok and Goldebru. The story describes how the city of Grimsby was founded by Grim. The seal of Grimsby therefore links the story with what was perceived to be real history.[121] We would expect this kind of historical material to be adapted in a heroic epic. This time, however, the material has been adapted in a courtly romance.

Norse mythology

The story of *Havelok the Dane* is, as we have seen, clearly connected with the local legends of the Northeast Midlands. Yet certain elements of the story connect it to the Germanic culture of Scandinavia and the British Isles as well. Edmund Reiss, who has researched the Germanic roots of the romance, points out that Grim, the companion of Havelok, can be connected to Odin, the highest Germanic god. The name Grim or Grímnir could mean disguise, which is the name Odin sometimes uses in the Old Norse sagas. Grim's occupation as servant, ferryman and fishermen all correspond to Odin's occupations during some of Norse sagas.[122] Odin carries with him two ravens who acts as messengers; in *Havelok the Dane*, one of Grim's sons is called Hugh Raven. Reiss concludes that these mythological elements are important, because they stress the Scandinavian origin of the story. The original story might have revolved around Havelok who struggles and eventually succeeds in overcoming his enemies with the help of Odin pretending to be a fisherman called Grim.[123] Both the historical background and the Nordic mythological elements would have fitted a heroic poem above any other genre at the time. Instead, the author of *Havelok the Dane* decided to choose a genre far removed from these characteristics, a courtly romance

Character, ethos and morals

Despite the fact that the story is based on historical events, contains folkloric elements and certain elements can be connected with Nordic mythology, *Havelok the Dane* is very

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[120] Bradbury, "The Traditional Origins of 'Havelok the Dane'," 125.

[121] Ronald B. Herzman, and Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, "Havelok the Dane: Introduction," in *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

[122] Reiss, "*Havelok the Dane* and Norse Mythology," 118-119.

[123] Reiss, "*Havelok the Dane* and Norse Mythology," 124.

clearly a courtly romance. We see this most clearly in the characters, morals and in the themes of the work.

We clearly see the courtly ethos and the courtly morality in *Havelok the Dane*. The ethos the main characters follow is courtly and the characters as a whole can easily be split up into two types: they are either good or bad. The good characters are, as we shall see, just, pious and humble, while those characters that are bad simply do not follow any ethos at all. They are rather undeveloped characters who simply act in an evil manner. This simple divide between the heroic epic and the courtly romance is not present in heroic epics such as *Das Hildebrandslied*, where both Siegfried, Hagen and Kriemhild are both praised and condemned, were they are both good and evil. This ambiguity is not something we see in *Havelok the Dane*.

The moral ambivalence we see in a heroic epic such as *Das Hildebrandslied* is not present in *Havelok the Dane*. The romance is also far more clear about what is good and what is bad than other romances such as *Tristan*, in which the problem of choosing between love and between social conformity looms is important. In fact, *Havelok the Dane* quit explicitly spells out what good behaviour is. The work opens with a description of king Athelwold who behaves as the perfect knight:

> He was the beste knith at nede
> That hevere micthe riden on stede,
> Or wepne wagge or folc ut lede;
> Of knith ne havede he nevere drede,
> That he ne sprong forth so sparke of glede,
> And lete him knawe of hise hand dede,
> Hu he couthe with wepne spede;
> And other he refte him hors or wede,
> Or made him sone handes sprede
> And "Louerd, merci!" loude grede.
> He was large and no wicth gnede.
> Havede he non so god brede
> Ne on his bord non so god shrede,
> That he ne wolde thorwit fede
> Poure that on fote yede,
> Forto haven of Him the mede
> That for us wolde on Rode blede -
> Crist, that al kan wisse and rede
> That evere woneth in any thede.[124]

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[124] "Havelok the Dane," in *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, and Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute

This description gives us an almost complete list of the qualities that were expected of a knight. The combination of martial skills and Christian virtues such as moderation, mercifulness, generousness and pity are the benchmark of any courtly knight. The position of this list, at the beginning of the work, gives the reader a blueprint of what to expect of the hero.

The hero of the story, Havelok, undergoes a quest to reclaim his throne. He is forced to leave Denmark and start a new life in England, where his royal birth is not known. He starts out as a churl, a lowly peasant, and has to proof his worth throughout the story. Interestingly enough, there is never any doubt whether Havelok is virtuous enough. His birth makes him inherently virtuous and he only needs to proof his worth in several adventures. There is no learning process involved and in this *Havelok the Dane* does not follow other courtly romances. So, when we read about Havelok's bravery and virtuousness, the resemblance with Athelwold's description immediately springs to mind:

> Havelok stod over hem als a mast;
> Als he was heie, als he was long,
> He was bothe stark and strong -
> In Engelond non hise per
> Of strengthe that evere kam him ner.
> Als he was strong, so was he softe;
> They a man him misdede ofte,
> Neveremore he him misseyde,
> Ne hond on him with yvele leyde.
> Of bodi was he mayden clene;
> Nevere yete in game, ne in grene,
> With hire ne wolde he leyke ne lye,
> No more than it were a strie.[125]

Like Athelwold, the paragon of virtue and the perfect ruler and knight, Havelok has the same mixture of strength and virtue. He is both strong and meek, large of statue and polite.

Publications, 1997): 87-105: trans. Tuma: "He was the best knight at need that ever might ride on a steed, wield a weapon or lead an army. He had no fear of any knight, but sprang forth like a spark of ember to show his skill at arms. He either took his foe's horse or armor, or made him raise his hands and loudly cry "Mercy!" He was generous and not at all stingy; the food on his table was never too good to share with the poor who came on foot, for the love of Christ, who can guide all."

[125] "Havelok the Dane," 987-999: trans. Tuma: "Havelok was taller by a shoulder than the largest of them and stood over them like a mast. There was no one in England to match his strength, and in wrestling there was no man he didn't soon throw down. He was as gentle as he was strong; though a man might mistreat him, he never slandered or harmed anyone. He had not yet been with a woman, in play or in desire, and he would no sooner lie with a whore than he would a hag."

Godrich and Godard are the two evil characters in the story. They usurp the throne of England and Denmark respectively by getting rid of the rightful heirs. These characters are noticeable for the absence of depth. Godrich is tasked by Athelwold to rule over England until Goldeboru comes of age. He turns against Goldeboru only because he wants to make his own son king of England: "Ich have a sone, a ful fayr knave;/He shal Engelond al have!"[126] No other reason for his evilness is given beside his urge for more power. He has no redeeming qualities or special virtues that distinguishes him in any way, nor is his evilness anything distinctive. The urge for more power and protection for himself and his heir is something the readers would probably recognize in any feudal lord. Much of the same things can be said of Godard, who is even more ruthless in getting rid of the rightful heirs. Like Godrich he is a powerful vassal of the king of Denmark who has to govern Denmark until Havelok comes of age. A major difference is how far Godard is willing to go. Unlike Godrich, who remains relatively civilized by marrying Goldeboru off, Godard actually starts executing small children. Once Birkabein is dead he kill Havelok's sisters and threatens to do the same thing to Havelok. Surprisingly, he spares Havelok out of pity, a character trait that fits uncomfortably with the rest of the character. This pity is not really explained or expanded in the story.

Another interesting character in respect to ethos and morals is Grim. He is a fishermen tasked with killing Havelok by Godard. Grim simply follows orders and prepares to drown Havelok until his identity as the rightful heir becomes known. Only then does he help Havelok to escape. This moral ambiguity might belong to an older tradition of the story, although a simple inconsistency as in the case with Godard's pity might also be possible.

As we have seen, the good characters follow the courtly code of behaviour. They behave as a good knights should behave.. Although deprived of his throne, Havelok is eventually able to return to power because he so clearly has the inherent virtues of a rightful king and just knight. Against this the bad characters can do very little. They follow no real ethos, and are simply bad. Their motives for seizing the throne are straightforward attempts to gain more power and no attempt is made at creating real moral ambiguity.

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[126] "Havelok the Dane," 308-309: trans. Tuma: "I have a fair son who will have all England and be king and lord, as I hope to live!"

Themes

When we look at the subject matter in *Havelok the Dane* we see a few important themes that we associate with the courtly romance. One important theme is the journey the hero of the story undertakes to become the perfect ruler. Although the work deals with politics and power, and not so much with love or the virtues of a courtly knight, the same didactic journey the courtly knight usually undertakes in courtly romances is used to emphasize Havelok's path to become a just ruler. During this adventure, a few question surrounding kingship are raised: who should be a king and what virtues does a just ruler have?

The work opens with the death of two kings and the problems of succession. Because of the minority of the heirs, overmighty vassals act as regents who control the kingdom till the heirs are old enough to take up power. They act treacherously and seize power for themselves. This development shows the medieval reader a situation they would be familiar with, as medieval history is filled with problematic regencies.

The question, who should be king, is therefore an important in this romance. It becomes clear that despite Havelok's youth, his lack of power and the strength and power of the usurpers, Havelok's is still predestined to be king. Not only does he have the right traits for the job, as discussed in the previous section, there are also other signs that show his destiny. We read that he has "On hise rith shuldre a kynmerk,"[127] and that "Of hise mouth it stod a stem/Als it were a sunnebem;/Al so lith was it therinne/So ther brenden cerges inne."[128] These supernatural signs, which return numerous times, shows the readers and the characters in the story that he is chosen by God to be king. This claim no power and might can overcome.

There is, however, a development in terms of social order. Havelok has the rightful claims and the ability to become king, but he first needs to earn it. He starts out as a thrall and because of his strength becomes a porter and later a champion. He is then married off to Goldebru. He travels to Denmark in the guise of a trader and there rallies his allies. He leads his army as general before seizing back his throne. He then also deposes Godrich and eventually is king over two kingdoms. The social transformation functions as the didactic journey he undertakes.

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[127] "Havelok the Dane," 605: trans. Tuma: "the birthmark of a king on his right shoulder."
[128] "Havelok the Dane," 592-595: trans. Tuma: "A ray like a sunbeam came from his mouth, as bright as though candles were burning."

In the typical heroic epic, this development is not repeated. There the focus lies more on the heroic qualities of the hero, which are fixed in place and often are responsible for the doom and tragedy in the story. *Havelok the Dane* does not in any way embrace a heroic theme and only embraces a courtly one.

Conclusion

Havelok the Dane is based on folkloric material that deals with the history of England and Denmark. This material refers to a period in the past when the two kingdoms where ruled by one king. These stories even contained Norse mythological material that go back to the Viking era. Despite this background, the author of *Havelok the Dane* decided to adapt these materials in a romance. The characters either follow a courtly ethos that focusses on moderation, generousness, pity and also strength and justice. There is a clear moral divide between good and bad characters. The bad characters are typified by a lack of depth. No deeper reason for their behaviour is mentioned and their function is mainly to act as a foil to the hero of the story. Havelok, the hero of the story, is clearly destined to be king as he displays the right traits and is set out from other men by his birthmark and by the light that sometimes emanates from his face. He nevertheless goes on a didactic journey of some sort, for he has to rise up the social ladder. He starts out as the lowest serf and eventually becomes king. Despite his social climb, it is clear that he was already fated to be king. These black and white moral universe, the purity of the hero and the virtues he develops are all characteristics we find back in courtly romances.

So despite the promising historical material and the Nordic mythological influence, we see no traces of the heroic epic in *Havelok the Dane*. Unlike in Germany, England did not produce any heroic epic after the Norman Conquest. Either the Middle English authors simply did not chose to use the heroic epic, or they did not know of the genre.

CONCLUSION

The dominant secular heroic genre during the Early Middle Ages was the heroic epic. Around the eleventh century a new genre, the chivalric romance, was developed in southern France and spread all over Europe. This genre either subverted the heroic epic or existed side by side with it. Unfortunately, very few remnants of heroic epic before the spread of courtly romance have survived, preventing us from identifying key characteristics of the heroic epic before the romance. The characterization of the two genres has been the point of much discussion. How do we define the heroic epic and the courtly romance and what characteristics divides them? Many heroic epics have adapted courtly elements and many romance have adapted heroic characteristics. Some scholars have therefore argued that the heroic genre was lost and a new genre developed that combined characteristics of the heroic epic and the courtly romance. These scholars also claim that the medieval audience would therefore not understand the differences between a heroic epic and a courtly romance. Others claim that the heroic epic and the courtly romance were unconsciously embedded in the literary works by the authors and that the political and ideological class of the authors had influence upon the genre of a literary text. This research has shown, however, that some authors of the time did know the differences between the heroic epic and the courtly romance and expected their audience to know the differences as well. These authors used the characteristics of the epic and the romance consciously in their texts to create new meaning. They played with the characteristics of both genres, and by analysing this process we can interpret the works in a new way.

This study has looked at two examples of this process. We have seen that *Tristan* by Gottfried von Straßburg contains both heroic and courtly characteristics. The first part works in respect to ethos, themes and especially structure, as a heroic epic. Only in the middle of the work, during the third epic moment, does *Tristan* change tack. The epic moment ends in an anti-climax, in which emphasize shifts from the heroic theme of revenge to the courtly theme of courtly love.

For *Das Nibelungenlied*, this study has focussed on the heroic and the courtly ethos in the text. The characters follow both a heroic and courtly ethos at certain times. This ethos decides their decision making. The author shows that following an extreme

heroic or courtly ethos will eventually lead to the tragedy we see at the end of *Das Nibelungenlied*.

However, although authors could use genre to create new meaning, this study's analysis of *Havelok the Dane* tells us that possibly not every author and audience had knowledge of the heroic epic. No heroic epic has been produced in Middle English, despite its many Old English antecedents. We see that even in the earliest secular aristocratic poem of Middle English literature, *Havelok the Dane*, there is no trace of any characteristics of the heroic epic. Nevertheless, the subject matter, which is folkloric, historic and inspired by Nordic mythological stories, is well suited for the heroic epic genre. The question remains whether the Middle English author did not now of the heroic epic or whether he chose not to use the genre. Perhaps the heroic poem had lost so much of its prestige as a genre that authors no longer used it to write works. Further research needs to be done to further analyse this phenomenon.

The close readings of these three texts show us therefore how some authors during the Middle Ages have consciously used genre to create meaning. They were aware of different genres and the characteristics attached to it. Accepting the fact that there was an awareness of the differences between the heroic epic and the courtly romance will be important in further analysing medieval literature. This study makes it clear that, in contrast to what scholars such as Ernst Robert Curtius and Alastair Fowler have claimed, an awareness of genre did not disappear during the middle ages. It is also important to realise that postmodern thought about genre studies, which postmodern thought claims is useless and restricting, will not open up new possibilities in interpreting medieval literature, but will prevent further study and discovery. Dismissing genre greatly limits our understanding of medieval texts, as we would not be able to understand certain morals, messages or aesthetic stratagems such as are present in *Tristan* and *Das Nibelungenlied*.

This study has also shown that an awareness of the heroic epic and courtly romance is a conscious act. Through an analysis of *Havelok the Dane* we have seen that the tradition of the heroic epic can disappear. Much knowledge that we have of the heroic epic of the early medieval period comes from Old English. The tradition of *Beowulf* has seemingly completely disappeared by the time of the Middle English period. Why this tradition has been broken and why other regions in Europe, such as Germany, have

maintained this tradition is a question that remains unanswered and requires further research. This also opens the question of how the heroic epic has survived in different regions. Medieval French literature for example, would be an possible fruitful field for research. Not only did the heroic epic survive in Old French in the form of the *chanson de geste*, but it is also the place where the courtly romance was first developed. To analyse how the authors of French epics and romances have used the awareness of genre to create tension, meaning and develop a message would be an interesting topic for further study.

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