

9-2007

# On the Question of Authorship of the Nibelungenlied

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## Recommended Citation

Anderson, Annette, "On the Question of Authorship of the Nibelungenlied" (2007). *Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2007*. Paper 3.

[http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_conf\\_newvoice\\_2007/3](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_conf_newvoice_2007/3)

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**GER 8865, Modern and Classical Languages Department**  
**Georgia State University**  
**2007 New Voices Conference September 27-29**  
**Graduate English Association**  
**English Department, Georgia State University**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**

**On the Question of Authorship of the *Nibelungenlied***

INTRODUCTION

Sometime around the year 1200 a yet to be identified poet wrote what is often referred to as, "...the most impressive single work of medieval German literature and [it] stands in the small company of great national epics, with the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Roland*, and the *Cid*."<sup>1</sup> The author of the aforementioned quote, Frank Ryder, goes on to say, "...in the pure art of story, in the creation of epic figures, in vigor and directness of characterization, in monumental scope and power—[this] work can bear comparison with any of the great epics. Like them, it is a true work of world literature, faithful to its time but not bound by it, comprehensible and of significance to an audience centuries removed."<sup>2</sup> Naturally many scholars over time have attempted to identify the author of such an outstanding piece of literature and it is understandable that such a significant piece of literature deserves to have an identifiable author. Or does it? The scope of study on this subject has spanned centuries and has filled countless volumes and kept hundreds of scholars well occupied for most of their academic careers. The question which occupies many modern scholars is naturally the question of

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<sup>1</sup>Frank G. Ryder translation, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, (Wayne State Univ. Press, Detroit,1962) p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Frank G. Ryder translation, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, (Wayne State Univ. Press, Detroit,1962) p.1.

gender—was it written by a man, as was assumed by nineteenth and many twentieth century researchers, or is it possible that a woman was able to produce such an epic work at a time when female poets and writers were a rare commodity indeed? In the following paper I will explore three very different theories of authorship ranging from Werner Wunderlich’s assertion that the author of the *Nibelungenlied* does not need to be named because the epic exists as a part of our human history and this human history needs no author, to Edward Haymes exploration of the “Werkstatt” theory of authorship, to the angle that interests me most, which is the theory that a female author is responsible for producing this great work of literature.

### BODY

Certain facts about the *Nibelungenlied* are known and are agreed upon by most scholars. It can be assumed with reasonable certainty that the original epic originated as an oral “Lied” or more specifically, the story was sung by “Meistersängers” in the medieval tradition long before any author thought to write down the words on parchment or paper. As mentioned above, Werner Wunderlich finds the identification of the individual who first transformed the epic from the oral tradition to a written work to be unimportant. As he asserts in his article, *The Invented Poet: Scheffel’s Literary Imagination of the Nibelungen Author*, simply “Epic poetry is written anonymously.”<sup>3</sup> Not much question on his part why a name can simply not be attached to the epic—there is no need when the genre itself

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<sup>3</sup>Werner Wunderlich, “The Invented Poet: Scheffel’s Literary Imagination of the Nibelungen Author.” *Poetica*, 1993 v. 39-40:249.

dictates anonymity. He goes on to explain that “The evidence indicates that authors always saw themselves as a mere link in a chain of tradition, and thus their task was to pass on and preserve ‘what wondrous old tales can tell us’ (in alten maeren wunders vil geseit)”<sup>4</sup> Certainly an interesting concept and one that he goes on to explore further when he questions the idea that there was only one original of the epic. Wunderlich asks, is it not possible that the original oral versions were varied and different, would not every performer have added some of his own life’s experiences into the re-telling of the “wondrous old tales?” “Authorship is established on the basis of tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Or more specifically, “The author is an anonymous individual who transmits and preserves tradition,”<sup>6</sup> Wunderlich emphatically asserts. He points out that it cannot even be determined with complete certainty that the written versions we now possess accurately reflect the oral versions that were originally sung, he suggests that the written forms may even only “feign the oral style that we associate with them.”<sup>7</sup> However, he does admit that elements contained in the epic, such as the above mentioned opening stanza of the *Nibelungenlied*, where a re-telling of “wondrous old tales” are promised to the audience, do indicate that the epic did have its beginning in the oral tradition. Wunderlich never disputes the **authority** of the author as he says here, “The author allows the subject matter that he has taken up to come into its own as a story, he transforms, develops, and expands it through a variety of images. Yet authority is

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Invented Poet: Scheffel’s Literary Imagination of the Nibelungen Author.” *Poetica*, 1993 v. 39-40:249.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Authorship of the Nibelungenlied.” *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*. Widmer McConnel, ed. (Camden House, Columbia, S.C., 1998) p.253.

<sup>6</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Authorship of the Nibelungenlied.” p.256.

<sup>7</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Authorship of the Nibelungenlied.” p 253.

passed on to him through the fact that he gives life to the story and allows it to grow.”<sup>8</sup> It can be concluded from reading Wunderlich’s article that Wunderlich feels that the *Nibelungenlied* author actually made a conscious decision **not** to identify himself, that there was no real importance in the “who” but certainly in the “how.” As Wunderlich so eloquently states, “He [the author] sees himself as a link in a long chain of people who have always been there to tell the tale in the vernacular.”<sup>9</sup> This oft repeated image of Wunderlich’s, the idea of “being a link in the chain of tradition” sums up his assertion that some forms of literature, no matter how significant or “epic” they are, simply do not need to have the name of an author attached to them. He feels that the *Nibelungenlied* is to remain firmly in the collective wisdom of literary history, and it will never be necessary to positively identify the original author of the epic.

In his article, “Der Nibelungendichter—eine Werkstatt” Edward Haymes presents the idea that the *Nibelungenlied* was not merely written by one individual, but by a whole workshop or “Werkstatt” of individuals and identifying just one author simply cannot be done. He does allow that scholars’ fascination with identifying the *Nibelungenlied* author is understandable in that “Der Anonymus ist immer ein Ärger,”<sup>10</sup> or in other words, anonymity always disturbs the mind of the literary historian. Haymes initially subscribes to the theory (held by many other scholars as well) that the scope of the epic is such that it would be an impossibility for one individual to have written it completely unassisted. As Wunderlich adds; “It

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<sup>8</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Authorship of the Nibelungenlied.” p 254.

<sup>9</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Authorship of the Nibelungenlied.” P. 256.

<sup>10</sup> Edward R. Haymes, “Der Nibelungendichter—eine Werkstatt.” *The Nibelungenlied; genesis, interpretation, reception; (Kalamazoo papers 1997-2005)* 2006:1.

was believed that the artistic ability needed to produce a poetic work such as the *Nibelungenlied* could only have originated with a genius.”<sup>11</sup> So, if such one genius did not exist, according to Haymes, who or what group was able to produce the epic?

Haymes presents a systematic review of authorship theories of the past fifty years, beginning in 1963 with Helmuth Brackert’s assertion that a group of singers, all well-versed in the oral tradition, collaborated in presenting the oral epic, therefore immediately adding to the number of possible responsible parties for authorship and alluding to the idea that it was a group, rather than an individual effort.

Haymes mentions, as an interesting aside, the “oral poetry” theory introduced by Parry and Lord in the Sixties that describes a metric/ syntactic model as a building block in the creation of the oral epic. Parry and Lord go on to assert that the *Nibelungenlied* was created using this same model, which basically entails the epic having “quasi-automatically”<sup>12</sup> written itself by adhering to the above-mentioned metric/syntactic model in that the structure of the model produced the epic and not an author per se. (which explains, in their opinion, why no named author of the *Nibelungenlied* exists)

Moving a bit further on in Haymes history of authorship theories he mentions Roland Barthes’ (written in 1968) quote from an article on authorship, “Die Geburt des Lesers geschieht durch den Tod des Autors,”<sup>13</sup> or the epic can give birth or re-birth to the reader, but kills the author as a result. A dramatic approach

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<sup>11</sup> Werner Wunderlich, “The Authorship of the *Nibelungenlied*.” P. 252.

<sup>12</sup> Edward R. Haymes, “Der Nibelungendichter—eine Werkstatt.” P. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Edward R. Haymes, “Der Nibelungendichter—eine Werkstatt.” P. 8.

to be sure. Several other scholars brought up the question, including Hans Fromm (in 1974) whom Haymes also mentions in his article, can it be automatically concluded that written poetry is truly superior to the spoken form? These scholars point out, why spend so much time and energy attempting to determine the author of the *Nibelungenlied* if we don't know for sure that perhaps the oral form was actually superior to the written form? Did the story benefit from being written down, or are we attaching our contemporary idea that a written document must always be superior to the spoken or oral form? This introduces yet another element which takes one away from the specific task of identifying a *Nibelungenlied* author, but an interesting question that could be considered in a separate forum.

Haymes finally arrives at the 1996 research theory of Jochim Bumke, which includes the aforementioned “workshop” theory. Bumke theorizes that the existence of so many varied forms and styles of handwriting which can be identified on the existing manuscripts (the most well-known of the manuscripts are designated as manuscript “A,” manuscript “B,” and manuscript “C”) clearly indicate the existence of multiple authors, or as Haymes puts it into contemporary jargon, “teamwork.” In his article, Haymes reveals, Bumke conjures up an image of a medieval workshop where many scribes can be seen busily transcribing the great epic—a picture of what could almost be described as a medieval production line. Haymes seems to agree with Bumke’s assertion, yet he goes on to say that the “what” that was written, in his opinion, is much more important than the actual mechanics (i.e. variety of hands holding the stylus) or the “how” the manuscripts were written. Specifically, Haymes states; “Ich finde Baumkes Darstellung der Handschriftsproduktion durchaus

überzeugend, aber es ist ein Fehler dieses Bild der Überlieferung auf die Entstehung des Epos selbst übertragen zu wollen.“<sup>14</sup>

After exploring the "teamwork" theory, among others, Haymes finally arrives at the conclusion that in the end, he must disagree with Bumke. His reasons for doubting that a whole group of medieval scribes could have created such a multi-layered and complex work of literature is distilled into the following quote; “Der fein abgestimmte Einbau höfische Elemente in die Geschichte, die Höfisierung des Helden als Hauptgrund für seinen Tod gestalten, ist die subtile Arbeit eines Einzelnen.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Haymes has come full circle once again, and is firmly back in the camp of those scholars who theorize that one particularly gifted author had to have produced this amazing epic. Obviously, who this gifted author may be, continues to be a mystery and a question Haymes is also not able to definitively answer.

One well hidden reference to a certain cloister-house in stanza 1295 in the twenty-first adventure of the *Nibelungenlied* inspired literary historian and professor, Berta Lösel-Wieland-Englemann to present her theory in a 1980 article, “Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Nidernburger Nonne?” that a female author had been responsible for writing the great epic. She feels that certain mysteries which had plagued scholars for centuries regarding the authorship of the *Nibelungenlied* could be cleared up by accepting the fact that a woman was responsible for penning the epic. As she says in the opening paragraph of her article; “...viele Dinge im *NL*, die den Forschern Rätsel aufgeben, werden leichter

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<sup>14</sup> Edward R. Haymes, “Der Nibelungendichter—eine Werkstatt.” P.8.

<sup>15</sup> Edward R. Haymes, “Der Nibelungendichter—eine Werkstatt.” P.12.



verständlich, wenn wir sie als das Ergebnis weiblicher Ansichten auffassen.“<sup>16</sup> Or in other words; “So mancher Kommentar, der uns auf soetwas Sonderbares oder Rätselhaftes im Epos hinweist, ist in seinem Kern oft nichts weiter als das Herausstellen eines weiblichen Blickwinkels oder das Betonen einer weiblichen Interessensphäre.“<sup>17</sup>

Englemann does not stand alone in her beliefs that a female author with a more pro-female approach or with a greater focus on the importance of the female characters was responsible for the writing of the epic. In a 1995 article, Stephanie Pafenberg points out “...the *Nibelungenlied* author is bolder and more willing to develop the idea of female transgression, albeit with a tinge of humor and a character’s interior monologue.”<sup>18</sup> She continues; “The narrator leaves no doubt about who, in fact, is stronger—Siegfried or Brünhild—and suggests a sympathy with the queen.”<sup>19</sup> Pafenberg suggests that “Women are ‘intruding’ into male spheres of action, using male means of action.”<sup>20</sup> and that such an emancipated portrayal of female characters would not have been created by a male author.

Englemann introduces her, at the time, radical new theory of female authorship of the *Nibelungenlied* with a brief geography lesson in that she connects the above mentioned cloister to a specific location, namely; “Down where the

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<sup>16</sup> Berta Lösel-Wieland-Englemann, “Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Niedernburger Nonne?“ *Monatshefte*, vol.72, No. 1, 1980. p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Berta Lösel-Wieland-Englemann, “Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Niedernburger Nonne?“ p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie B. Pafenberg, “The Spindle and the Sword: Gender, Sex, and Heroism in the *Nibelungenlied* and Kudrun” *The Germanic Review*, 1995 Summer; 70 (3): 112.

<sup>19</sup> Stephanie B. Pafenberg, “The Spindle and the Sword: Gender, Sex, and Heroism in the *Nibelungenlied* and Kudrun” p. 112.

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie B. Pafenberg, “The Spindle and the Sword: Gender, Sex, and Heroism in the *Nibelungenlied* and Kudrun” p. 111.

Danube takes the waters of the Inn.”<sup>21</sup> She offers the fact that this particular cloister still stands today as irrefutable evidence of the existence of the presence of nuns who lived in the very same geographic region, (during the very same time period when most agree the *Nibelungenlied* was written) where much of the action described in the *Nibelungenlied* also took place. The female author theory is further developed in that Englemann proceeds to explore the history of the nuns of the Nidernburger cloister, specifically an Abbess Gisela who was to have been the widow of a Hungarian King, thereby having experienced life at court prior to her becoming a nun in her widowhood. This experience at court gave her the authority to write about the often highlighted details of courtly life which do appear with regularity, especially in Manuscript C, of the *Nibelungenlied*. It does seem reasonable that a nun who had lived her entire life inside the walls of a cloister could not have experienced the “courtly life” and all of its trappings as the *Nibelungenlied* author so richly describes: “They chose from wardrobes clothes of the finest kind, All the noble garments they could find; Bracelets, too, with silk-and-golden chains, And all the maidens dressed and primped with endless pains.”<sup>22</sup> The pageantry of life at court is captured fully, as the epic continues; “Uta also came, Her Majesty. In many lovely ladies’ company, All richly dressed-perhaps a hundred or more. Charming maidens followed, her daughter walked before.”<sup>23</sup> A thorough knowledge of the intricacies of romance and deception are also evident throughout the epic, another indicator, according to Englemann, that only a woman could have this knowledge and therefore only a woman could have written the overwhelmingly

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<sup>21</sup> Frank G. Ryder translation, *The Song of the Nibelungs*. p. 251.

<sup>22</sup> Frank G. Ryder translation, *The Song of the Nibelungs*. p.86.

<sup>23</sup> Frank G. Ryder translation, *The Song of the Nibelungs*. p.87.

“courtly” Manuscript C of the *Nibelungenlied*. Furthermore, it has been pointed out by many literary historians that the epic lacks detailed battle scenes, the gore of the battlefield (not to say there isn’t plenty of gore in the epic, it just doesn’t occur on the battlefield) is omitted, which Englemann points to as further proof that a female author would chose to omit, obviously due to a lack of knowledge of the battlefield, such details.

Englemann fleshes out her theory further in order to offer a reason or motivation for this Abbess Gisela to have written the tale when she describes the hardships the nuns of the Nidernburg Cloister experienced during the period of history when the epic was thought to have been written. The nuns were forced to live in abject poverty for thirty-seven long years, due to the elimination of their sole means of support, by the **male** Kaiser Friederich Barbarossa. While, in Englemann’s opinion, adversity breeds brilliance, or as she says; “Bei Hochleistungsmenschen, die alles verloren haben, werden in solchen Fällen regelmässig ungeahnte Talente und Energien mobilisiert.”<sup>24</sup> she feels like rather than finding her hidden talents due to the hardships thrust upon her, it is more likely that Abbess Gisela wrote the *Nibelungenlied* as more of a protest piece in reaction to or perhaps as retribution for the poor treatment the nuns received at the hands of the Kaiser and all other male figures that dominated women’s lives during this particular period in history. At this point, Englemann’s article begins to read more like a feminist manifesto and her facts become blurred by her feminist zeal-she even suggests that the Nidernburg Cloister was a haven for medieval “man-haters”

“Deshalb dürfte in jenen Jahrzehnten das Kloster Nidernburg eine Stätte der

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<sup>24</sup> Berta Lösel-Wieland-Englemann, “Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Niedernburger Nonne?“ p. 7.

Bitterkeit und des Pessimismus, der Resignation und des Männerhasses gewesen sein.”<sup>25</sup> In her final thrust at male dominance, Englemann suggests that Manuscript C with its, in her opinion, obvious pro-female angle was indeed the original manuscript and men made the changes which produced a much more male dominated version of the epic in Manuscript B. Since mostly men were exposed to literature and learning throughout history, she explains that the male readers of the epic soon tired of the intricacies of the more female slant, and the complexities of the female mind as depicted in the tale, and therefore made the changes which led to Manuscript B’s emergence. In her own more forceful words;

Die Zuhörer wollten nicht ihr Augenmerk auf kompliziertes weibliches Seelenleben und auf heisse Witwentränen richten müssen. Statt dessen wollten sie männliche Triumphe mitempfinden dürfen, und die Schwarzzeichnung Hagens stimmte mit ihren natürlichen Sympathien nicht überein.<sup>26</sup>

Which leads to the final and obvious question, why did Abbess Gisela not attach her name as the author to the *Nibelungenlied*, and chose to remain anonymous? Englemann has an answer for that as well—it was the reality of medieval male dominion to never allow a woman to so obviously make her presence in literary circles known.

In her book, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers* self-described “feminist medievalist” Sara Poor takes the discussion of female authorship to another level. While Poor’s book focuses primarily on medieval writer Mechthild of Magdeburg, her approach to the problems associated with attributing medieval works of fiction to female authors is certainly relevant to this discussion. As

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<sup>25</sup> Berta Lösel-Wieland-Englemann, “Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Niedernburger Nonne?” p.7.

<sup>26</sup> Berta Lösel-Wieland-Englemann, “Verdanken wir das *Nibelungenlied* einer Niedernburger Nonne?” p.21.

Englemann's theory of female authorship of the *Nibelungenlied* is contemplated, Poor's comments become even more pertinent; "If the question driving this study is What happened to this female author [Magdeburg] and her book?, the more pressing question that underlines it is Does the answer matter to us?"<sup>27</sup> Poor emphatically answers that question in the affirmative by pointing out that;

It matters...because a literary history that more accurately reflects women's participation in the complex changes in literary production and reception over time can, I believe, raise awareness about what it means to be a woman both historically and now and thereby help to shape and change current ideological attitudes towards women for the better.<sup>28</sup>

Textural authority is so closely tied to the identity of an author, in Poor's opinion, that it becomes even more critical that female authors receive the recognition they deserve which brings Englemann's theory about the significance of the *Nibelungenlied*'s supposed female author into even sharper focus. Poor points out that there are countless inconsistencies in literary anthologies that concern themselves with medieval authors—some name multiple authors for one single work while others omit all authors entirely. She says; "Regardless of this apparent lack of consistency regarding author attributions for medieval bookmakers, the concept of a single, identifiable author continues to be central to most if not all present-day studies of medieval German literature."<sup>29</sup> "For today's scholars, authorship at its most basic still amounts to the attribution of a text to a name."<sup>30</sup> It is clear that the

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<sup>27</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*.(University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia,2004) p.15.

<sup>28</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.15.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.10.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.10.

search to identify the author of a medieval epic such as the *Nibelungenlied* is viewed by Poor as necessary and most certainly so, if the possibility exists that the epic was perhaps written by a woman. In her opinion, Poor emphasizes that even in the twenty first century; "...the academic focus on women has not yet fully surpassed this problem; female traditions thus continue to resonate as subsets of the universal human traditions peopled by men or as documentation of particular and essentialized female experience or feminine immediacy."<sup>31</sup> If one were to accept Englemann's theory of a female *Nibelungenlied* author, Poor indicates that scholars would not even give the poor medieval Abbess a chance to finally get her due, since the likelihood of general scholarship attributing such a monumental work of literature to a woman just doesn't exist. Poor explains; "The historians discussed devalue the women's texts because they presumably do not display the thoughtful, rational—read active—authorship displayed by the men. Once again authorship can only be attributed to women insofar as their agency (rational, active authorship) is downplayed."<sup>32</sup> One could certainly argue that Kriemhild's uncontrolled need for revenge for Siegfried's murder would never be viewed as "thoughtful" or "rational" thereby once again eliminating the possibility of a female *Nibelungenlied* author being accepted by mainstream (male-dominated) literary scholarship. Interestingly, Poor reports; "As recently as 1987, for example, we find an anthology produced for the teaching of medieval German literature in the United States in which Mechthild's book earns no mention, nor does any other female-authored text."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.200.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.174.

<sup>33</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.193.

In an interesting tie-in to Englemann's theory that a nun was the author of the *Nibelungenlied*, Poor offers some interesting insight into the realities or rather the impossibility of a medieval female author with religious ties to even voice her opinions, much less author and attach her name to a significant work of literary import. "The particular conflict about authorship expressed in Mechthild's text pits her agency as the writer of a book, the source of which is God himself, against her social role as a woman bound to silence by Church decree."<sup>34</sup> If Mechthild could not publicize her work which contained words that came to her directly from God, it is certainly reasonable to assume that an epic tale filled with courtly romance, revenge and deceit would be even less likely to get the woman who reportedly wrote it the recognition she deserved. Poor refers to an excerpt from the Bible when she indicates that; "The scriptural proscription against women teaching and speaking, however, made writing a more dangerous enterprise for women."<sup>35</sup> Assuming that an Abbess living in a cloister in the thirteenth century would not only be intimately familiar with the teachings of the Bible regarding women and their role in society, it would be a natural assumption that such a woman would not dare to invoke the wrath of the church by attaching her name to an epic of a decidedly secular nature.

### CONCLUSION

So where does this leave us? Obviously a vast array of theories regarding the authorship of the *Nibelungenlied* exist, and it is difficult to point to one or the other as more correct or more authoritative, since all theories require consideration and

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<sup>34</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.12.

<sup>35</sup> Sara Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and her Papers*. p.58.

thoughtful discussion. Is it Wunderlich's assertion that we will never need to know the name of the author of the *Nibelungenlied* because it simply exists as a part of our collective literary history that we want to believe? Or do we consider the workshop theory and recognize that the epic was a group effort or collaboration of many individuals whom we could all never know by their individual names? Was it one brilliant or gifted man who created one of the greatest works of medieval literature? Finally, do we consider the feminists' approach, and believe that a woman with an uncanny knowledge of courtly traditions, the black hearts of men, and a woman's desire for revenge, spent many long years laboring over the great epic behind the walls of a cloister?

While my heart wants to believe that a female genius was responsible for the *Nibelungenlied*, my head read the thoughtful and convincing arguments of Sara Poor, and realized she is probably closer to reality in that she is able to point out why, even if it were true (or irrefutable evidence existed) that a woman had written the epic, a female author of a medieval Middle High German masterpiece could not be accepted even in today's much more emancipated scholarly circles. So, we will press on and continue to mull this mystery and perhaps one day a solution will present itself.



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