**Henry FUSELI RA (Zurich 1741 - Putney Hill 1825)**

**The Quarrel of the Queens: Kriemhild and Brunhild at the Church, from Das Nibelungenlied [recto]; Kriemhild and Brunhild, with Siegfried Between Them [verso]**

Brush and grey and brown washes, heightened with white, over an extensive underdrawing in pencil.

The verso in pencil and brown and grey wash, with touches of white heightening.

Inscribed and dated P.C. [Purser's Cross] Augt 05 at the lower left.

Inscribed (not in the artist's hand) The Ladies Dancing in pencil on the verso.

464 x 371 mm. (18 1/4 x 14 5/8 in.)

In the early years of the 19th century Henry Fuseli began to depict subjects and characters from the medieval German epic poem the Nibelungenlied (or the Song of the Nibelungs) in a number of oil paintings and drawings, and he continued to produce works inspired by the text until 1820. Fuseli was well acquainted with the tale; his teacher Bodmer had been the first to publish a portion of the Nibelungenlied in 1755 and he himself owned the first German edition of the full text, published in 1782. (The poem was not translated into English until 1848 and so would have been largely unknown to a British audience.) Fuseli exhibited paintings of scenes from the Nibelungenlied at the Royal Academy in 1807 and between 1814 and 1820, and also wrote a number of poems based on the text.

Between 1805 and 1807 Fuseli produced a series of large, finished drawings of episodes from the Nibelungenlied, of which the present sheet is one. A recurring character in most of these works is that of Kriemhild, the central female protagonist of the story. As a recent scholar has suggested, 'Kriemhild is Henry Fuseli's representation of the ideal woman, embodying values of justice and morality.' A Burgundian princess, Kriemhild married the great warrior prince Siegfried, but their love is shattered when Siegfried is murdered by Hagen, a close friend of Kriemhild's brother, the Burgundian

King Gunther, during a boar hunt. Kriemhild's grief is overwhelming, and the remainder of the story is taken up with her search for revenge, culminating in the savage deaths of Gunther and Hagen, and the destruction of the Burgundian kingdom. As Christian Klemm points out, '[one] aspect that particularly fascinated Fuseli in the Nibelungenlied [was] Kriemhild's manically obsessive revenge, which is no less excessive and without restraint than her possessive love.'

This large sheet is part of a distinct series of Nibelungenlied drawings, executed between May and August 1805, and represents an episode from the first half of the poem, before the death of Siegfried. Here Kriemhild challenges her rival, the warrior-queen Brunhild, wife of King Gunther. The two women have argued over which has the higher social rank, since Brunhild wrongly believes that Siegfried is Gunther's vassal, and that therefore she, as the wife of a King, should take precedence. Meanwhile, Kriemhild claims that Siegfried, not Gunther, took Brunhild's virginity on her wedding night, when he took her ring and belt as trophies. (Although Siegfried did not, in fact, seduce Brunhild that night, he did steal her ring and belt, with the help of a magical cloak of invisibility.)When both women arrive at the cathedral at the same time, Kriemhild asserts her superior status and enters first, to Brunhild's anger and dismay.

As Klemm describes the present sheet, Fuseli 'presents the fight between the two Queens in an elaborately orchestrated climax in front of the church, where Brunhild tries to deny precedence to Kriemhild and Kriemhild accuses Brunhild of being her husband's concubine, leading to the tragedy after the mass, when Kriemhild shows the ring and belt Siegfried took from Brunhild on her wedding night...Fuseli was in every way equal to the dramatic mastery with which his literary model employs contrasts to reveal the antagonism of the two rivals; in fact he builds up the situation even further, following his predilection for diametric opposites, by contracting the whole sequence of the narrative into one single scene. Kriemhild, as the wife of the great hero Siegfried, is portrayed all in white apart from the belt which Brunhild, in black, is missing; this woman bright with light who drags the secret concealed in the darkness into the daylight is show frontally, while her opponent in diametrically opposed rear view turns back. Kriemhild strides past her up the steps of the cathedral, showing the ring with a contemptuous gesture. As in the saga, standing between the fighting queens is the object of their dispute, the enigmatic Siegfried: shadow-like, he seems to be more part of than in front of a steeply soaring geometric form, which may be seen in concrete terms as a buttress of the church. But the significance of the scene lies wholly in the abstract expressive content – in the division of the picture plane between the rivals, opening up a height and depth giving the conflict both suspense and inevitability.' It is this quarrel between Kriemhild and Brunhild, and the anger which the latter feels at being deceived and dishonoured, that leads her to demand justice from Gunther, who then orders Hagen to kill Siegfried.

Other drawings of subjects from the Nibelungenlied from 1805 are today in the collections of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki in New Zealand, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the Nottingham City Museums and Galleries, the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, the Klassik Stiftung Weimar and the Kunsthaus in Zurich. As the Fuseli scholar Gert Schiff has noted, 'In just a few months, mostly at Joseph Johnson's country estate, he created a series of Nibelungen drawings that are among his finest achievements; had this series not remained fragmentary, this series could have been his masterpiece.'

The verso of this double-sided sheet shows the figure of Kriemhild traced through from the recto, creating a reversed image, to which the artist has added the figures of Brunhilde and Siegfried in different poses from the recto. This allowed him to experiment with variations to the composition, and is typical of Fuseli's practice, since he often drew through the outlines of figures onto the versos of his drawings, which he then elaborated upon. As Ketty Gottardo has written, 'Fuseli's frequent practice of tracing his compositions from one side to the other of a sheet in order to obtain a mirror image…

happens so frequently in his work that it could almost be considered a trademark of authenticity of the artist's drawings, in addition to their left-handedness…for Fuseli the point of tracing through from one side of a sheet to the other was not simply about seeing how a composition would appear when turned in the opposite direction. On the contrary, trying out a design on the other side allowed him to experiment, and to play with certain details; at times he would then return to the side drawn first to make changes there…through tracing, Fuseli's explorations on paper free his fantasy to exploit different ideas.'

In his Nibelungenlied drawings, as has been noted, '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…mixes together strength and femininity…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.' Although in Fuseli's Nibelungenlied drawings the men are usually depicted as antique nudes, the women, and in particular Kriemhild, are shown in contemporary fashions and hairstyles, typified by the Neoclassical Empire dresses of the early years of the 19th century. As has also been noted, 'Fuseli was especially interested in changes in women's fashions.'

The initials P.C. inscribed by Fuseli at the bottom of the present sheet indicate that it was one of the drawings made by the artist at the country home, at Purser's Cross in Fulham, of his longtime friend, the publisher and bookseller Joseph Johnson (1738-1809). Johnson is perhaps best-known today as the publisher of William Blake's engravings, but also published the works of such writers as William Beckford, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Cowper, Erasmus Darwin, William Godwin, Thomas Malthus, Joseph Priestley, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Wordsworth. When Fuseli first arrived in London from Zurich in 1764 Johnson allowed him to stay in a flat above his bookshop in St. Paul's Churchyard, and engaged him as a translator while Fuseli began to pursue his artistic ambitions. As one scholar has written, 'Secure in his profession and recognized as one of its leaders, Johnson obtained for himself the sine qua non of an established tradesman: a house in the suburbs. He rented Acacia Cottage in Fulham where he spent weekends entertaining his intimate friends. Fuseli and Joseph Farington of the Royal Academy came often for dinner and a game of whist. Fuseli usually brought his sketch book, identifying his completed drawings with his signature and the initials "P.C." for "Purser's Cross", the location of his host's cottage.' Most of Fuseli's Nibelungenlieddrawings of 1805 were done at Purser's Cross, and several examples – dated between May and November 1805 – are in the museums of Auckland, Berlin, Weimar and Zurich.

**Literature:**

Gert Schiff, Johann Heinrich Füssli 1741-1825, Zürich, 1973, Vol.I, p.317, pp.638-639, no.1798, Vol.II, fig.1798 [recto]; Christian Klemm, 'Friedel's Love and Kriemhild's Revenge. Fuseli's Revels in the Kingdom of the Nibelungs', in Franziska Lentzsch et al, Fuseli: The Wild Swiss, exhibition catalogue, Zurich, 2005-2006, pp.160-162 (recto only illustrated).

**Artist description:**

Although born and brought up in Switzerland, the artist and writer Henry Fuseli spent most of his career in England, apart from a period of about a year in Germany and some eight years in Italy. The son of a minor Swiss painter of portraits and landscapes from an old Zurich family, Fuseli was educated at the Collegium Carolinum in the city which was the intellectual and literary capital of Switzerland in the 18th century. Fuseli became part of a highly educated circle that included his fellow student, the poet and physiognomist Johan Kaspar Lavater, and the historian Johan Jakob Bodmer, who was his teacher and first instilled in the young student an abiding love of the works of Shakespeare and John Milton, as well as Dante, Homer and the Nibelungenlied. Fuseli was extremely well read and became proficient in

several languages apart from his native German, including English, French, Italian, Latin and Greek. Destined by his father for the church, he was ordained into the Zwinglian Swiss Reformed Church at the age of twenty, at the same time as Lavater. In 1762 Fuseli and Lavater published an attack on a corrupt local magistrate and the following year had to leave Switzerland to avoid the repercussions caused the official's powerful family. After several months in Berlin, where Fuseli came into contact with several German writers, he settled in London in 1764. The following year he published a translation of the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings on Greek art into English and visited France as tutor to the young Lord Chewton, the teenage son of Lord Waldegrave, meeting Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume in Paris.

While Fuseli had drawn since his childhood, during his early years in London he expressed himself mainly in his writings. In 1768, however, he met Sir Joshua Reynolds, the President of the Royal Academy, who encouraged him to become a painter and to travel to Rome. With the support of several friends and patrons, including the wealthy banker Thomas Coutts, he was able to spend the years between 1770 and 1778 studying in Italy, mainly in Rome but with visits to Naples, Florence and Venice. A passionate admirer of Michelangelo and the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in particular, which he copied extensively, Fuseli became part of a circle of foreign-born artists working in Rome that included Nicolai Abildgaard, Thomas Banks, John Brown and Johan Tobias Sergel. From Italy he occasionally sent back works to be shown at the Royal Academy and the Society of Artists. After his return to London he began to exhibit regularly at the Royal Academy, enjoying some success in the 1780s with such imaginative, grandiose and inventive compositions as The Nightmare, shown to considerable acclaim at the Royal Academy in 1782 and arguably his most famous painting, Macbeth and the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth Walking in her Sleep. He was inspired by performances of Shakespeare and other works on the London stage, and a theatrical influence is manifest in many of his early paintings. Fuseli continued to enjoy the patronage of Coutts and also received commissions from the Liverpool banker, lawyer and abolitionist William Roscoe, while among his pupils was the amateur painter William Lock of Norbury. Another early supporter was the influential publisher Joseph Johnson, through whom Fuseli met William Blake, who was to become a good friend, and Mary Wollstonecraft, who fell in love with him. Fuseli was elected an Associate of the Academy in 1788 and a Royal Academician in 1790.

Throughout his career, Fuseli's work remained deeply rooted in literature. From 1786 he produced nine paintings to illustrate John Boydell's 'Shakespeare Gallery', and a few years later began his single greatest task; a series of more than fifty paintings of subjects taken from the writings of John Milton. The project took a decade to come to fruition, and the paintings – many of them on a monumental scale – were exhibited, as the 'Milton Gallery', on Pall Mall in London in 1799 and 1800 but with little commercial success, and the artist came close to financial ruin. Fuseli served as Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy Schools from 1799 to 1805 and again from 1810 onwards, and as Keeper from 1784. Among his students at the Royal Academy were William Etty, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Edwin Landseer, John Linnell, William Mulready and David Wilkie. Although Fuseli was much respected in artistic circles in London as a member of the Royal Academy and a noted Professor, his paintings and drawings were little known outside of a small group of aristocratic private collectors, and he was largely forgotten by the middle of the 19th century. It was not until the centenary of Fuseli's death that his work became known to a wider audience, when an exhibition of 361 drawings and paintings, mainly from Swiss and English collections, was held at the Kunsthaus in Zurich in 1926. In 1941 an even larger exhibition was held at the same museum, which today houses the most comprehensive collection of Fuseli's oeuvre.

Fuseli occupies an important place in the history of drawing in Britain. His intellectual background, which set him apart from almost any other artist working in England at the same time, is reflected in his conception of his own art, and this is especially true in his drawings. Around 1,400 drawings by the artist are known today, of which the largest single group, amounting to over six hundred sheets, is in the Kunsthaus in Zurich. Relatively few of his drawings may be related to finished paintings, and most seem to have been done as independent exercises. As Paul Ganz has noted, in one of the earliest modern surveys of the artist's output as a draughtsman, 'Fuseli's drawings are less the product of his age than his paintings; they are the direct expression of his creative power and reveal his personal outlook and his fiery artistic temperament…In the drawings the artist's genius has unfolded itself in a free and unrestricted manner without regard to contemporary taste; they therefore open the way to a proper understanding of his art and reveal what was unusual in it and far ahead of his time.' Similarly, a more

recent writer has commented that ‘Fuseli concentrated especially on original subjects and inventive interpretations of those subjects, especially in drawings. Indeed, the drawings are the most immediate evidence of the sparkling genius, the tenderness, the intense and highly eccentric individuality that was Fuseli’s.’ The majority of Fuseli’s extant drawings date from the 1770s onwards, as much of his earliest output was lost in a fire at the home of his friend and patron Joseph Johnson in 1770.

As has recently been noted, ‘Fuseli would remain an indefatigable draughtsman till the end of his life; and for him drawing would always retain its capacity to operate as a clandestine area of creative freedom – a space where he could be at liberty to break the rules, and give untrammelled expression to his genius.’