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German epic on display in Beinecke

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As curator of German literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Christa Sammons only rarely gets the opportunity to describe a new exhibit in blockbuster terms.

But she said the Library's newest attraction has it all — “money, sex and violence.”

“That being said, the exhibit is very dignified,” Sammons added.

The source of her excitement is the Beinecke's latest exhibit, opening Wednesday, which explores the historical reception of the *Nibelungenlied*, a medieval Germanic epic. Entitled “Creating Germany's National Myth: The *Nibelungenlied* and its Homeric Context,” the display focuses on the mid-18th-century German quest to find a national epic on par with the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as how that desire shaped the presentation and treatment of the story.

Originally composed around 1200, the *Nibelungenlied* — or “Song of the Nibelungs” — was known for its soap-operatic plot, which made it the Michael Crichton thriller of its day, said Bryn Savage GRD '11, a German literature student and the principle architect of the exhibit. In spite of its popularity, the tale never made it to print and fell into obscurity for 300 years until a manuscript resurfaced in 1757, Savage said.

The rediscovery of the *Nibelungenlied* coincided with a particularly strong surge in German Hellenophilism, Sammons said. And amid hopes that the *Nibelungenlied* was the long-sought-after national German epic, the story was widely disseminated throughout Germany.

“An epic text with homegrown heroes allows nationalities to put themselves in league with the classical,” William Whobrey, professor of German language and literature, said.

Still, the *Nibelungenlied* fell well short of expectations because it was judged against the Homeric ideal, Savage said. For Sammons, the inadequacies of a touted national epic played into deep-seated fears about the inferiority of the German language as a medium for lyric poetry.

And since it was a text that, as Whobrey said, “supposedly spoke to national Germanic values,” the *Nibelungenlied* was used as a touchstone for Germanic identity. As a result, it went through many permutations as it changed hands, from Wagner to the Nazis, Sammons said.

The exhibit comprises roughly 35 pieces accompanied by explanatory literature.

“It's a complicated topic to present visually,” Sammons said. “You'll have to read a little bit.”

Yet even the reading-averse will be able to appreciate the collection's pieces and illustrations, which span five centuries.

"We do have things that are just treasures," Savage said.

The earliest piece, an illustrated German translation of the Odyssey, was printed in 1537. The exhibit also includes an original libretto of the Ring cycle in Wagner's own handwriting, an exceptional piece that Savage hopes will lure in people less interested in or familiar with the Nibelungenlied.

Although almost all of the pieces were originally in Yale's possession, they were scattered through various libraries and collections, making it a challenge to assemble the exhibit, Sammons said.

"This was not an easy exhibit to do, and it had to be teased out of a larger context," she said.

The only piece that was newly purchased is a 1924 printing of the Nibelungenlied with ornate expressionist illustrations by Alois Kolb. A copy of the book was already in Yale's possession, but when Savage opened it, she discovered that someone had taken a razor blade and cut out several of the illustrations and pages of text.

"It's a great sadness," said Sammons, who also noted that it is not uncommon to find books with similar of vandalism.

The exhibit is on display through Jan. 9. A reception and brief talk are scheduled for Nov. 14 at 5 p.m.