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# A Comparative Analysis of Henry Fuseli's Nibelungen Series and Drawings of Courtesans

Kathryn Long

## Abstract

In a series of drawings completed in 1805, artist Henry Fuseli illustrated Kriemhild, the female protagonist of the medieval German epic *The Nibelungenlied*. Around the same time period, Fuseli was also creating highly sexualized illustrations of courtesans. While other scholars have proposed that Fuseli's sketches of courtesans show that he held a positive view of women, this essay compares his images of Kriemhild and courtesans to suggest that Fuseli saw Kriemhild a symbol of righteous fury, loyalty and justice, and as a moral opposite to contemporary sex workers. Fuseli's idealization of Kriemhild combined with his posthumously published lectures reveal his negative perception of 19th-century women, offering an alternative interpretation of Fuseli's artistic intent.



During his time as a Professor of Painting and a Keeper at the Royal Academy of Art in London, Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) created a series of drawings inspired by the German medieval saga *The Nibelungenlied*.<sup>1</sup> His illustrations follow the central female character Kriemhild and her vengeful response to her husband Siegfried's murder. While scholars have focused on Fuseli's depictions of women as part of a psychoanalytic discourse on sexual desire, no work has analyzed the differences between Fuseli's depictions of courtesans and his depiction of Kriemhild.

The depiction of Kriemhild with masculine features is significant when comparing this female character's representation to Fuseli's courtesans. While many of Fuseli's primary documents, including his letters, are said to have been destroyed, the documents that have survived show Fuseli's attitudes regarding women. These attitudes can be found throughout his posthumously published lectures, where he traced his perception of ideal beauty in the Western art history canon. In Fuseli's lectures on aesthetics and artistic invention, he argued that beauty can be found in a figure with a strong physique, which symbolizes justice and morality. Opposite these ideas are Fuseli's examples of lesser women, those he described as weak and defenseless.<sup>2</sup> Looking at the different artistic conventions in Fuseli's drawings of Kriemhild and his drawings of courtesans, I argue that Kriemhild is Henry Fuseli's representation of the ideal woman, embodying values of justice and morality.

## *The Nibelungenlied* and the Rise of German Nationalism

Fuseli's interest in *The Nibelungenlied* likely stemmed from the time he spent in his early twenties with the Swiss historian Johann Jakob Bodmer (1698–1783).<sup>3</sup> Bodmer was an academic mentor and professor of Fuseli's during his time at the Collegium Carolinum in Zurich. Through Bodmer, Fuseli met Christoph Heinrich Myller (1740–1807), another pupil of Bodmer, who assisted on Bodmer's translations of *The Nibelungenlied*.<sup>4</sup> While Fuseli returned to drawing scenes from *The Nibelungenlied* throughout the latter half of his life, his series of *Nibelungenlied* drawings completed around 1805 are of interest due to their connections with the famous lectures in Berlin by August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845) between 1801 and 1804.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 19th century, a new interest in medieval texts was spreading throughout German-speaking regions to establish claims regarding total German nationalism, a unification project that sought to bring together regions that spoke Germanic dialects.<sup>6</sup> While Henry Fuseli was Swiss-German, Pan-German identity allowed cultural materials like *The Nibelungenlied* to be shared across borders. A prime example of these cultural exchanges appeared in von Schlegel's lectures, where he brought national attention to *The Nibelungenlied* by encouraging artists and writers to be inspired by this resurgence of epic stories and the mythology found within them and in turn create a visual

1. Henry Fuseli and Eudo C. Mason, "Appendix I: The Principal Dates in Fuseli's Life," in *The Mind of Henry Fuseli: Selections from His Writings*, ed. Eudo C. Mason (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1951), 351–353.

2. Henry Fuseli, "Fourth Lecture: Invention Part II," in *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. John Knowles (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 2:202.

3. Johann Jakob Bodmer was known for inspiring Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock at the genesis of Germany's artistic and literary rejection of neoclassicism (Sturm und Drang) while also producing initial translations of *The Nibelungenlied* in 1755. See Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741–1825): Text und Oeuvrekatalog*, 25.

4. Henry Fuseli. *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. John Knowles (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 1:18. Myller continued the translations to a further completion than Bodmer.

5. August Wilhelm von Schlegel. *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. A. J. W. Morrison, trans. John Black (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1886), 11.

6. These regions included much of Central and Eastern Europe, in addition to Scandinavia. For an extensive breakdown of German nationalism, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

language for the German “Vaterland.”<sup>7</sup> While Fuseli attended these lectures, it is unlikely that he engaged with and incorporated German nationalism in his drawings of *The Nibelungenlied*.<sup>8</sup> He did not intend the series of drawings as a finished product like an oil painting, and there is no primary evidence indicating he meant them to be symbolic of nationalistic claims.

## Kriemhild and Lady Justice

*The Nibelungenlied* was written in a narrative style that primarily shows the perspectives of several male characters, but the storyline consistently follows one female character, Kriemhild, and her experiences of love, death, betrayal, mourning, and fury.<sup>9</sup> Born a Burgundian princess, Kriemhild falls in love with and marries Siegfried, a mighty warrior and prince from the Netherlands. According to the story, when Siegfried and “Kriemhild came together, the beautiful girl gave him such delight, shared his love with so much tenderness, that she became at once the world and all to him, he’d never exchange her for anyone on earth.”<sup>10</sup> This love comes to an abrupt end when Kriemhild is betrayed by her brother Gunther and his best friend, Hagen, who murder Siegfried during a boar hunt. From then on, the saga focuses on a wife’s revenge and the consequences of an unjust murder. In the end, Kriemhild’s revenge destroys the Burgundians and her own family as it restores the balance of justice. It is this extreme circumstance of a wife’s loyalty that Fuseli idealizes in his illustrations of Kriemhild to portray how women should present themselves in society.

In the early 1800s, Georgian Britain was a time of both opulence and political change, during which the separations between classes grew starker and conservative religious influence in-

tensified.<sup>11</sup> Sex historian Kate Lister has argued that sex work was neither legal nor illegal, meaning public opinion about sex work was extremely diverse in the early 19th century.<sup>12</sup> Connecting Fuseli to this culturally tumultuous era in history makes his critiques of women clearer. In his “Aphorisms,” Fuseli wrote that “age of luxury women have taste, decide and dictate; for in an age of luxury woman aspires to the functions of man, and man slides into the offices of woman. The epoch of eunuchs was ever the epoch of viragoes.”<sup>13</sup> This attempt at an aphorism was a reaction to the masculine fear of women claiming intellectual and social rights that were historically dominated by men, and it links Fuseli to a misogynistic perspective of the modern women in his life, which is evident in his depictions of courtesans when compared to the drawings of Kriemhild.

In *The Nibelungenlied* series of drawings from 1805, Fuseli’s visual representation of Kriemhild is an idealized figure of Justice. She is depicted with an androgynous form consisting of both masculine and feminine features, including a strong physique and a furrowed brow, exuding absolute strength and force, alongside a shapely body and long flowing hair. This androgyny, which mixes together strength and femininity, could be indicative of the visual depictions of Lady Justice that Fuseli would have likely seen throughout his life. Masculine features would have also been indicative of social constructions pertaining to male dominance in Western Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. The relationship to masculinity further cements the

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7. Creating a distinct visual language that incorporated Germanic mythologies was another means of reinforcing this idea of German nationalism.

8. Primary and secondary evidence have not revealed Fuseli as being definitively associated with nationalist ideologies.

9. *Das Nibelungenlied: Song of the Nibelungs*, trans. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

10. *Das Nibelungenlied*, 89.

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11. While Henry Fuseli was Swiss-German, he spent many years of his life in London due to his career at the Royal Academy of Art. Corfield, Penelope J. *The Georgians: The Deeds and Misdeeds of 18th-Century Britain*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022.

12. Kate Lister. “Sex Work in Georgian Britain” in *Open Courtauld Hour: The Modern Woman and Fuseli*. London: The Courtauld, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDTXQ-j5bC\\_k&t=2557s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDTXQ-j5bC_k&t=2557s).

13. Henry Fuseli. “Aphorisms.” In *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, edited by John Knowles, Vol. 3. London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831. no. 226.

notion of social norms that portrayed maleness as an indication of self-control and correctness. Having a female figure with strong masculine features signifying Justice suggests that the visual language for the personification of Justice was still dominated by maleness at that time. This conception of Western European masculine identity stemmed from an interest in ancient Greek politics and citizenship and supported Western male dominance, which pushed against women's suffrage movements across Europe and established men in positions of power.<sup>14</sup> Henry Fuseli's artistic choice to portray Kriemhild with masculine markers, personifying the institution of justice, thus puts her on the same axis of power as these men.



Figure 1. Henry Fuseli, *Kriemhild Keeps Vigil for Siegfried*, *Nibelungenlied*, 1805. Ink wash on paper, 38.2 x 47.3 cm. With permission of Berlin State Museums, Kupferstichkabinett / Jörg P. Anders.

## Kriemhild and Justice Served

Several of the drawings from the 1805 series present Kriemhild as the largest and most detailed figure in the scene, making her a central and hierarchically important figure. Not only does this emphasize Fuseli's interest in the character, it also shows the depth of Kriemhild and her journey towards rectifying a wrongful act. In *Kriemhild Keeps Vigil for Siegfried* (fig. 1) and

*Kriemhild shows Hagen Gunther's head* (fig. 2), Fuseli portrays her as a heartbroken lover seeking to avenge what was taken too soon. In these two examples, Fuseli idealizes her as a symbol of justice by showing the moment of mourning, which leads to the towering figure of Kriemhild confronting the culprit of her husband's murder. Kriemhild's revenge is fulfilled at the moment she has control over Hagen and Gunther's punishment, leading to their deaths. Here, the difference between the heroic representation of a female character and that of the 19th-century women shows the disconnection between Fuseli's fantasy and reality. While images of his wife and courtesans emphasize his misogyny, Kriemhild becomes a visual invention of what "womankind" ought to be through the phases of justified mourning and fury.

In *Kriemhild Keeps Vigil for Siegfried*, Kriemhild is shown destroyed by grief. The epic states that "Siegfried's death would take away all the joy in her life," foreshadowing that the rest of the tale will no longer be lighthearted.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Fuseli's depiction of the mourning widow is anything but cheerful. The foreground is entirely composed of Siegfried's corpse lying on the ground with Kriemhild draped over him. She cradles his head in her lap, daintily touching his cheek with one hand while balling the other into a fist and lying her face flush against his armored chest. The linearly patterned armor and rigid muscles show that Siegfried's body has undergone rigor mortis, cementing the fact that nothing can bring him back from the dead. Kriemhild's disheveled hair, a combination of braided and wavy tendrils, cascades down across his body while her long dress appears to create a curtain between the dead and the living. The background of the composition resembles a vignette appropriate for a funeral; Siegfried and Kriemhild are framed by heavily shadowed drapery that separates them from reality. Mourners in the back prostrate themselves in grief and prayer while discreetly glancing at the devastated queen. Two women, possibly Kriemhild's ladies-in-waiting, solemnly

14. For more information regarding masculine gender construction, see Stefan Dudink, Anna Clark, and Karen Hagemann, eds. *Representing Masculinity: Male Citizenship in Modern Western Culture*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

15. *Das Nibelungenlied*, 141.



stand guard over the emotionally heavy scene.

Kriemhild continuously exemplifies the virtue of loyalty as the series goes on. She remains with Siegfried's body for several days until she is forced to separate and "even though he was dead, she kissed her noble man. Her brilliant eyes, from her sorrowful weeping, were shedding tears of blood. The miserable final parting was difficult to bear. She had to be carried away, unable to stand or walk. They lifted this royal woman, now weak beyond compare."<sup>16</sup> Fuseli chose to show "a magnificent queen, almost dead with a grief she could not share" at the worst moment in her life to emphasize that she is a character of extreme devotion, which explains her subsequent violent actions towards her brother and Hagen in the later drawings of Fuseli's 1805 series.<sup>17</sup>

Fuseli's *Kriemhild shows Hagen Gunther's head* depicts one of the final scenes of *The Nibelungenlied*, which leads to the downfall of the Burgundians. At this point in the saga, Kriemhild is remarried to King Etzel, the king of what is now Hungary. She initially refuses his marriage proposal until a royal messenger suggests that the king would do anything to make her happy again. The translated text states "her need would never leave her, the urge to revenge kept burning," Kriemhild finally welcomes the Hungarian king's proposition by proclaiming that she will use this newfound wealth and power to hunt down Gunther and Hagen to bring them to justice.<sup>18</sup> She plots her revenge as soon as she settles into her new life.<sup>19</sup> Kriemhild plans a trap to confront her previous husband's killers, asking Etzel to invite her Burgundian family and friends to make peace between their kingdoms in what seems to be an innocent and courteous event. However, the feast results in a massacre



Figure 2. Henry Fuseli, *Kriemhild shows Hagen Gunther's head*. *Nibelungenlied* XXXVIII, 2440, 1805. Gray pen and brush over graphite pencil, gray and black wash on paper, 48.5 x 38.5 cm. With permission of Kunsthau Zürich, Collection of Prints and Drawings, The Gottfried Keller Foundation, Federal Office of Culture, Bern, 1940.

that lasts for many days after "arrogant Hagen set across his lap a brightly shining sword. A glittering jasper shone at the tip of the handle, a gem greener than grass."<sup>20</sup> Kriemhild recognizes this sword as the one Siegfried used in the boar hunt before he was murdered, confirming Hagen's betrayal.

Kriemhild declares war on the Burgundians. Her brother, King Gunther, and his close friend, Hagen, are all that are left of the invited party. Kriemhild eventually has Gunther and Hagen captured and brought to the dungeons where she serves out justice. The queen avenges the death of her beloved Siegfried by ordering her guards to sever her brother's head from his body.

Fuseli shows Kriemhild at the climax of her revenge: the moment when she takes Gunther's

16. *Das Nibelungenlied*, 149.

17. *Das Nibelungenlied*, 149.

18. *Das Nibelungenlied*, 194.

19. Leonard Neidorf, "On 'Beowulf' and the 'Nibelungenlied': Counselors, Queens, and Characterization." *Neohelicon* 47 (July 2020): 655–672, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-020-00541-2>.

20. *Das Nibelungenlied*, 247.

head and presents it to Hagen. The composition shows Kriemhild's massive body occupying the entire left side and Hagen's smaller body to the right, creating spatial depth. The massive curvature of her hips and thighs, with a peek of the side of a full and rounded breast, are accentuated by the dress that clings to her hypersexualized body. Her braided hair falls down her back and her crown is perfectly in line with Hagen's gaze. She is no longer the disheveled, mourning widow but an idealized image of justice. It is no coincidence that Hagen is not looking at the head of his dear friend and king but at her; he knows that his fate lies with Kriemhild and the power her crown represents. Fuseli portrays her as the largest figure in the composition to further emphasize her dominance over Hagen. One of her hands grips her brother's hair in her clenched fingers, a scarf draped across her arm hiding the gruesome wound, while her other hand clasps the pommel of a mighty sword, a silent warning of the swift death to come. The sword and Gunther's head are the incriminating evidence through which Hagen is convicted. Her penetrative gaze looks directly at Hagen's nude form chained to the dungeon wall. The sword and the severed head as well as the direct look focused on the offender foreshadow his fate; Kriemhild delivers justice as she takes the sword and decapitates the last culprit in Siegfried's murder.

Fuseli's idealistic portrayal of Kriemhild is one of ultimate loyalty and justice. She has corrected the imbalance caused by Gunther and Hagen's betrayal by taking their lives, avenging the death of Siegfried. She is not corrupt or immoral because she is fair in her judgment. The premeditated decision to behead Gunther and Hagen is morally justified because they are deserving of this punishment.

## The Courtesan as a Critique

While most primary documentation has been lost to time, some contemporary sources provide clues to Fuseli's attitude toward wom-



Figure 3. Henry Fuseli, *Mrs. Fuseli, at a table in front of a niche with a curtain*, 1799. Pencil and brush in gray, washed and watercolored pink and light blue, mounted, 23.2 x 17.5 cm. With permission of Kunstmuseum Basel.

en. Oftentimes, he criticized women's rights movements. For example, he argues in his lectures that courtesans have no morality.<sup>21</sup> From his perspective, there should be a just cause for their actions rather than wanton impulse. In regards to gender placement and women's supposed emotional instability, Fuseli claimed that the female individual "fondles, pities, despises, and forgets what is below her; she values, bears and wrangles with her equal; she adores what is above her."<sup>22</sup> Based on his writings, it seems that Fuseli criticized women's desire to have more power in society. The distinction between Kriemhild and the courtesans is that the former has masculine features incorporated while the latter are composed entirely of Fuseli's female criticism.

21. Fuseli and Eudo. *The Mind of Henry Fuseli*. p. 142-148.

22. Fuseli, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*. no. 227.



Henry Fuseli's drawings of courtesans show a woman, or multiple women, with distinct coiffed hairstyles and headdresses, breasts bared to the viewer, black chokers, and *mouches*, whereas his depictions of Kriemhild show a woman with long, flowing hair, and covered breasts; she is also free from any symbolic clothing that alludes to sex work at this time in Europe.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Fuseli adds an emblem of a phallus on arm-bands, belts, and bustline decorations in many of his drawings of courtesans, thus symbolically connecting these figures to sex work. Fuseli uses this imagery to represent prostitutes, but he also uses it in portraits of his own wife, Sophia Fuseli. David H. Solkin, the curator of the Courtauld Gallery's 2022–2023 exhibition "Fuseli and the Modern Woman: Fashion, Fantasy, Fetishism" notes that Sophia Fuseli (1763–1832) was an artist's model prior to her marriage to Fuseli.<sup>24</sup> During this time in Europe, many women who modeled for art studios and schools also participated in sex work.<sup>25</sup> Sophia Fuseli's background is not thoroughly known, but this relation between sex workers and artists' models could be the reason why Henry Fuseli drew his wife with the features of a courtesan as a form of criticism, especially when compared to the idealized figure of Kriemhild. For instance, in the drawing *Mrs. Fuseli at a table in front of a niche with a curtain* (fig. 3), she is drawn with a bulbous hair-piece, faux mole, and phallus-embellished belt. I believe depictions of Sophia Fuseli would have looked entirely different if Fuseli did not hold some contempt for his wife.

Fuseli's courtesan sketches have been argued by some scholars to indicate that Fuseli held a positive opinion of women, but if that were



Figure 4. Henry Fuseli, *Half figure of a courtesan with a plume, bow and veil in her hair*, 1800-1810. Graphite pencil, pen and brush in gray, black and brown on paper, 28.3 x 20 cm. With permission of Kunsthau Zürich, Collection of Prints and Drawings, The Gottfried Keller Foundation, Federal Office of Culture, Bern, 1934.

the case, the women portrayed in the sketches would look more like the idealized Kriemhild.<sup>26</sup> While it is possible to apply a feminist perspective to these sketches, they can also show Fuseli's perversion in a society that puts men on pedestals. Throughout his life, Fuseli made remarks claiming women, as a whole, were lacking in consciousness and were subjected to the whims of impulsiveness without reason.<sup>27</sup> Glimpses of Fuseli's perception of an ideal woman come through in his lectures where he relates a strong warrior-like form to this Romantic notion of the

23. Other women depicted in Fuseli's *The Nibelungenlied* series have coiffed hairstyles. Kriemhild is the only character to have long flowing hair.

24. David H. Solkin and Ketty Gottardo, "Drawings in an Age of Luxury: Fuseli's Women in Their Time," in *Fuseli and the Modern Woman: Fashion, Fantasy, Fetishism*, ed. David H. Solkin (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2022), 22.

25. Kate Lister. "Sex Work in Georgian Britain," in *Open Courtauld Hour: The Modern Woman and Fuseli*. London: The Courtauld, 2022.

26. Sarah Carter. "Henry Fuseli and the Sexual Sublime" (MA thesis, University of Guelph, 2015), 6, <http://hdl.handle.net/10214/8677>.

27. Henry Fuseli. "Fuseli on Women." In *The Mind of Henry Fuseli: Selections from His Writings*, edited by Eudo C. Mason. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1951. p. 142–148.



genius, which Kriemhild embodies.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, when comparing the figures of Kriemhild to those of courtesans, there appears to be more care put into creating clean details for the Burgundian queen. In looking closer at the drawing of the courtesans, we see that many pencil lines mark up their bodies to a point that they do not look as finished as the drawings of Kriemhild. The compositions of *Half figure of a courtesan with a plume, bow and veil in her hair* (fig. 4) and *Mrs. Fuseli, at a table in front of a niche with a curtain* (fig. 3) show one woman seated in a front-facing position; the viewer has no choice but to look at the singular figure. However, the drawings of *The Nibelungenlied* place Kriemhild in scenes featuring many figures, yet the eye is drawn to the queen because Fuseli has made her demanding and powerful form the focus.



Figure 5. Henry Fuseli, *Kriemhild accuses Gunther and Hagen of murder*, 1805. Ink wash on paper, 36.5 x 47 cm.

There are also differences in how Henry Fuseli addresses eyelines between these examples of the ideal woman and those he criticizes. In the drawings of his wife and courtesans, the subjects' gazes are indirect and submissive in manner. Sophia addresses the viewer out of the side of her eyes, and the courtesan completely casts

her gaze and face away. In contrast, Kriemhild directly addresses a character in each scene. In both *Kriemhild accuses Gunther and Hagen of murder* (fig. 5) and *Kriemhild shows Hagen Gunther's head* (fig. 2), the queen's hard gaze specifically engages Hagen, the culprit of Siegfried's murder.

## Conclusion

Comparing the different ways in which Fuseli rendered these female figures shows that Kriemhild is idealized and the figure of the courtesan is a critique. In drawing Kriemhild as a figure embodying both feminine and masculine traits (as well as placing her in male-dominated scenes), Fuseli idealizes her in the drawings where she avenges Siegfried's murder and establishes order out of the chaos. It is Kriemhild's honorable actions that Fuseli heralds as worthy of depicting.

Rather than casting the female bodies of Fuseli's courtesans in a heroicized light, as previous scholars have done, which suggests female empowerment and strength, they should be understood as responses to masculine fear of the 19th century's perception of the erotic woman. By juxtaposing the image of a woman exuding erotic behavior and that of an idol of morality, Kriemhild became a symbol of social correction for Fuseli.

28. In the art historical canon, the Romantic notion of the "genius" was related to an artist's success in finding the "truth" in their paintings. If an artist was deemed a "genius," their forms were the closest to those seen in nature, thus exhibiting a close relationship to a higher power. In Western and European contexts, the "higher power" refers to the Christian God.



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Kathryn Long ('22) majored in Art History with a concentration in Museum Studies and a minor in German at James

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