SIEGFRIED’S VASSALAGE DECEPTION RE-EXAMINED

Abstract

The Nibelungenlied’s poet’s innovation in having Siegfried debase himself by assuming the role of Gunther’s vassal during the wooing of Brünhild at Isenstein has often caused scholars concern. Many have argued that the deception not only failed to fully convince Brünhild, but that it was quite unnecessary, as Gunther’s wooing would have been successful without it. It has also been argued that Siegfried could have achieved his purpose by remaining in the tarnkappe for the duration of the visit. A further matter for concern has been Siegfried’s performance of “Stratordienst” for Gunther in the view of all when leaving the ship. This has been interpreted as the high point in Siegfried’s “Minnedienst”, extreme self-abasement symbolising his readiness to go to any lengths to win Kriemhild.

The present article argues i) that the vassalage deception was indeed necessary for the success of the mission, ii) that there are other and perhaps more cogent explanations for the stirrup-holding episode, iii) that it was not a viable option for Siegfried to remain at all times incognito in the tarnkappe, and iv) that both Siegfried’s physical appearance and his at times ill-considered behaviour belied his inferior status, causing lingering doubts in Brünhild’s mind.

It has long been a problem for Nibelungenlied scholarship that shortly before Gunther, accompanied by Siegfried, Hagen and Dankwart, arrives at Isenstein to woo Brünhild, Siegfried tells the group to be unanimous in saying that he is Gunther’s vassal. “Numerous critics have questioned the effectiveness, both thematic and structural, of the vassalage deception. Most often the vassalage motif is cited as an unhappy innovation that causes inconsistencies within the plot and leads nowhere” (Thelen, 471, n. 1). Siegfried’s act of self-debasement is indeed remarkable in one whom one otherwise has learnt to know as extremely proud and status-conscious. At the time of his first encounter with the Burgundians he had announced: Ich bin ouch ein recke und solde krône tragen (109, 1), and one remembers his sharp rebuke of Ortwin when he had been challenged by that knight:

. . .: “sich sol vermezzen nicht wider mich dîn hant. ich bin ein künec rîche, só bistu küneges man. jane dörften mich dîn zwelve mit strîte nîmmêr bestân.” (118, 2–4)

Not only is Siegfried prepared, however, to play the role of Gunther’s man throughout the visit to Isenstein, on arrival he leads Gunther’s horse from the ship, holds it by the bridle and performs the highly symbolic service of holding the stirrup for Gunther to mount (396–397). To underline the extraordinary nature of Siegfried’s action, the narrator comments, pointing also to the public nature of the gesture:
In recent times Jens Haustein has reopened the question of the meaning and function of Siegfried’s vassalage fiction acted out in support of Gunther’s wooing of Brünhild. Haustein states that no one has as yet found a compelling reason for this invention by the poet of the Nibelungenlied. He refers to J. Heinzle, who sees no reason why Gunther’s wooing should not be successful without it (1987: 70). Rejecting the often expressed view that the purpose is to enhance Gunther’s standing, though granting that this is a side effect, Haustein bases the deception not in Gunther’s wooing of Brünhild but rather in Siegfried’s wooing of Kriemhild, the purpose being “zu zeigen, bis zu welchem Grad der sozialen Selbstentäußerung Siegfried geht, um Kriemhild zu erhalten” (381). For Haustein, the “Stratordienst” represents the high point in Siegfried’s “Minnedienst” (383). He states that Siegfried would no doubt have gained Kriemhild’s hand without it – “Gleichwohl geht er so weit, den Ordo zu verletzen, um gewissermaßen zeichenhaft zu bedeuten, wie sehr das Ziel, Kriemhild zu erlangen, alle anderen Rücksichten dominiert” (387). Haustein’s interpretation of the “Stratordienst” is in this respect very much in the spirit of an interpretation put forward long ago by F. Saran. Saran claimed: “Der tiefere Grund für Siegfrieds V erhalten ist, daß er das Bedürfnis fühlt, sich im Dienst der Geliebten freiwillig zu erniedrigen, um durch diese Selbsterniedrigung seine völlige Ergebenheit zu beweisen, um der Geliebten diese Selbstherabsetzung als Leistung darzubringen” (46 f.). While granting that the vassalage deception itself has a meaningful part to play in reassuring Brünhild, Saran found quite unnecessary for the purpose Siegfried’s excessive stressing of his subservience and his self-debasement in the performance of a variety of services (47). This interpretation was rejected by W. Hoffmann. Saran, according to Hoffmann, “trägt [. . .] etwas in die Dichtung hinein, was sie nicht enthält und was kläglich als abwegig gelten muß” (90). Hoffmann states that Siegfried’s vasall role is absolutely necessary if Brünhild is to be deceived and Gunther’s and Siegfried’s goal is to be achieved, “und sich auch hinreichend von daher verstehen läßt” (137, n.119), but he does not come to terms with the distinction that Saran draws between what is necessary and what might be seen as going far beyond that, e.g. the “Stratordienst”. Gernot Müller’s interpretation is not dissimilar to Saran’s. He writes of the stirrup-holding pantomime that it is “als ein Schaubild innerhalb der fortlaufenden Erzählung herausgestellt, mit der Funktion, ein überzeugungskräftiges Zeichen für Siegfrieds Bereitschaft zur Selbstverleugnung im Minnedienst für Kriemhild zu setzen,” adding that Siegfried “unter dem Einfluss der Minne mutwillig seinen Rang durchbricht”