

**THE NIBELUNGENLIED
AND SAGE IN
MODERN POETRY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649239269

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Cover @ 2017

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BY

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[Reprinted from the *Publications of the Modern Language Association
of America*, Vol. XI, No. 2]

BALTIMORE
THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA
1896

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In an article, entitled *Nibelungensage und Nibelungendichtungen*, which appeared in the *Preussische Jahrbücher* a little over a year ago (October, 1894), Dr. A. Schmidt, after a summary of the entire *Nibelungensage* and a comparison of this *Sage* with the form it assumes in the *Nibelungenlied*, makes the following statement: "Though it would be madness after Homer to reconstruct anew the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in poetic form, after the mediæval author it is really a religious duty of German poets who have the interests of their nation at heart to recast into higher forms the imperfectly coined *Nibelungen* treasure." In these words the essayist expresses not merely a personal opinion, but echoes the sentiments of many other German critics,¹ and above all of over forty authors who, with over fifty different productions in drama and epic poetry, have tried to recast into 'higher forms' the *Nibelungensage* as a whole or in part. This large number of attempts includes three or four dramatic sketches, but does not include the 'lower forms' of lyric and ballad poetry, or of prose narrative. After the clear and thorough discussion of Nibelungen dramas by Professor Carl Weibrecht,² it might seem unnecessary to discuss this part of the general subject any further, but there are certain aspects of this question which he has not touched upon which it is the purpose of this paper to consider; and, while there is complete agreement with the views advanced by Prof. Weibrecht, yet the attempt will be made to show that his conclusions do not warrant the same approval.

¹ Weibrecht, Röpe, Piper and others; cf. Piper: *Die Nibelungen*, I. Theil (Kürschner's *Deutsche Nationalliteratur*. Bd. 6, Abth., II, p. 184).

² *Die Nibelungen im Modernen Drama*. Eine Antrittsvorlesung (gehalten den 5 Nov., 1892, am Eidgen. Polytechnikum in Zürich). Zürich, 1892.

The question as to whether the treasure of the *Nibelungen-sage* has been, or can be, 'recast into higher forms,' either of drama or of epic poetry, is an eminently practical one, aesthetic or dramaturgic theorizings can prove or establish nothing. The poetic value of the existing *Nibelungen* dramas cannot be determined in long philosophical discussions as to the propriety of using myths as a source of dramatical subjects, of the nature of 'dramatic guilt' (Aristotle's *ἀμαρτία*), of the theoretical differences between the drama and the epic, but in the case of each drama before us for criticism, we must simply ask, Has the poet in his play really mastered the difficulties inherent in the subject matter; has he created a living tragedy, one which, by its poetic beauty and dramatic power, carries away reader and spectator alike, and exacts the tribute of admiration from even those critics who, in their studies, would measure the beauties of living poetry by the canons of dead philosophical speculation? And we have a right to demand more; for, if we are to call any modern dramatic reproduction a 'higher form' than the *Nibelungenlied*, it must rank as high at least in the domain of tragedy as the mediæval German poem does amongst the epics of the world's literature. Where the modern poet would rival the old epic in its own field and try to re-create the *Sage* or the *Nibelungenlied* in epic form, he himself challenges 'odious comparison,' and has no reason to complain, because he cannot pass off debased metal stamped with the stamp of the genuine gold, or beguile us into believing that he is no longer a wren, because, forsooth, he has fluttered a little higher than the eagle, upon whose back he has been carried into the high heavens.

These practical criteria simplify immensely the task before us. It seems an appalling labor to try to determine which of the forty poets has performed most successfully 'his religious duty to the German nation,' and which drama or epic of the fifty bodies forth the 'higher form' of the *Nibelungen* treasure. But even German theorists have been able to agree upon the elimination of most of the forty authors and the most enthu-

siastic of German critics, with all their exaggerated pride in their national literature and their aesthetic magnifying-glasses, can find only four poets worthy of serious consideration¹—Geibel,² Hebbel³ and Richard Wagner⁴ amongst the dramatists; and William Jordan⁵ who essayed the *Nibelunge* in two long epics. Nowhere does there appear even a reference to William Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung*⁶ in the essays of German writers, but why they should utterly ignore so important a production is not easy to understand. For, in poetic power and beauty, both of conception and execution, it ranks at least as high as any of the productions of the above named authors. Some of the 'moderns' would include also amongst the more important works based upon the *Nibelungensage* Ibsen's *Chieftains of Helgeland*,⁷ which reveals a great deal of dramatic force and presents a thoroughly interesting modern realistic conception of the old hero-myth. Yet, since it lacks poetic form and diction, and makes no pretense to 'higher form,' it can hardly be ranked as a poetical production in a strict sense.

Passing over for the present the epics of Jordan and Morris to apply the practical tests to the dramas of Geibel, Hebbel and Wagner, we still find that no very perplexing problems of critical acumen or literary discrimination present themselves to the impartial judge who possesses only a moderate amount of critical literary taste. The dramas of Geibel and Hebbel

¹ Böpe, v. Muth, Bulthaupt, Weibrecht.

² Emanuel Geibel, *Brunhilde: Eine Tragödie aus der Nibelungen Sage*. Stuttgart, 1857.

³ F. Hebbel, *Die Nibelungen*. Trauerspiel. 3 Theile: 1. *Der gehörnte Siegfried*; 2. *Siegfrieds Tod*; 3. *Kriemhilds Rache*. Hamburg, 1862.

⁴ R. Wagner, *Der Ring der Nibelungen*: 1. *Das Rheingold*; 2. *Die Walküre*; 3. *Siegfried*; 4. *Die Götterdämmerung*. Presented as a whole at Bayreuth, 1876.

⁵ Wilhelm Jordan, *Die Nibelunge*. 2 Theile: 1^{tes} *Lied, Sigfridsage*. Frankfurt, 1869; 2^{tes} *Lied, Hildebrands Heimkehr*. Frankfurt, 1875.

⁶ Wm. Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*. London, 1876.

⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *Härmændene paa Helgeland*. Christiania, 1858. German: *Die Nordische Herrfahrt*. Reclam 2633.

may be a prominent feature and take up much space in the histories of German literature and in critical essays on the German drama, but they constitute no important part of the repertoires of the German stage and seem to occupy but a very small place in the favor of the German theatre-going public.¹ These plays are rarely presented, whilst the classic plays of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Kleist, yes even of Grillparzer and Ludwig, are being played all the time and in every city of importance. This state of affairs proves only one of two things. Either the Germans are, and will remain, hopelessly unappreciative of the 'higher' form of the *Lied* as presented by these authors, or else (and who could fail to recognize the fact?) the poets have failed in their attempts. As for the reading public the facts are still more striking.² The *Nibelungenlied*, in the original and in a

¹ It was impossible for the writer to get approximately accurate information of the repertoires of the theatres in Berlin and Munich, but in the two years from 1887 to 1889, though following carefully the plays given in these two capitals, he could find no announcement of the performance of either. Hebbel's *Nibelungen* was restaged and presented last winter at Berlin, the first time for eight years at least, and probably for a longer period. During the last eight years the writer has chanced upon only one other notice of the performance of these plays—Geibel's in New York, Hebbel's once in Frankfurt, and once in Hannover. Undoubtedly they are presented oftener, but, if very often, one would expect to see more frequent notices of their production. In Vienna, Hebbel's home during the last years of his life, his trilogy is one of the stock plays of the *Burgtheater*; in fact Pröls, one of Hebbel's most enthusiastic admirers (in his *Geschichte des Neuere Dramas*, vi, 251), claims that this theatre is the only place where it can be properly performed—a rather dubious compliment in view of the excellent productions of the German classic dramas and Shakespeare in the comparatively small cities of Germany.

² Simrock's translation is one of some thirty German translations of the *Nibelungenlied* into modern German. It reached its tenth edition in 1856, Geibel's *Brünhild* appearing in 1857; Simrock in 1889 was in its forty-ninth edition, Geibel in 1890 in its fifth. Simrock's translation passed through thirty-five editions while Hebbel's *Nibelungen* was passing through three. The large number of editions of the original text and the repeated reprints of these (e. g. Lachmann's has been reprinted eleven times, Zarocke's six) prove still more the popularity of the *Nibelungenlied* amongst the German people. The Germans cannot, at any rate, be called indifferent to their great poetic treasures.

large number of translations, has passed through, and is still passing through edition after edition, while Geibel's *Brunhild*, the earlier of the two dramas, is now only in its fifth, Hebbel's *Nibelungen* in its third edition. It is true, beyond all doubt, that 'in literature excellence cannot be counted by the numbering of heads,' yet when one considers the strong patriotic enthusiasm of the Germans for their literature, their exaggerated admiration of their native poets, the constant interest kept alive by the various literary cliques and cults, such bare, prosaic facts do mean something, and have decided weight in estimating the literary and dramatic value of the dramas under consideration.

The general attitude of German critics is decidedly in favor of Hebbel's *Nibelungen*, as compared with the *Brunhild* of Geibel, though they allow the greater poetic beauties of the latter. But let any unbiased reader weigh the testimony of Pröls,¹ Bulthaupt,² Gottschall,³ or even of Hebbel himself in his introduction to the play, and judge whether they establish their claims and make clear that even Hebbel has really created a drama which will take a place and live on with the greatest dramas of German literature; whether his drama occupies anywhere near the proud position which the *Lied* claims for itself in the literary productions of Germany. Their condemnatory criticism of such defects as cannot be defended, their apology for the other weak points in the drama, the excessive warmth and unnecessary enthusiasm in their praise of its good features prove only too clearly how far below a successful and truly great drama they feel it to be. Or rather let the reader go to the plays themselves, read them and re-read them, if necessary, and decide for himself whether they approximate in the least to the simple grandeur, the

¹ Robert Pröls, *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*, vi, 329.

² Heinrich Bulthaupt, *Dramaturgie des Schauspiels*. 3rd edition. 1891, iii, p. 159 f.

³ E. v. Gottschall, *Die Deutsche Nationalliteratur des 19^{ten} Jahrhunderts*. 1891, iii, 500.

power and the rugged beauty of the *Nibelungenlied*, with all its imperfections. He can reach only one decision;¹ notwithstanding the great ingenuity of dramatic structure, the occasionally beautiful and powerful passages, both dramas fall far below their source in poetic value and beauty. And as for Wagner (whose trilogy, to receive any consideration in this connection, must be judged as a drama pure and simple, entirely apart from the music) Weibrecht's final verdict² seems thoroughly sound and the only correct one: "Wagner deserves great credit for his dramatic conception of the subject, but he was not enough of a poet not to fall short of his conception in the actual poetical execution." And with Weibrecht we must reach the final conclusion that the *Nibelungen-sage* is still waiting for the coming of the poet who will give it its definitive form.³ Röpe⁴ has called the Sage a Brunhild waiting for a delivering Siegfried; a beautiful metaphor and truer than appears on the surface, for all the weakling wooers in their attempts to subdue and win her met only with defeat and disgrace.

Why have the German poets failed? It is not the main purpose in this paper to discuss the peculiar inherent difficulties in the *Lied* and *Sage* which offer such obstacles to their successful dramatization, but simply to call attention to and emphasize those already pointed out in former discussions of this general subject, and then to proceed to the treatment of one aspect of this question which has not been touched upon before by any writer, and yet would seem to be of the highest importance. Fr. Theodor Vischer, in a short essay, *Vorschlag zu einer Oper*,⁵ was the first to discern and state clearly the first great practical difficulty in using the characters and motives of the *Sage* and *Lied* for a drama. "Endow these men of iron, these Titan-women with the eloquence

¹ Cf. Weibrecht.

² Weibrecht, p. 36.

³ Weibrecht, p. 37.

⁴ Röpe, *Die Modernen Nibelungendichtungen*. Hamburg, 1869.

⁵ *Kritische Gänge*, II, 369. Tübingen, 1844. Cf. also Freytag: *Die Technik des Dramas* (seventh edition, 1894), pp. 40; 243 and 244.