

# Murder in Medieval German Literature - Disruptions and Challenges of Society. Crime and Self-Determination in the Pre-Modern World

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## Abstract

Medieval literature is filled with references to criminal acts, to evil characters, and so also to murder. This paper examines the complex of killing as depicted in four medieval texts, *Herzog Ernst*, the *Nibelungenlied*, Heinrich Kaufringer's "Die unschuldige Mörderin," and Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Königin Sibille*, attempting to discriminate between manslaughter, assassination, and murder. In each case, the act of murder is rationalized and explained through a different lens, depending on the literary context. As the analysis demonstrates, already pre-modern writers were fully aware of the rich discourse on law, for which murder constituted the most egregious case. Not every murder, however, is simply condemned because at times the perpetrator seeks justified revenge, at other times the killing is condoned, if not even approved, by the king himself in order to preserve the honor of the court. Kaufringer even goes so far as to present a case where multiple murders are explained as a form of self-defense according to God's laws, whereas Elisabeth simplifies and vilifies the killing to an extreme once again.

## Keywords

*Herzog Ernst*, *Nibelungenlied*, Heinrich Kaufringer, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, murder, assassination, self-defense, revenge, rape.

In contrast to killing in war, which happens because two or more countries, people, groups, communities, etc. are in a bitter conflict with each other, when an individual targets another and kills him secretly or also publicly without justification or valid excuse, then this constitutes murder, as virtually all legal authors throughout history have confirmed.<sup>1</sup> One of the central commands in the Old Testament explicitly addressed this issue already: "Though shalt not kill" (*Exodus* 20:13). Murder represents a major challenge of, if not direct attack against, an individual or a group of people (massacre), but then of society at large because it transgresses the most fundamental ethical norms. Naturally, the entire history of law is deeply determined by the effort to establish clear rules regulating the relationship among people and the responsibility and privileges of the government, meaning that killing is identified as murder and can thus be

persecuted. The Middle Ages were not really different in that regard, though efforts were constantly made to come to terms with crime at large and to prevent acts such as murder as the worst transgression which an individual could commit against another individual.

The Old Icelandic Sagas illustrate maybe most impressively how a society established itself and made strong efforts, by default or by specific design, to create a legal system with which all kinds of behavior could be judged, condemned, approved, and channeled.<sup>2</sup> But all societies have pursued more or less the same goal in that regard, as legal historians have amply demonstrated already for a long time. After all, murder easily proves to be a critical benchmark regarding the level of the legal discourse within any society, which invites us to consider not only factual texts such as law books, but also literary narratives where unique cases of murder are discussed and where the sense of the audience regarding justice might be challenged.<sup>3</sup>

In response to a recent volume dealing most concretely with murder in the Middle Ages, the question to be pursued here pertains to the treatment of this crime in medieval German literature, a topic which neither Larissa Tracy as the editor nor the contributors of her volume have touched upon.<sup>4</sup> Even though the articles are subdivided into a section dealing, first, with justice, law, and justice; second, with interpretation and context; and third, gender, youth, and family, it is always murder in a variety of contexts which all share deeply with the discourse on this horrible crime. The term ‘murder’ by itself implies that killing is not carried out by any authorities—those would execute an individual after a legal trial, for instance, or would wage a war—and is regarded as a crime condemned by society at large.

In her introduction, Tracy relies repeatedly on Michel Foucault’s concepts concerning the growth of this discourse since the Middle Ages, but it would be egregiously erroneous to perceive the pre-modern world as only an experimental stage for a modern system of legal stipulations. In fact, Tracy herself indirectly questions Foucault when she notes that “[A]lmost every medieval society had a system of written laws that adjudicated the nature of various crimes and proscribed appropriate punishments, most of which involved monetary compensation rather than physical punishment.”<sup>5</sup> The condition of the legal discourse changed over time, depending very much on the influence of, or lack thereof, of Roman law on Germanic law (the Continent vs. England, e.g.), but law has always been present in every functioning society. Hence, the issue of murder has been of great significance throughout time, and so also in medieval Germany.<sup>6</sup>

As is often the case in Anglophone research, the focus of Tracy's volume rests, apart from historical cases, mostly on English, French, and Spanish literature, here disregarding a study by Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar on Icelandic Sagas. Moreover, some of the most important legal documents created in the Middle Ages, such as Eike von Repgow's *Sachsenspiegel* (ca. 1225/1230), which became the dominant law book in all of northern Europe, are not even dealt with by Tracy or her contributors.<sup>7</sup> The most dramatic murder ever elaborated on in medieval literature, Hagen's murder of the hero Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), is mentioned here only once in passing, without any specific examination of what happens in this intriguing heroic epic. There are many examples in heroic epics and courtly romances where all traditional norms collapse and murder suddenly emerges as one way out of a severe dilemma, although this then leads to much worse conditions, such as blood feuds. Murder is the result of desperation on the part of the murderer, or of utter greed, loss of self-control. At any rate, those who resort to this violent form of action have mostly abandoned rational strategies and resorted to the final possible operation available to them. At that point, however, society at large is dangerously undermined because the fundamental legal system is deeply questioned. If a murderer can continue to operate scot-free, then all crimes are possible and acceptable, which would lead to mayhem. As we will see, that is the very outcome of Siegfried's murder, as the conclusion of this anonymous epic demonstrates in most tragic terms.

However, the real problem rests in the evaluation of killing a person, in distinguishing between murder, manslaughter, or authorized execution. Assassins, for instance, consider their task as honorable, worthy, ordained, and even as a sacrifice on behalf of a higher authority. As much as we might think that assassins and terrorists are products of the modern world, as much do we have to accept evidence that both phenomena already existed in the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Studying murder, or the killing of an individual in general, allows us to grasp legal frameworks and deliberate transgressions leading us into an underworld of moral and ethical depravity. Literary protagonists who resort to murder are desperate and no longer know how to handle a difficult situation except by resorting to violence.

Violence itself, the bane of all social structures, has also been discussed at length,<sup>9</sup> but the specific case of murder, as committed in medieval times, deserves particular attention certainly beyond a simplistic descriptive level.<sup>10</sup> Above all, we need to get beyond popular approaches to

the Middle Ages according to which that world was entirely violence prone and obtuse to the perpetration of murder. As Larissa Tracy rightly emphasizes, “the literary and legal accounts . . . reveal that medieval societies were no less horrified by homicide than modern ones.”<sup>11</sup>

However, what was the case in medieval German literature, here disregarding historical and legal aspects?<sup>12</sup> As valuable as Larissa Tracy’s volume proves to be for the discussion of murder at large, only some of the contributors address literary material, and then only Icelandic sagas, Old French fabliaux, the *Quest del Saint Graal*, Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, and Shota Rustaveli’s Georgian *The Man in the Panther Skin* (ca. 1200). We do not hear about Chrétien de Troyes, Hartmann von Aue, Marie de France, Gottfried von Straßburg, Dante,

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<sup>1</sup>. Since this is such a fundamental and universal aspect, see the definition of murder as provided by the United States Department of Justice: “Section 1751(a) of Title 18 incorporates by reference 18 U.S.C. §§ 1111 and 1112. 18 U.S.C. § 1111 defines murder as the unlawful killing of a human being with malice, and divides it into two degrees. Murder in the first degree is punishable by death. In any case in which the death penalty may be applicable, it is necessary for the United States Attorney to follow the procedures set forth in JM 9-10.000. The Attorney General must authorize the United States Attorney to seek the death penalty in any case. Any other kind of murder is murder in the second degree and is punishable by any term of imprisonment including life.” <https://www.justice.gov/jm/criminal-resource-manual-1536-murder-definition-and-degrees> (last accessed on April 10, 2019). See also Spierenburg (2008/2013); Waterson (2008); and the contributions to *The Crime of Aggression* (2017). This could be discussed from many different perspectives, of course.

<sup>2</sup>. This is probably best represented by the *Njál’s Saga* (1997).

<sup>3</sup>. Dean (2001); Vallerani (2012); Bellamy (1973); Given (1977); Skoda (2013). See also the research overview by Taylor (2010).

<sup>4</sup>. Tracy (2018). See my review, forthcoming in *Mediaevistik* 31 (2019).

<sup>5</sup>. Tracy (2018), Introduction, 6; she also lists a number of relevant studies addressing this issue. Revealingly, neither Foucault nor any other French deconstructionist appears here, obviously because Tracy rightly wants to ground her arguments solidly in historical research and to avoid theoretical speculations.

<sup>6</sup>. See Taylor (2010).

<sup>7</sup>. Kümper (2005); for an English translation, see Eike of Reggow (1999); Lewis (1967).

<sup>8</sup>. Assassins (2001/2013).

<sup>9</sup>. *Violence in Medieval Society* (2000); *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature* (2004); Classen (2007); *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age* (2012).

<sup>10</sup>. Groebner (1995); id., (2003/2004). In his grand overview, Spierenburg (2008/2013), touches only upon the medieval period.

<sup>11</sup>. *Medieval and Early Modern Murder* (2018), Tracy, Introduction, 3.

<sup>12</sup>. Kintzinger (2004); Lausser (2010).

Boccaccio, Petrarch, or other major writers who all investigated a variety of crimes, including murder and critically tried to come to terms with it through narrative reflections. Such comments are not supposed to be real criticism of that volume; instead, Tracy's efforts and those by her colleagues provide significant stimulation and inspiration to pursue the same topic in a variety of other directions as well.

Consequently, to build on this research and to expand it considerably, here I will examine relevant murder cases in the Middle High German *Herzog Ernst* (ms. B, ca. 1220/1230), in the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), and, leaping from there to the early fifteenth century, in Heinrich Kaufringer's *Die unschuldige Mörderin* (ca. 1400), concluding with some comments on murder and intended rape in Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Königin Sibille* (ca. 1437). There are countless other literary texts where knightly killing takes place (Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*, ca. 1170, and *Iwein*, ca. 1190/1200; Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, ca. 1210; and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, ca. 1205), where jousts in tournaments result in the death of an opponent (*Mauritius von Craûn*, ca. 1220/1230),<sup>13</sup> or where a protagonist, Count Mai, commits matricide because his mother had tried to get her daughter-in-law executed for allegedly having committed adultery (*Mai und Beafloer*, ca. 1290).<sup>14</sup>

But murder, that is, premeditated killing for a personal reason, is a unique case that threatens to tear the seams of society apart; for that reason many medieval poets, chroniclers, and romance authors have commented on this form of crime. As in the modern world, unfortunately, medieval people were certainly familiar with assassinations, ethnic cleansing, patricide, infanticide, mob lynching, etc.<sup>15</sup> While we cannot expect medieval poets to reflect extensively on the legal implications, they certainly provide highly illustrative examples of the consequences of murder and thus leave us with significant comments after all that allow us to unravel some of the fundamental approaches to this crime, if it was identified as such, much depending on the circumstances.

The anonymous *Herzog Ernst* (ms. A, ca. 1180; ms. B, ca. 1220/1230) is predicated on

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<sup>13</sup>. Brunner, "Tristan als Mörder" (2011/2018). For a review of this collection of articles, see Albrecht Classen, in *Mediaevistik* 31 (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup>. *Mai und Beafloer* (2006).

<sup>15</sup>. See Gates (2018); Brunner, "Lynchjustiz in Würzburg" (2018).

unjustified violence which the Emperor Otto exerts against his step-son, the Duke of Bavaria, Ernst. While there had been friendship between both at first after Otto had married Ernst's widowed mother, evil rumors have poisoned the Emperor's mind who suddenly but irrationally believes that the young man secretly aspires to overthrow Otto and to kill him.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Otto had treated Ernst like his own biological son and had raised him to the highest position in the empire (621), but this then triggered the jealousy of the Count of the Palatinate, Heinrich, who is also a relative of and close advisor to the emperor. The narrator, as to be expected for the Middle Ages, refers to the devil as the one responsible for Heinrich's decision to malign his competitor (650).

Basically, here we face a universal account of two individuals who vie for the ruler's respect and gratitude, and whereas Ernst is winning in this at first, especially because of the emperor's marriage with his mother, Heinrich then resorts to the technique of slander. The narrator uses the descriptor of "bæse zage" (653), which is a worse term than what the German translator has used, "Schurke" (criminal). Instead, he characterizes him as an evil-minded person who is yet determined by cowardice, adding insult to injury. Moreover, he is an "ungetriuwe" (673; disloyal one), filled with "valsch âne riuwe" (674; ruthless deception), all of which motivates him to create this false story about Ernst, a literary and actually historical motif often dealt with in the Middle Ages and ever since.<sup>17</sup> This, however, creates a deep military and political crisis in the entire empire because most princes are opposed to fighting the much loved Duke of Bavaria, though they are then obligated to do so as subordinates under the emperor. A huge war subsequently erupts pitting the entire Holy Roman Empire against the Duke of Bavaria, who strives for a long time to resist the hostile troops, but at the end has to leave Germany, which then sets the stage for the famous, often discussed journey into the world of monsters.<sup>18</sup>

However, Ernst is not the kind of man who easily gives up, and the poet projects a character portrait of a very energetic, charismatic, and decisive leader of his people. This finds its perhaps best expression in this early section of the narrative where Ernst decides to carry out an

<sup>16</sup>. *Herzog Ernst* (1979); for recent studies, mostly concerned with Ernst's experiences in the world of monsters, see Classen (2013); id. (2013b); Stock (2017).

<sup>17</sup>. Bellamy (1970); Mickel (1989); Ohler (1997); Cunningham (2002); *Law and the Illicit in Medieval Europe* (2008); *Verstellung und Betrug* (2015) (here *Herzog Ernst* is also discussed); Mario Müller (2017).

<sup>18</sup>. See, for instance, Classen (1990); Stein (1997); Classen (2012).

assassination attempt targeting the emperor himself. In an amazingly bold move—he is driven by wrath and a deep sense of injustice having been committed against him (1268-69)—he secretly travels from Bavaria to the Rhine, where Otto has assembled a diet in the city of Speyer on the west side of the river in order to get support for his military plans, of which Ernst has been informed about.

Together with his councilor and companion Wetzel, he quietly reaches the camp, makes his way to the court, and forcefully enters the emperor's private chamber where he has a meeting with the Count of the Palatinate. The latter is consistently identified as a traitor and evil-minded courtier who constantly manipulates the emperor in order to eliminate his nemesis, Ernst. The assassination attempt takes place late at night, and only the two targeted men are still up. The Bavarian duke immediately pulls his sword, attacks them, but Otto manages to escape, which allows the narrative to continue for a long time until Ernst's return from the Orient and his re-establishment of the friendship with the emperor. However, Heinrich dies in this short melee, when Ernst resolutely cuts off his head and then berates the evil count, whom he rightly blames for all of his own suffering. The poet might have felt the constraint to make the emperor escape in the nick of time because otherwise the events would have developed very differently, which might have cut off the narrative already at that point.

In global terms, we are strongly encouraged to approve of Ernst's brazen deed, although he operates rather emotionally and irrationally as well at that point and does not entirely achieve his goal, liberating himself from his worst enemy. Nevertheless, undeterred by the dangerous situation, he penetrates deeply into the enemy's camp, even enters the private chamber, and there he can take his revenge by killing Heinrich, who had consistently maligned him without any justification. Of course, subsequently everyone in town gets greatly alarmed when the news spread in the morning, and soldiers search for the culprits far and wide, but without any success. For the narrator, Ernst's action proves to be a fully approvable revenge, and not a murder: "Dô sich der hertzoze sus gerach" (1351; After the duke had taken his revenge). The soldiers and the other members of the court deeply mourn the killing of their leader (1346-40), but the account itself paints a very different picture. From the first appearance of the Count of the Palatinate, Heinrich, until this last moment, the narrator had identified him as an evil, treacherous character, and we are certainly invited to feel relief over his death. The emperor, by contrast laments his

murder deeply (1357-88), obviously because he had trusted the victim entirely and could not distinguish properly between an evil and a good character. For Otto, the assassination represented a “lasterliche[ ]” (1400; criminal) deed, and he swears that he would never give up on his attempt to avenge this killing, especially because Ernst would certainly have murdered him as well if he himself had not managed to escape at the last moment, finding a refuge in the near-by chapel (1411-12). The assassination constituted, as Otto voices, a most despicable method by his young opponent who had openly shamed both the entire court and the empire as well (1415-16). Consequently, with the approval of everyone present, Ernst is condemned to be put under the imperial ban of outlawry and would hence deserve to be persecuted and killed wherever and however possible (1427). Moreover, the emperor has now the authority to move with all his energy and full power against the rebellious duke and to destroy both him and his people, “und über die sîne” (1427). The conflict between these two men thus assumes a collective dimension, which justifies the calling up of the imperial army to fight a war of devastation against Ernst and his entire dukedom of Bavaria (1430-31). The battle for the city of Regensburg especially proves to be very bloody, with heavy losses on both sides, which enrages the emperor even further, but eventually he manages to cause so many damages to the fortifications that the city has to submit and beg for peace, especially because Ernst had let them know that he would rather leave Germany than to witness their destruction and death.

Undoubtedly, Duke Ernst is depicted as a victim of evil slander aimed at his political demise. He then finds himself in an untenable situation, with no opportunity to defend himself to the emperor, who viciously persecutes him, whereas Ernst publicly announces that he had always supported and loved the ruler, paying him full respect and acknowledging his superior authority (1200-42). He is not a rebel and would have happily continued to serve as the duke of Bavaria, if not treason would have come in the way, which forces him to take serious actions. The killing of Count Heinrich thus emerges to be less a murder than an almost justified act of revenge.<sup>19</sup> We also might have to consider the curious situation that Ernst and his companion Wetzlar do not make any effort to chase after the emperor during their assassination attempt and leave him alone

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<sup>19</sup>. Sunderland (2017). Christopher Fletcher, in his review of this book, in *The Medieval Review* (TMR 18.09.35; online), makes the astute observation about the relationship between fictional texts and political reality: “In the laboratory of fiction, various forms of failing authority are worked through in a way which is underdeveloped in works of political theory.”

in the chapel. After all, Ernst will always try, up to the very end after his return to Germany, to regain the emperor's love and confidence.

The narrative thus concludes with a happy end, especially because Ernst is not determined by a murderous instinct and only defends himself with all the means available to him. Of course, killing Heinrich only exacerbates the entire situation and steels the emperor's resolve to pursue Ernst with all his military might, but for Ernst there is at least the satisfaction that he could punish his arch enemy. Altogether, even though the situation indicates here that a murder via assassination has happened, the political circumstances provide the protagonist with considerable justification to carry out this action, even though Otto laments the 'evil' deed in public (1381) and instrumentalizes it for his military purposes to squash the Bavarian duke, who might have been a too powerful opponent for him in the first place. Significantly, in the course of the narrative this 'killing' is then entirely ignored because even the author would not identify it specifically as 'murder,' suggesting consistently that Heinrich deserved his death.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Ernst proves through this deed his bold character, his resolve, his determination, and his effective leadership, even though, in hindsight, the assassination attempt also intensifies the emperor's hatred, thus pitting two highly emotional individuals at the top of their society against each other, which brings about a miserable war and the death of scores of victims. However, the poet's ultimate purpose was not so much to write a political or military analysis, but to build a case explaining why Ernst has to leave Bavaria, go to Constantinople on his way to the Holy Land, and then to get lost in the world of monsters.

We encounter a most complex case of killing also in the anonymous *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), where the issue arises once again whether Hagen's actions would have to be seen as criminal or as a form of self-defense, as revenge or as a political calculation of utmost brutality and yet with a certain degree of logic.<sup>21</sup> Not to be misunderstood, the poet presents a literary account where thousands of people die and where the entire Burgundian army, together with their Hunnish

<sup>20</sup>. For a concise, though short summary of the relevant research, see Behr (1989).

<sup>21</sup>. This epic poem and the specific theme of revenge have been discussed already from many perspectives; see, for instance, Brinker-von der Heyde (2003); see also the contributions to *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied* (1998); Jan-Dirk Müller (2009). For a solid critical edition, see *Das Nibelungenlied* (2010). For the English translation, see A. T. Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied* (1965).

opponents, perish at the end. It is a gory, apocalyptic conclusion, which only the extensive and global mourning, as depicted in the sequel, *Diu Klage*, can come fully to terms with.<sup>22</sup>

Siegfried is the notorious and pompous super-hero who does not seem to fit either into a heroic epic or a courtly romance, neither into the world of the gods (he makes contacts with the dwarfs, kills a dragon, becomes impenetrable through his bath in the dragon's blood, except on his shoulder blade, and he is super strong) nor into the world of humans. Wherever he appears, he creates conflicts and strife because of his enormous strength and at the same time his inability to understand the social conditions surrounding him. He proves to be most irritating to Hagen, the second-in-command at the Burgundian court, above all who as a liminal figure comes closest to him in every respect and yet cannot tolerate or supersede him.<sup>23</sup> Siegfried achieves all of his goals and ridicules the other men in Worms, yet he does not recognize or perceive how he is hurting them all and makes them feel incompetent in his presence. This is perhaps best illustrated during the hunt shortly before Hagen will kill him, where Siegfried plays with the wild bear to frighten them all and demonstrates at the same time his own superiority, him being even the master over all wild animals.<sup>24</sup>

As Jan-Dirk Müller has correctly observed, the tension between courtly culture and violence is noticeable throughout the epic poem because Siegfried challenges all and tends to belittle them, whether knowingly or not.<sup>25</sup> Even though he extraordinarily assists King Gunther in many aspects, even when he is wooing the Icelandic Queen Brunhild and when he 'readies' her for the second wedding night, practically by raping her on behalf of the husband,<sup>26</sup> all this intensifies Hagen's jealousy and fear. From the start when Siegfried had arrived as a usurper, he had been aware of the enormously destabilizing threat represented by this outlandish hero, but he could not really contain Siegfried. Hence, when he finally witnesses Brunhild shedding tears because Kriemhild had severely insulted her, calling her publicly a 'prostitute' by proving her

<sup>22</sup>. There are various editions and translations of *Diu Klage* both into modern German and English; here I rely on my own work, *Diu Klage* (1997); Lienert (1998); cf. also my study Classen (1999); and Classen (2006). See now also Fichtner (2015).

<sup>23</sup>. Haymes (1986), iii–vi.

<sup>24</sup>. Classen (2003); see also my chapter "The Forest as Staging Ground for the Heroic Protagonist: Glory and Demise in the *Nibelungenlied*," in my *The Forest in Medieval German Literature* (2015), 63–80.

<sup>25</sup>. Jan-Dirk Müller (1998), 418.

<sup>26</sup>. Classen (2011), 33–52.

charge through the belt which Siegfried had taken from Gunther's wife at night (stanzas 380-381), the long-sought opportunity has arrived for Hagen to plot his opponent's murder. He does not speak openly about killing him, only about the need "daz ez erarnen müse der Kriemhilde man" (stanza 861, 3; that Kriemhild's husband would have to pay for it), but there is no doubt that he utilizes Brunhild's pain and suffering for his own purposes to get rid of his nemesis. There is no word about Hagen during the entire scene following the bickering of the two queens, but we can be certain that he is present the whole time, together with Gunther's brothers and his mighty vassals. Nevertheless, he only reappears after Siegfried had promised to the king to swear an oath that he never claimed what Kriemhild had said to Brunhild about him, without specifically denying his dealings with the latter. This seems to settle the case, but everyone at court realizes the full degree of ambiguity and evasiveness of his statement, with no one raising their voice, however: "dô sâhen zuo zeinander di guoten ritter gemeit" (stanza 858, 4; the good knights looked at each other). Subsequently, the entire court splits into camps, which finally allows Hagen to step into this breach and to promise to serve as Brunhild's avenger (stanza 861).

There is no real political or military necessity for Hagen's plan, at least on the surface. Although Siegfried represents a power that is unmatched by anyone in their world, including Iceland and the realm of the dwarfs, he quickly gave up on any of his early plans to usurp Gunther's kingdom, despite the angry exchanges of words when he arrived in Worms (stanzas 103-26).<sup>27</sup> None of their initial conflicts are ever fully addressed or even resolved; Siegfried simply submits under the court protocol, enjoys his time with the courtly company, and awaits his chance to gain a glimpse of Kriemhild; so, love transforms the mighty hero into a sheepish servant or a subservient courtly wooer (stanza 136), and yet Hagen's fury continues to fester because he clearly understands the true danger resulting from Siegfried's monstrous power that could squash him at any time if he would resume his original plan on taking over the kingdom of the Burgundians. He is therefore the one who eggs King Gunther on to call upon Siegfried to be their leader on the voyage to Iceland (stanza 329), which binds the protagonist into the Burgundian affairs ever further. Curiously, however, after their return with the new queen Hagen fades away during that complex situation of the wedding night, and he only reappears when

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<sup>27</sup>. There are numerous cases of rebellion against the ruler, such as in the *chansons de geste*; see Sunderland (2017). See also the contributions to *Ordnung und Aufruhr im Mittelalter* (1995).

Brunhild is shamed and ridiculed by Kriemhild.

Old grudges against Siegfried surface here, and Hagen then steps up his strategy to murder his opponent, all of which scholarship has discussed already in many different ways, and yet has not fully analyzed in light of the criminal case of ‘murder.’<sup>28</sup> In other words, how are we to evaluate Hagen’s action both in light of the larger social context and in light of the conversations among the royal brothers and their vassals? Is Hagen acting all by himself? In practical terms, he does, but all three royal brothers and other confidants join the deliberations about this plot, with some of them lamely defending Siegfried, whereas Hagen simply rejects their arguments as irrelevant and insists on the absolute need to kill his opponent in order to preserve the honor of the Worms court, that is, to maintain the political status quo and to fend off the monstrous outsider (stanza 864). Gunther weakly protests that Siegfried has never done them any harm (stanza 865), but when Hagen assures him that Gunther would gain power over many kingdoms through Siegfried’s death (stanza 867), the king’s greed gains the upper hand, which allows Hagen to pursue his murderous strategy without any further opposition. Irmgard Gephart identifies Gunther’s motivation as “‘rationale[ ]’ Machterwägungen,”<sup>29</sup> but it might be more accurate to recognize here the king’s cowardice (stanza 869) and an astounding character weakness (stanza 873), which was not unusual for kings in medieval romances or heroic epics.<sup>30</sup> Hagen, on the other hand, remains very realistic and is brutal at the same time.

At any rate, from then on Hagen orchestrates a highly sophisticated maneuver which eventually achieves its goal, with Siegfried finally in a vulnerable position below his enemy, whose enmity he is even entirely ignorant about in his utter naiveté. This allows Hagen to kill him from behind, hurling a spear exactly into the one spot where the dragon blood had not covered his shoulder blade because of a leaf from a linden tree (stanzas 899, 977-978). For the narrator, this is not only murder, but also treason and an egregious misdeed: “sô grôze missewende” (stanza 978, 4), victimizing a “vil hêrlîche gast” (stanza 982, 4; a truly great outsider). William Whobrey now comments quite insightfully:

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<sup>28</sup>. Jan-Dirk Müller (1998), 92–93, focuses primarily on the intrigue, on dissimulation, and deception.

<sup>29</sup>. Gephart (2005), 82.

<sup>30</sup>. Classen (1998).

The appellative of traitor (*ungetriuwe man*) has now become Hagen's main attribute. The concept of loyalty and faithfulness (*triuwe*) is the driving force behind the murder that is being plotted. The concept itself is complicated, however, in that Hagen sees himself as fulfilling his role as a loyal vassal of the king and queen, his lady, and sees it as his duty to avenge the wrong done to them by Siegfried and Kriemhild.<sup>31</sup>

In truth, however, Hagen only references those heroic values to convince Gunther and his brothers to accede to his murderous plot which satisfies ultimately only himself, and not the Burgundians. After all, Gunther was not much concerned with the queens' bickering and was happy to let all things stand as they were, especially because he knows only too well how much he is obligated to Siegfried in their mutual deception of Brunhild and disempowerment, if not rape.

If Siegfried had not tried so hard to observe courtly manners and had not placed his weapons far away from the fountain before he took a draw from it, Hagen would have failed in his plan (stanza 977, 1). The latter, by contrast, has always remained loyal to his own cultural values and continues to observe his heroic ideals throughout, which makes it possible for him to survive until the very end of the epic poem. Hagen is a pragmatist through and through and kills and murders whenever it might be necessary, as long as he can thereby achieve his goals, which are intricately intertwined with those of his lords, although they tend to follow his advice, except when they want to go visit their sister in the land of the Huns. Would we hence be entitled to talk about 'justified' political murder here?

For instance, early on when the Burgundian company had traveled to Iceland to win Brunhild's hand for King Gunther in marriage, he had adamantly refused to put down his weapons until he was virtually forced to do so by Siegfried who knew and accepted the customs in that Nordic country (stanza 405). While Hagen thus can be identified as a character who remains consistent throughout the entire work, as repugnant that may be, Siegfried emerges as a waffling figure who really belongs to the world of heroes but tries to adapt to the courtly norms of knighthood and chivalry.<sup>32</sup> Edward R. Haymes and Susan T. Samples go so far as to comment:

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<sup>31</sup>. *The Nibelungenlied with The Klage*, ed. and trans., with an intro. by William (2018), 77, n. 92.

“Siegfried, Gunther, and to a lesser extent, Etzel all needlessly expose themselves to danger or possible loss of face in the pursuit of their respective brides.”<sup>33</sup> This makes them to willing and malleable objects in the hands of mighty Hagen who mostly controls the events, except when Siegfried is in his way. The murder thus proves to be the result of bitter internecine strife pitting these two powerful men against each other, or, on a more global level, two social systems, one heroic, the other courtly.

There is never any doubt that Hagen wants to commit murder, but he does not care about any criticism or charges because no one will ever dare to challenge him once he has gotten rid of Siegfried. He continues to obey his lord, King Gunther, later even granting that the Burgundians travel to the land of the Huns although he has greatest apprehensions (stanzas 1458 and 1497) and is even subsequently told by the mermaids about the doom which is awaiting them at King Etzel’s court (stanzas 1537 and 1539). For Hagen, killing Siegfried represents a liberation from greatest threat, but not for the Burgundian kingdom itself, but for himself and the ideals he is standing for. Hagen only pretends that he wants to protect Brunhild’s honor and that of her husband, Gunther. In reality, however, he is only concerned with his own heroic values and unique position at court, as far as the narrator allows us to comprehend the case. Within a larger, political framework, however, the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* might have been deeply concerned with political instability in the German empire and appears to cast Siegfried as the dangerous outsider and Hagen as the radical defender of the traditional imperial system.

Kriemhild is only too aware of who was responsible for the killing because during the *Bahrprobe* Siegfried’s wounds begin to bleed again when Hagen approaches the corpse (stanza 1041).<sup>34</sup> In a ghastly travesty, Gunther realizes that his liege man could be implicated and condemned, so he publicly states that robbers (“schâchære,” stanza 1042, 4) had committed that crime, and not Hagen, whom he explicitly mentions here, meekly trying to deflect the accusation away from him. However, Kriemhild is aware of the truth and points her finger at Gunther and Hagen: “Gunther und Hagene, jâ habt ir iz getân” (stanza 1043, 3; Gunther and Hagen, you have done it). This proves to be strong enough to incite Siegfried’s men to take to their weapons

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<sup>32</sup>. Classen (2010).

<sup>33</sup>. Haymes and Samples (1996), 105.

<sup>34</sup>. Schmitz-Esser (2014/2016), 418–20; unfortunately, he does not include a reference to the *Nibelungenlied* and focuses mostly on historical or religious documents.

and prepare an attack on the Burgundians, but Kriemhild oddly holds them back, probably because she does not want to see her own family killed in such a melee. However, when the narrator then affirms that Gunther's brothers, Gernot and Giselher, demonstrate their loyalty toward the deceased lord ("in triuwen si in klagetē mit den anderen sint," stanza 1044, 4; they loyally lamented him along with the others), shedding many tears about his death (stanza 1045, 1), we might have to see it as thinly veiled form of sarcasm injected by the narrator,<sup>35</sup> or simply as hypocrite behavior. Her brothers, despite having basically approved Hagen's intentions, try their best to calm down Kriemhild and to make her forget the murder (stanza 1046), but she does not fall for this trap and will brood for revenge until the very end.

The poet of the *Nibelungenlied* identified Siegfried's killing as murder, motivated by political, but also deeply personal intentions. For Hagen, Siegfried's death means a temporary relief because he has eliminated his worst enemy, a constant reminder that he was not as strong and powerful as Siegfried. However, as the subsequent events then demonstrate, this murder, which was coldly calculated and carried out with the help of the entire royal family and their advisors who are more or less informed about it all beforehand, then turns into the catalyst for the death of the entire Burgundian army, not even to mention the scores of Hunnish soldiers. Armageddon is the outcome of this one murder, and the poet could not have formulated a stronger warning about such a horrible misdeed. Finally, Hagen murders Siegfried not simply out of affect; instead, he carefully plans the entire complicated maneuver, ruthlessly getting the entire upper echelon of Burgundian society involved as accomplices, if not culprits, setting up a devious plan to expose the victim to the attack and to leave him helpless when he is drinking water from the well. Siegfried's innocent death thus turns into the trigger for a massive war from which no one will escape.

We are left breathlessly, vacillating between strong condemnation of Hagen's actions leading to his enemy's murder, and awe over his virtually Machiavellian strategy to protect the kingdom at all costs, not even shying away from this brutal crime. Hagen is not concerned with moral or ethical issues; his purpose in life is to preserve King Gunther's and his own honor. The elimination of Siegfried thus represents his triumph, at least in the first part of the

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<sup>35</sup>. For sarcasm in the Middle Ages, see *Words that Tear the Flesh* (2018), but this scene is not discussed there.

*Nibelungenlied*, but at the end none of the Burgundians survive, not even Hagen. The narrator thus explicitly warns about the catastrophic consequences of murder, irrespective of the motifs behind it, justified or not.

The discourse on murder in medieval German literature, certainly parallel to the situation in many other contemporary texts in a variety of European languages, thus proves to be highly complex, often surprising, and even ambivalent (Marie de France, Juan Ruiz, Geoffrey Chaucer, et al.). This finds its perhaps most telling expression in one of the verse narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer, a famous poet active in Landsberg near Augsburg around 1400, “Die unschuldige Mörderin.”<sup>36</sup> As we have learned only recently, Kaufringer obviously drew on a very old Jewish-Arabic tradition that he might have learned about through oral Yiddish sources, or via a Latin translation contained in the *Gesta romanorum*.<sup>37</sup> But the issue, murder, as discussed in this curious tale, remains rather elusive despite numerous efforts by previous scholars to examine Kaufringer’s intentions.<sup>38</sup> The title of the story itself represents an oxymoron since murder is defined as a criminal act which never can be done innocently. Granted, there are cases, indeed, when children ignorantly kill one of their own in play without understanding the consequences of their action, such as in Georg Wickram’s famous *Rollwagenbüchlein* from 1555,<sup>39</sup> but Kaufringer presents a narrative predicated on the lives of young adults where murder, honor, innocence, virginity, desperation, and self-defense intriguingly intertwine.

The protagonist, a young countess whom the king is about to marry, is badly maligned by the servant of a knight. He claims that she would sleep with any man and willingly prostitute herself (54-62), which proves to be utterly false. Nevertheless, the knight, well prepared by his servant, knows how to force her to let him in and to sleep with him, which both actually enjoy (236-41). However, in his foolishness, he then betrays himself, commenting to her that the

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<sup>36</sup>. Sappler (1982). For an updated bibliography, which extends, however, only to 2008, see Jurchen (2013). Here I will draw from Heinrich Kaufringer, *Werke*. Vol. I: *Text* (1972); for an English translation, see Kaufringer: Classen (2014). See now also Rippl (2014).

<sup>37</sup>. Classen (2017). Stede (1993), 108, questions the possibility that Kaufringer was familiar with the *Gesta romanorum*, but whether a reference to an English version of the *Gesta* might be productive here seems doubtful as well.

<sup>38</sup>. See the commentary by Klaus Grubmüller (1996), 1285–91.

<sup>39</sup>. Wickram (1973), “Von einem Kind / das kindlicher weis ein ander Kind umbbringt” (no. 74).

servant was correct in characterizing her as an evil woman who would be a bad match for the king (249-51). Thereupon he falls asleep, but the countess is deeply upset and wants to find out the truth about this man. When she shines a light into his face, she realizes that he is not the king and had badly deceived her. Resolutely, the countess fetches a strong and sharp knife and simply cuts off his head; so she murders him, as we would have to say in face of the specific account. But does she do this out of rage, hatred, personal concerns for her enrichment or empowerment, greed, or fear? Similarly, when she kills the gate keeper, what are her motives? She needs his help, but she has to pay a very high price for it, her sexual favor. Eliminating him makes it possible for the countess to hide all traces of her deed, and there are no witnesses left. Further, after the wedding, during the first night with her husband, she convinces her most trusted maid (477) to step in for her to deceive the king about her virginity—a fairly common motif in medieval literature, such as in the case of Isolde in Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* (ca. 121), who has her maid Brangaene substitute for her in the first wedding night with King Mark—but that maid later refuses to leave the marital bed despite her pledge to follow all the instructions (514-17) because she wants to become queen herself (557). In her desperation, the protagonist then sets fire to the bedroom, rescues her husband, but locks the door behind her and so abandons the maid to the flames (600-616).

In every case, the narrator intervenes and provides a justification for this murder, such as in the case of the maid whom he blames for her great disloyalty: “also ward ir der recht lon / umb ir untrew gros gegeben, / das si da verlos ir leben” (614-16; hence she received the proper punishment because of her great disloyalty, there losing her life). Where is the difference between murder and manslaughter? Could we grant the countess some kind of moral justification for her actions? Did she act out of self-defense and was she thus entitled to kill those two men and the maid? Formally, both then and today she would clearly be condemned for multiple murders, irrespective of her understandable reasons to defend her honor, her future marriage, her entire life which those evil characters all threatened to ruin and to destroy. Moreover, the countess and later queen suffers deep compunctions during her entire married life, and the narrative sets in again after those thirty-two years because her bad conscience tortures her: “rew” (631; repentance) is filling her heart, and she regrets what she had done to the knight: “das was ir lait” (633; she repented it), although she then ignores his own bad deed against her. The more

she reflects upon her terrible action in the past, the more she sheds tears, which then wake up her husband, who is then finally informed about everything that she had done for herself and also on his behalf. However, instead of blaming her and calling her a murderess, he pulls her toward himself, hugs her, and expresses his deep pity and empathy with her sorrowing and long-term suffering all upon his behalf: “durch meinen willen” (695). He promises her that he would never, neither privately nor publicly, blame her, and would not diminish her honor or her character: “weder an eren noch an muot” (699).

The narrator thereupon comments the entire account and acknowledges her enormous victimization, her long-term grief, her emotional stress, and profound sorrow. The king rightly forgave her, as he posits, “wann die fraw übels nie began” (704; because the woman never committed an evil deed). Moreover, great dangers were thrust upon her without her own fault or responsibility (705-06), and for Kaufringer, this all appears as good enough to acknowledge that she had had to fend for herself and can thus be exempted from all guilt. All four dead people, including the knight’s servant who was apprehended early in the morning and hanged as a presumed thief, brought their death upon themselves because of their misdeeds, their evil character, and simply because of their plain fault in their relationship with the protagonist. They were all guilty in their own terms, whereas the countess turned queen emerges as the innocent victim despite her active effort to protect herself. The knight had to die because of his egregious deception and horrible exploitation of the lady; the gate keeper, the maid, and the servant had to die because they broke their oaths of loyalty and betrayed the lady.

As the narrator emphasizes at the end regarding the maid: “darumb hat sie bösen solt / empfangen, das gefelt mir wol, / wann si was aller untrew vol” (736-738; she earned a bad reward, which pleases me, because she was full of disloyalty). He even goes one step further and insists that everyone should suffer the same destiny if they were to become guilty of the same evil crime, “untrew” (748). For Kaufringer, God has spoken in this case and punished those four people, whereas the countess had to suffer badly both at the time of her wedding and then for more than three decades as a result of her self-accusations and remorse (750-57). As Michaela Willers and others have correctly underscored, for the poet, God’s justice is of a different kind than human justice, and it is God in this situation who helped the lady to escape without real harm from those four people and who imposed the death penalty upon them.<sup>40</sup>

Let us conclude with one final example provided by a female author, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, who composed one of the first German novels when she translated *Königin Sibille* from the French original in ca. 1437.<sup>41</sup> Some scholars have questioned her authorship, which is actually irrelevant in our context because it does not matter whether she was relying on a staff of translators and writers at her court, or whether she was in charge of this and her other novels all by herself.<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth's German 'translation' deals with the tragic destiny of King Charles's wife, Sibille, who, although pregnant with his child, is falsely accused of having committed adultery with an ugly and evil-minded dwarfish person who tries to rape her. When she repels him, hitting him hard, he decides to avenge himself and later hides in the marital bed while her husband attends mass early in the morning. Upon his return, Charles discovers the dwarf and immediately believes the worst, ready to have his wife burned at the stake. On the advice of his councilors he finally changes the verdict to exile, forcing her to leave the court, even though she is about to deliver their mutual child. She returns to her father, the Emperor of Constantinople, but she has to face many challenges and difficulties on the way far to the east.

To provide her with at least some protection on her journey into her exile, the king allows the knight Abrye of Mondidire to accompany her, but the malicious courtier Markair (no other eponym given for him, though his name is spelled in different ways) follows them, murders his opponent, and tries to catch Sibille, whom he wants to rape and then to kill. Although the narrator at first explains that Markair had held a secret love for the queen for a long time (128), he now resorts to a vile and violent method to overpower and abuse her, revealing his purely sexual desire for her: "synen willen mit ir dun" (128). While the two knights fight against each other, she manages to escape, though, riding through the forest in a frenzy without leaving a trace. Finally, she comes across the peasant Warakir, who then accompanies her all the way to Constantinople, even though this means for him to leave behind his own family without protection and support.

Intriguingly, Abrye's dog proves to be the most loyal animal, mourning his master's

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<sup>40</sup>. Willers (2002), 196–203. See also Classen (2017).

<sup>41</sup>. Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, *Der Roman von der Königin Sibille in drei Prosafassungen des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts* (1977); cf. Herrmann (2002).

<sup>42</sup>. Großbröhmer (2017).

death. When he recognizes Markair at court, he immediately attacks him, and soon enough it becomes clear that this might shed light on the disappearance of Abrye. The court then discovers his corpse barely covered in the forest, and they set up a trial in which the dog is allowed to fight against Markair—a form of ordeal.<sup>43</sup> God obviously wants the latter's punishment and helps the dog to triumph over the evil man, who is then executed, together with his relative Galleran, who had tried, against Charles's explicit ban, to intervene to protect the defeated Markair, while the dog later dies from famine, refusing to eat any further and mourning the loss of its lord.

Sibille delivers her infant while on the way to Constantinople, calling him Ludwig (Louis). Years pass in which the child grows up and turns into a mighty warrior. Altogether, Sibille needs her father's help, but then also the pope's assistance, her son's strength and that of her loyal servant Warakir to triumph over her husband's forces. Finally, King Charles recognizes Sibille's innocence and the horrible machinations by the evil councilors, who are subsequently brought to justice and executed. There is a happy end, as we commonly observe in Elisabeth's novels, but the price which Sibille has to pay is enormous, casting a particularly negative light on her husband, apart from the evil councilors, who emerge here, perhaps more than ever before in these prose novels, as an irrational, emotional, weak character whom the secret opponents at court can easily manipulate and mislead, convincing him that his wife indeed had committed adultery with the worst possible figure, the ugly dwarf.<sup>44</sup>

But there is murder, a deliberate, vicious act, entirely contrary to the laws and the general social conditions as presented by the novel. Once Sibille, whom Charles had initially wanted to be burned at the stake for her alleged adultery, has left the court, accompanied only by the lightly armored knight Abrye, the courtly public is basically shut out of sight, which adds the important components of silence and isolation to the conditions that make murder possible, a heinous and brutal method to achieve one's personal goals without consideration of other people.

Markair does not pursue Abrye for any particular purposes, except that he is with the queen and protects her with his simple means. In contrast to all other examples examined above, Abrye is killed only because he is in the way for Markair who wants to rape Sibille at all costs

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<sup>43</sup>. See Neumann (2010), for a global discussion of medieval ordeals.

<sup>44</sup>. For a discussion of the dwarf in medieval German literature, see Habicht (2010); as to the implications for the queen, see Classen (2015). See also the contributions to *Zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich* (2002).

and has no hesitation to overpower the opponent, even though this proves to be entirely in contradiction to all knightly ideals. Indeed, here we encounter an individual whom the poet projects as utterly evil, with no redeeming values; he is called a “verreder” (129; traitor) and “schalk” (129; rogue). Moreover, not only would he have taken his sexual pleasure with Sibille, he also would have killed her immediately thereafter to make sure that his crime would not be revealed by anyone. In fact, Markair is in a veritable blood thirstiness, trying to kill the dog after he has overcome Abrye, but fails in that, and then cuts off the head of the horse, which he would have done with Sibille as well (129). Unfortunately for him, however, the queen can escape, and in the end the dog succeeds in demonstrating through the public trial (ordeal) that Markair was the murderer. In fact, if the latter had not faced the animal’s resolute resistance, he would have killed both the young knight and his lady, compiling double murder on his crime of rape.

As the narrator comments, “Aber got wolde sye behuden” (129; God wanted to protect her), so she manages to get away; and from then on she is never really threatened again by evil men, and can, finally, recover her previous honorable position as the king’s innocent wife. There is much wrong at Charles’s court, where the king has basically lost all control, where a hostile faction operates strategically to undermine his authority and to rob him of his happiness by maligning the queen and getting this poor woman either executed by burning or at least exiled by her own husband despite the fact that she is pregnant with his child. Markair is only one of many evil characters in that situation, but his murder of Abrye is the last criminal deed that he can commit. The author takes a very distinct position and condemns both this evil individual and the entire family behind him as disrespectful, deceptive, hypocritical, and disloyal people who ruthlessly pursue their political agenda, even if it entails a whole series of criminal acts. Murder thus emerges as what it commonly proves to be also today, a horrible crime against society and the affected individual. Justice, however, is finally reestablished and after the ordeal with the dog Markair confesses all of his evil deeds and intentions, admitting publicly that he had murdered Abrye because he had defended the queen against his attempt to rape her (142).

Although *Königin Sibille* seems to reflect a catastrophically defective kingdom and royal court, criticizing King Charles above all, apart from the murderer and his kin, once the crime has taken place, the culprit is soon identified and brought to justice through the ordeal involving the dog. The novel presents also an extensive account of Sibille struggling long and hard to

overcome a whole sequence of problems and conflicts, though no further attacks on her life, but at the end she has so much support from so many different sides that the evil company at Charles's court loses its influence and is decisively crushed. Murder, as Elisabeth hence states most distinctly, is a terrible crime and must be persecuted with the full force of the authority. However, the king does not demonstrate the necessary strength to uphold law and order at his own court, which allows the hostile party to continue exerting a deep influence on the king, who cuts a truly poor figure, not untypically of late medieval literature at large.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>. Bloh (2002); Bastert (2004); Schlusemann (2010); Classen (2016).

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To conclude, the case of murder was discussed rather intensively throughout medieval German and European literature. Significantly, each poet projects a different condition and situates murder in a very distinct context. Sometimes murder proves to be rather a form of political revenge, if not assassination (*Herzog Ernst*), and the audience is even invited to approve Duke Ernst's action. At other times, murder follows from very brutal but rational calculations aiming at the preservation of a certain set of political values (*Nibelungenlied*). However, as the poet then

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indicates very explicitly, that murder sets into motion a long sequence of events ultimately leading to a veritable Armageddon and is thus actually identified as a most dangerous crime that never should have happened. Heinrich Kaufringer even suggests the possibility of innocent murder in order to protect the woman's honor, social status, and virginity. By contrast, in Elisabeth's novel, the murderer represents a truly evil character, with no redeeming features, and when he is ultimately executed, there is a kind of relief.

Our analysis has thus revealed the complexity of killing, which could be identified either

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as murder, as an act of revenge, as an attempt at assassination, or as the result of desperate efforts to protect one's own life, honor, and happiness. There is much killing in medieval German literature, but the discourse about murder also proves to be highly complex because in each case the motivation of the perpetrator needs to be taken into consideration. Duke Ernst's action cannot be simply compared with Hagen's murder in the *Nibelungenlied*, even though each time it affects an individual who is killed for personal reasons. The situation in Heinrich Kaufinger's case proves to be even more complicated insofar as the three murders are contextualized most

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intricately, forcing us to evaluate them both from a criminal and an ethical perspective.

Only Elisabeth of Nassau-Saarbrücken presents a situation where murder is utterly condemned and identified as an entirely evil deed, both politically and morally. Altogether, we can realize how much the individual poets struggled with coming to terms with their protagonists' actions that cannot be easily categorized and evaluated. The term 'murder' does not serve fully to come to terms with the issue presented in each case because the death of the respective victim needs to be evaluated quite individually. In other words, medieval German

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poets already recognized the complexity of the legal process and the challenges in the judicial discourse and thus succeeded in sensitizing their audiences to the many issues involved.

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