Beyond sorrow and swords: gender in the Old Norse Völsung legend and its British rewritings

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Abstract

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This thesis explores male and female identity in Old Norse and British iterations of the Völsung legend, focusing on the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, William Morris’s *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and Melvin Burgess’s *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*. Using poststructuralist theories of gender and posthumanism to analyse representations of gender in these texts, it argues that, in the Old Norse versions of this legend, female identity is closely connected to the control of representations of narrative events, whereas male identity is subject to this control but becomes more overtly fluid in the depiction of shape-shifting. The thesis goes beyond previous critical analyses of gender in these texts which observe an active/ passive binary, or focus on female monstrosity and lament, and male heroism. Unlike most examinations of adaptations of this legend which focus on the medieval or Victorian material, this thesis provides a detailed exploration of *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* in conjunction with its Old Norse sources.

In doing so, it establishes the silencing of female characters by Morris’s rewriting, and the foregrounding of male identity through a focus on the body, performance and the built environment. This thesis also considers both the Old Norse texts and Morris’s poem alongside later, critically neglected, British versions of the legend to explore the ways in which narrative form influences the representation of the multiplicity of gender in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and the importance of a posthuman conception of identity in *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*. The thesis argues that the Old Norse sources do not stand aside from their later interpretations as something complete and originary, but are themselves supplemented by the rewritings of Morris, Tolkien and Burgess; it is, therefore, necessary to foreground our knowledge of all these iterations of the narrative to offer a fuller understanding of gender in the Old Norse Völsung legend and its British rewritings.

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List of abbreviations

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I = *HH.*

Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar = *HHv.*

Helgakviða Hundingsbana II = *HH.II*

Frá dauða Sinfjötla = *Sf.*

Grípisspá = *Grp.*

Reginsmál = *Rm.*

Fáfnismál = *Fm.*

Sigrdrífumál = *Sd.*

Brot af Sigurðarkviðu = *Br.*

Guðrúnarkviða I = *Gðr.I*

Sigurðarkviða in skamma = *Sg.*

Helreið Brynhildar = *HB.*

Dráp Niflunga = *Dr.*

Guðrúnarkviða II = *Gðr.II*

Guðrúnarkviða III = *Gðr.III*

Oddrúnargrátr = *Od.*

Atlakviða = *Akv.*

Atlamál hin groenlenzku = *Am.*

Guðrúnarhvöt = *Ghv.*

Hamðismál = *Hm.*

The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs = *Sigurd the Volsung*

The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún = *Sigurd and Gudrún*

Notes on the text

For ease of printing, I have replaced hooked o with o with an umlaut throughout the thesis, even in quotations where hooked o was used in the original. Translations are my own, unless otherwise stated. In my discussions of the texts, characters names are spelt as they appear in the relevant work: an analysis of *Gðr.II* will refer to Guðrún, whereas the same figure in *Sigurd the Volsung* will be Gudrun, or Gudrún in *Sigurd and Gudrún*.

Introduction

> It is as though these repetitions keep coming back for more translation until there is nothing left to translate.[1]

> Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.[2]

On a Monday afternoon at the British Museum, I was accosted by the sounds of a woman venting her anger and sorrow at three failed marriages and the death of her child. This was not, however, a fellow museum visitor but instead Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, the medieval Scandinavian legendary figure. At the entrance to the *Vikings: Life and Legend* exhibition, two recordings were playing: an excerpt from *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* and one from *Guðrúnarhvöt*.[3] This literature was read in Old Norse, meaning that most exhibition attendees would have focused on the sounds of the strange tongue, rather than the content. Indeed, in his review in the *Guardian*, Jonathan Jones criticises the choice of language:

> Even the soundtrack to the first displays, a reading of classic Viking literature, is in Old Norse. Instead of opening up this world, as a well-read translation might, it closes it off in melancholy Nordic words. This is perhaps a clue to what the curators think they are doing. They want to estrange our view of the Vikings.[4]

Visitors who could understand the recordings, or recognise the texts named on the entrance wall from their titles, would experience the exhibition filtered through the lens of two very different texts: the story of the aggressive and rebellious warrior-poet, Egill Skallagrímsson, and the tale of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, who wishes her sons to take revenge against the son-in-law who has killed her daughter, a loss sharpened by the previous demise of her beloved husband at the hands of her brothers. These two different representations of medieval-

[1] Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises* (London: Faber, 2000), pp. 135-6.
[2] Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and the Novel' in *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 65.
[3] *Vikings: Life and Legend* exhibited at British Museum (London: 6/0314- 22/06/14), visited 17th March 2014.
[4] 'Vikings at the British Museum: great ship but where's the story?', *The Guardian* 4th March 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/04/vikings-british-museum-ship-story (accessed 03/09/14).

Icelandic literature would not just, therefore, create an Othering of 'Viking' culture, as Jones suggests, but would also offer a perspective from both male and female representatives of this society.

Jones suggests that the inclusion of these texts in the exhibition establishes them as 'classic Viking literature'. Whether these two texts should occupy a place in a canon is a debate which I will not invoke here, but suffice to say that their selection for the exhibition demonstrates their importance to a British appreciation of Old Norse literature; these are both texts that have been translated or re-written into English several times. The use of *Guðrúnarhvöt* provides an illustration of a continued British interest in the Völsung legend of which it forms a part. Indeed, the exhibition shop was offering yet another version of this narrative, this time in the form of Megan Cullis's *The Story of the Vikings Sticker Book* which presents Brynhild, another female protagonist of this legend, as one of six key characters from 'Viking stories'.[5] Cullis chooses Brynhild as her sole female representative of 'Viking' literature, suggesting it is a male domain. Her gendered use of this legend is appropriate given that the different iterations of the narratives are all concerned with the representation of gender.

In the British Museum exhibition, the portrayal of female characters demonstrates the diversity of gender; both Guðrún, who laments and whets, and Brynhild, whom Cullis describes as 'staggeringly beautiful, and admired for her skill and aggression in battle' are depicted.[6] This representation of female identity is necessarily, due to the brevity of the content of the sticker book and the inability to offer multiple audio recordings, partial. We hear Guðrún's sorrow, but do not see her as a combatant or child murderer as in other versions of the Völsung legend. Similarly, Brynhild's warrior identity is unproven in most iterations of the narrative, and this depiction prioritises her battle prowess over her alternative

[5] Megan Cullis, *The Story of the Vikings Sticker Book* (London: Usbourne, 2013), pp. 20-1. The other characters chosen are all male: Erik the Red, Leif Eriksson, Cnut the Great, Ragnar Lothbrok and Ivar Ragnarsson.
[6] *Sticker Book*, p. 21.

roles as a betrayed lover or an inciter of male violence. This thesis will analyse representations of the Völsung legend, from Old Norse poetry to twenty-first century young-adult fiction, in order to explore their expressions of gender. This project has not been undertaken before; to a greater or lesser extent, work has been done on gender in individual texts, but there has been no criticism that has addressed gender across all of these different narratives. The British Museum exhibition demonstrates the impetus for this thesis's aim; it reveals the ongoing interest in depictions of this legend in British literary contexts and the significance of gender in portrayals of this narrative, and provides a glimpse of the ways in which an examination of gender in British literary rewritings of the Völsung legend can be both stimulating and productive.

This introduction will now provide contexts for both the thesis as a whole, and of the texts that it examines. It will, therefore, begin with an explanation of the theoretical approaches which will taken in the analyses of gender. After establishing the critical position, this chapter will then introduce the contexts of the literature that will be examined: the Old Norse texts of the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Skáldskaparmál*, followed by the English language rewritings of William Morris's *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*.[7] Each text will be situated within a material, historical and critical context, before the introduction concludes with an outline of the chapters that will follow.

[7] Gustav Neckel (ed.), *Edda, Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern Volume 1: Text* rev. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1962); R. G. Finch (ed. and trans.), *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Nelson, 1965); Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998); William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris, Volume XII: The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* ed. May Morris (London: Longmans Green, 1911); J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008); *Bloodtide* (London: Andersen Press, 1999); *Bloodsong* (London: Andersen Press, 2005). All further references to these texts refer to these editions and appear parenthetically.

Theoretical contexts

> Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. It modifies the original even as it also modifies the translating language. This process – transforming the original as well as the translation – is the translation contract between the original and the translating text.[8]

It is impossible to address representations of gender in the twenty-first century without doing so, consciously or unconsciously, in the context of Judith Butler's hugely influential work on performativity. This was first fully articulated in *Gender Trouble*, where she argues that the performativity inherent in sexual difference demonstrates the constructed nature of gender.[9] Butler argues that gender is performed within cultural constraints:

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (p. 25)

Identity is created through the duplication of social constructions, as it is only by recreating existing forms that a performance becomes comprehensible. Yet the nature of iterability means that these repetitions will always be dissimilar in some way, due to alterations in context, and so identity becomes unfixed and unstable. This conception of the performative nature of gender, which does not entail a conscious performance, but rather an appreciation that gender is an action rather than a state of being, has been developed and refined in the more than two decades since the publication of *Gender Trouble*, but it still remains a vital influence on the ways that we think about gender.[10]

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[8] Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken, 1989), p. 122.

[9] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

[10] Of course, Butler is not without her critics. Geoff Boucher, for example, contends that she 'produces a politics of performativity that is unsatisfactory in terms of its abstract individualism'; see 'The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler', *Parrhesia* 1 (2006), 112-41 (p. 137). Nevertheless, her rethinking of gender remains indispensable when examining masculinity and femininity.

Butler's construction of gender allows us to explore the kinds of gender identities that are permissible, and those that are not considered viable. This categorisation of gender identities can be illuminated by Julia Kristeva's ideas of abjection. Kristeva explains the process of abjection through food:

> When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself.[11]

Kristeva defines abjection as the desire to create boundaries in order to establish oneself as a subject and as different from others. In the context of gender, this can be illustrated by the abjection of gender identities that challenge the concept of stable, hegemonic masculinities or femininities. Yet abjection can never work as a process of complete exclusion; these boundaries and distinctions will always collapse, just as the borders of the body are always permeable. Nevertheless, the process of creating these false frontiers is often essential to how we define ourselves. Butler has extended this notion to produce a definition of what she describes as 'grievable lives'. In *Frames of War*, she argues that 'specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living'.[12] This concept of identities that are abjected to the extent that they are no longer considered human is a constructive way of thinking about the texts narrating the Völsung legend, with its focus on death and violence.

Butler and other modern gender theorists work in the context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; the examples that Butler uses to illustrate her arguments in both

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[11] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2-3.

[12] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 1.

Gender Trouble and its successor *Bodies that Matter* are from contemporary texts and culture.[13] Clearly, there needs to be some caution exercised when reading modern critical theory alongside medieval texts, and yet these theories need not be avoided as immaterial to an Old Norse context. In the 2005 film adaptation of *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy*, Steve Coogan's character attempts to explain the book's subversive elements with the phrase 'it's post-modern before there was any modern to be post about.'[14] This description is a satire of our desire for categories, and our continual belief in novelty, but it also acts as a reminder of the applicability of modern critical concepts to earlier literature. In work on Old Norse literature, scholars have demonstrated how beneficial critical theory is to the elucidation of medieval texts. David Clark, for example, uses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of homosocial desire to elucidate the *Poetic Edda* and Carl Phelpstead reads ecological theory alongside the sagas.[15] This thesis, therefore, in examining Old Norse texts and their English literary rewritings alongside modern theories of gender and identity, including posthuman theory, both forms new ground and continues in a tradition of scholarship. Whilst remaining conscious of the cultural differences between medieval Scandinavia and the modern Western world, this thesis demonstrates the utility of gender and posthuman theory to aid understanding of identity in a context that is temporally pre-Humanism.

The concept of posthumanism is particularly beneficial when examining the narrative of the Scandinavian Völsung legend, as it contains repeated questions about the nature of human identity in general, and gender in particular. One of the founders of this notion, Donna Haraway, explores the potential for posthuman cyborg identities to act as resistant figures

[13] Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).
[14] Michael Winterbottom (dir.), *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* (2005).
[15] David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Carl Phelpstead, 'Ecocriticism and *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Leeds Studies in English* 45 (2014), 1–18.

who are beyond binary categories of gender.[16] Her ideas have been developed in subsequent years; Katherine Hayles, for example, addresses the importance of embodiment in the concept of the posthuman.[17] More recently, Rosi Braidotti suggests that:

> We need to learn to think differently about ourselves. I take the posthuman predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming.[18]

The Völsung narrative asks similar questions about what a human, man, woman or hero should be. Its context within the *Poetic Edda*, positioned after tales of the gods and creation, interrogates the potential for the characters of the heroic poems to serve as some kind of model; this is also emphasised when the narrative appears in *Skáldskaparmál* as Snorri Sturluson places it even more firmly in the context of definitions and formations. When re-written into the continuous prose narrative of *Völsunga saga*, these questions are again apparent – how can existing notions of identity fit within a society that is becoming more influenced by European ideals? With *Sigurd the Volsung*, a setting within an unfixed historical alterity allows for an exploration of what the human might become, again particularly in terms of gender. Twentieth and twenty-first century iterations of the text, such as Tolkien's and Burgess's, also seek to explore these issues, with Burgess positioning most clearly the posthuman as an answer.

This thesis will use theories of identity, particularly posthumanism and a poststructuralist concept of gender, to work through the texts' explorations of these questions. Similarly, where appropriate, use will be made of narrative theory such as James Phelan's concepts of judgment, or Dorrit Cohn's exploration of the different representations of

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[16] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-181.

[17] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*: *Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics*, *Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[18] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 12.

consciousness.[19] The theory will not be bluntly applied in order to 'find' some performative gender or posthumanism in the earlier works. Rather, the theory will be read alongside the texts, creating a symbiotic relationship where each one has an affective relation with the other. Just as posthumanism offers new ways to look at kinship between the human and that which has previously been considered Other, this thesis will examine the possibilities of kinship between modern critical theory and the different iterations of the Völsung narratives.

Contexts of the texts

The *Poetic Edda*

The *Poetic Edda* is one name (the others are the *Elder Edda*, which is still frequently used, and *Saemundar Edda*, which is not, as it refers to an authorial attribution that is now universally considered to be incorrect) that is given to the series of poems that make up a particular thirteenth century manuscript, the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to). This is housed in the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, after spending a period of time in Denmark following its rediscovery in 1643 by Brynjólfur Sveinsson. The Codex Regius' forty-five leaves contain twenty-nine poems written in a single hand, some linked by short pieces of prose or containing summaries of action which are thought to be editorial.[20] Most critics believe that the *Poetic Edda* is a compilation of poems that were originally oral compositions.[21] The manuscript dates from around 1270, and the poems have been

[19] James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2007); Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
[20] See Robert Kellogg, 'Literature and Orality in the *Poetic Edda*' in *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Alger Nicolaus Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 89-101 (p. 91).
[21] For example, Kellogg states that the preservation of heroic legend prewriting must have been oral; see 'Literature and Orality', p. 89. Scott Mellor argues that the evidence supports the existence of an oral antecedent; see *Analyzing Ten Poems from the Poetic Edda: Oral Formula and Mythic Patterns* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), p. 168.

linguistically dated to between the ninth and eleventh centuries.[22] The manuscript includes a separation, signified by a decorated initial, between poems that are considered mythological and those that are considered heroic. There has been some debate over the usefulness of these distinctions, although they will be retained in the forthcoming Íslenzk fornrit edition of the text.[23] Clark suggests that the heroic poems constitute a 'human working out of mythology'.[24] In this phrasing, he acknowledges not only the connection between the two sets of texts, but also the differences between them. The delineation between mythological and heroic poems is expedient for this thesis, which examines the narratives of the Völsung legend, as these are entirely contained within the second portion of poems. Of course, the mythological context of these Völsung narratives is relevant, and will be addressed when appropriate, but this thesis will not directly analyse the mythological material.

Linguistic variations between the poems establish the Codex Regius as a compilation of existing poems of diverse ages. The dating of the poems has been subject to much critical debate, to which this thesis will not add; it will not determine when or where these different texts were composed, but instead analyse the Codex Regius on its own terms as a text in its own right. Differences between these poems will be explored to determine how this affects the representation of gender, rather than what it tells us about the period in which they may have been created. This concurs with Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's attitude to the *Poetic Edda*. She states that:

> I do not therefore work from the idea of a reconstructed ur-text, a unified representation of the characters, or "original" *Völsunga saga*, "contaminated" or "late" versions of the narrative. All that can be said for certain is that there was a

[22] For a summary of the dating debate, see Joseph Harris, 'Eddic Poetry' in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol Clover (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 68-156.
[23] Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (eds.), *Eddukvæði I-II*, Íslenzk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014).
[24] Clark, 'Kin-slaying in the *Poetic Edda*: the End of the World?' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2008), 21-41 (p. 37).

> thirteenth-century audience in Iceland for which the Codex Regius was compiled and who was the reception group for the poems.[25]

This thesis will take a similarly pragmatic approach to the eight missing leaves. The Codex Regius has a lacuna, frustratingly in the part of the manuscript which this thesis examines. The narrative before the gap ends with Sigurðr's visit to Sigrdrífa, in *Sd.*, and re-starts after the lacuna with the death of Sigurðr, in *Br.*. As Tom Shippey comments:

> The core of the story, then, is missing. Why did Sigurd marry the princess Gudrún rather than the valkyrie Sigrdrífa / Brynhild, for whom he was obviously destined as a man without fear? How did Brynhild come to marry Gudrún's brother Gunnar? And why did Gunnar feel obliged to murder, or to organize the murder of his brother-in-law and blood-brother Sigurd? All these questions must have been answered, scholars believe, in the great poem they think took up most of the space in the missing eight pages, a hypothetical and now non-existent poem they nevertheless call *Sigurðarkviða in Meiri* ("The Great Lay of Sigurd"). What a splendid poem it must have been! Only it isn't there.[26]

Some critics, most notably Theodore Andersson, have responded to this problem by interpreting the material that may have existed in this section.[27] This thesis, however, will not adopt that approach, as it seems unproductive to analyse imagined literary texts, enjoyable as this process might be. Instead, the Codex Regius will be considered as is, and no attempt will be made to restore it to some hypothetical original state.

When we read, our own identity, both individual and cultural, becomes part of the context of that text. This is most obvious when reading something that offers us a clear sense of alterity, such as a medieval text. This readerly influence on the interpretation of a text is something that cannot be avoided, but the problems that may arise from this can be reduced by being aware of this issue. When considering gender identity, we must do our best to examine the gender identities that are produced by the texts, and not the ones that we think are portrayed because they fit into our own dynamics of gender. Carol Clover has observed

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[25] Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, 'Women and Subversion' in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 117-35 (p. 118).
[26] Tom Shippey, '*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (review)', *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010), 291-324 (p. 296).
[27] Theodore Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

that the current binary system of gender that operates in the modern, Western world does not hold for medieval Iceland.[28] Instead, she suggests that there is a 'one gender' system in place. This involves a privileging of able-bodied men, and the categorisation of a 'rainbow coalition' of everyone else (children, old men, disabled men, women) on the other side of the binary (p. 380). This does not, therefore, oppose women and men in the way that our current system does. Clover's analysis is insightful, and is a useful starting point for the exploration of gender relations in Old Norse literature. Nevertheless, I will argue throughout this thesis that female identity does exist as a category that is different from children's identities, or those of old men, and is clearly delineated from the able-bodied, correctly-aged male. The thesis will, therefore, explore the representation of male and female identity in this context.

Gender identity in Old Norse literature has been addressed by a growing number of critics. There has been a focus on female identity, such as in Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's recent book *Women in Old Norse Literature*, and the essay compilation *Cold Counsel*.[29] Masculinity has received less attention, but some productive work has been done, such as Phelpstead's examination of baldness and Ármann Jakobsson's analysis of *Njáls saga*.[30] The most relevant work on gender and the Old Norse texts examined by this thesis is in Clark's DPhil thesis, articles and book which address both male and female identity in the *Poetic Edda*.[31] In the context of female identity, Clark focuses on the representation of Guðrún.[32] He moves beyond a simplistic classification of her portrayal as anti-feminist, and explores the

[28] Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* 68 (1993), 363-388.
[29] Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Sarah M. Anderson (ed.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).
[30] Phelpstead, 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 85.1 (2013), 1-19; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*', *Viator* 38 (2007), 191–215.
[31] Clark, 'Vengeance and the Heroic Ideal in Old English and Old Norse Literature' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 2004); Clark, 'Undermining and En-gendering Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-feminism in the *Poetic Edda*', *Scandinavian Studies* 77 (2005), 173-200; Clark, 'Kin-slaying'; *Gender, Violence, and the Past*.
[32] *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, pp. 17-45.

implications of viewing her as a figure who demonstrates the performativity of both male and female roles, and also as a subject of male audience identification. He argues that the portrayals of Guðrún work 'not only to raise the possibility of successful female autonomy, but also, via the concept of (possibly disavowed) male–female identification, to destabilize binary notions of gender'.[33] Clark offers a far more nuanced view of gender in the *Poetic Edda* than previous critics.

For his exploration of male identity, Clark uses the concept of homosocial desire, first established by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to examine the Helgi poems.[34] He argues that:

> The Helgi poems delineate a much more complex set of overlapping and competing bonds, indicating that a more nuanced consideration is necessary of how the roles of lover, rival, friend, and sibling can interact. […] Desire in medieval texts is involved in and inflected by these other relations in a way that does not come to the fore in the texts Sedgwick analyses. (pp. 65-6)

Clark's work offers a thought-provoking analysis of gender in the *Poetic Edda*. Yet, as he himself acknowledges, his work raises many issues which are in need of further exploration. His analyses of femininity in the context of a single character, for example, open up issues of identity in the texts and so pave the way for a fuller exploration of how femininity is constructed elsewhere in the *Poetic Edda*, or in relation to other aspects of female identity that are absent from his study, such as the connections between women and prophecy. Another important consideration is the ways in which *Völsunga saga*, as a rewriting of the *Poetic Edda*, offers an alternative exploration of these identities, which is an aspect that Clark does not investigate. This thesis, therefore, will build on Clark's work to offer a more extensive evaluation of gender identity in the *Poetic Edda*.

[33] *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, p. 45.
[34] *Gender, Violence, and the Past*, pp. 46-66.

Völsunga saga

Völsunga saga is believed to have been composed between c. 1200 and c. 1270, a similar period to the compilation of the *Poetic Edda*, indicating the likely cultural coexistence of these different forms of the same narratives.[35] As such, *Völsunga saga* does not offer a recovery of a long-forgotten story, but a reimagining of this narrative. This reformation occurs on a formal basis, as the poems are rewritten into a continuous prose narrative in the saga style, and also on the level of content, as *Völsunga saga* contains plot elements which do not occur in the *Poetic Edda*, due to its inclusion of both an extensive back story of the Völsung descent from Óðinn, and the material which may have been present in the Codex Regius lacuna. The refashioning of the narrative also affects the text's representation of gender. When I talk about the *Völsunga saga* author rewriting the tale, I am not, of course, arguing that they necessarily sat down with a copy of the Codex Regius and decided to compose a saga. It is possible that the saga author knew the poems in a different form to that of the Codex Regius, although the verse quotations in the saga suggest that their versions were similar. This thesis will not attempt to reconstruct the materials from which the author of *Völsunga saga* worked. Indeed, this is not necessary for this thesis, which does not look for conscious motivations on behalf of authors or compilers, but examines the effects of different representations of gender. In the thesis, therefore, when differences between the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsunga saga* are discussed, these are not intended to necessarily be attributed to intention on the part of the author of *Völsunga saga* but instead to explore the varied depictions of gender within the same narrative.

Critics frequently use *Völsunga saga* to elucidate the *Poetic Edda*.[36] The temptation to do so is obvious; it is likely that *Völsunga saga* may provide a glimpse of material that has

[35] R. G. Finch, 'Introduction', in *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Nelson, 1965), p. ix.
[36] Dennis Cronan discusses this phenomenon; see 'A Reading of *Guðrúnarqviða Qnnor*', *Scandinavian Studies* 57:2 (1985), 174-87 (174).

been removed from the *Poetic Edda*. Virginia C. Gildersleeve argues that 'the complete Norse conception of her [Brynhildr] can be obtained only when we add to these poems a study of the *Völsunga saga*'.[37] The method proposed by this statement, which looks at both texts to ascertain and acknowledge the differences between themes, ideas and characters in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, is productive and will be followed in this thesis. Yet Gildersleeve goes further than this, using *Völsunga saga* to explain the *Poetic Edda*, as if it offers a somewhat more rational version of the narrative. This approach is also evident in the work of modern scholars who use *Völsunga saga* or indeed the *Prose Edda* to explain elements in the *Poetic Edda* which may be otherwise confusing, or to fill in the narrative gaps in the *Poetic Edda*. As it is impossible to ascertain exactly what was in those missing leaves, I disagree with this method and will not be using it in this thesis. The trouble with this approach is that it assumes one unifying conception of the narrative which is reflected in several texts.

Instead, I will look at the *Völsunga saga* and the current incarnation of the *Poetic Edda* on their own terms. Indeed, Gildersleeve asserts that the author of *Völsunga saga* was 'paraphrasing his originals closely' (p. 358). I disagree with this, or perhaps disagree with what is meant by the term paraphrasing. A comparison of the sections of the *Poetic Edda* which do accord with parts of *Völsunga saga* clearly illustrates the almost infinite number of differences between the texts.[38] Even on a purely narrative level, the events of *Gðr. I*, for example, are absent from *Völsunga saga* altogether and there is little of *Gðr. II*. These variations are, of course, multiplied by their disparate forms; *Völsunga saga* is (mainly) comprised of prose whereas the *Poetic Edda* is (mainly) poetry. This discussion of the discrepancies between the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* does not, of course, entail a

[37] Virginia C. Gildersleeve, 'Brynhild in Legend and Literature', *Modern Philology* 6:3 (1909), 343-374 (p. 358).
[38] For a full exploration of some of these differences, see R. G. Finch 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga saga*', *Sagabook* 16 (1962-5), 315–53.

negative judgement on the aesthetics of *Völsunga saga*, which is also common amongst previous critics.[39]

Like the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* has a single medieval manuscript witness (NKS 1824 b 4to). This has been dated to c. 1400, providing another reason why it is less useful to try and establish its exact sources, as it is very likely that the text would have undergone many changes in the two hundred years between its composition and recording in NKS 1824 b 4to.[40] In the manuscript, *Völsunga saga* is followed by *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, which includes the afterlife of the character Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr who is mentioned in *Völsunga saga* (but not in the *Poetic Edda*). *Ragnars saga loðbrokar* will not be examined as part of this thesis. Although it appears in the same manuscript as *Völsunga saga*, and there is a small overlap of characters, there is a delineation between the two narratives, and *Ragnars saga loðbrokar* demonstrates a very different cultural conception, as Carolyne Larrington observes.[41] Indeed, elements from this text are not taken up by the British rewritings of the narrative. *Völsunga saga* also includes a portion of the text which is universally agreed to be an interpolation from *Þiðreks saga*.[42] The extensive use of material from other narratives demonstrates the ways in which *Völsunga saga* itself becomes a compilation to some extent, and its adoption of content from different sources is evidence of its variance from the *Poetic Edda*. It is, therefore, essential to examine the representation of gender in the Völsung legend in light of these alterations to the narrative of the *Poetic Edda*.

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[39] See, for example Finch, who states that 'such possible instances of improvement are rare. Unfortunately, the compiler is more likely to destroy, often unnecessarily from the point of view of prose diction, a particularly striking effect or scene'; see 'Treatment of Poetic Sources' p. 345. Manuel Aguirre has offered a sustained countering of such critical positions; see 'Narrative Composition in *The Saga of the Volsungs*', *Saga-Book* 26 (2002), 5-37.
[40] R. G. Finch, 'Introduction' p. ix.
[41] '*Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga* and Romance in Old Norse: Revisiting the Relationship', in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. by Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), pp. 251-270.
[42] This thesis does not examine *Þiðreks saga*. Although it contains parts of the Völsung legend, this thesis focuses on the Old Norse texts that most clearly influenced the later British rewritings.

The *Prose Edda*

The other Old Norse iteration of the Völsung legend appears in the *Prose Edda*. This text was written by Snorri in the first half of the thirteenth century and its oldest manuscript witness is Codex Upsaliensis, dated to the first quarter of the fourteenth century.[43] The *Prose Edda* is a manual for poets, as the skaldic poetry popular in that period makes extensive use of kennings, an often complicated form of metaphoric language which requires an understanding of ancient and in particular mythological material to untangle. Snorri originally introduces the part of the Völsung legend involving Reginn, Fáfnir and the hoard to explain the origin of the phrase *otrgjöld* (Otr's gold). Yet despite the rest of the narrative being less obviously relevant to an aspiring skald, he also retells the remainder of the story. His version of the narrative, written in prose, is much reduced, but provides an additional perspective on the representation of gender identity, which is particularly significant given the cultural coexistence of some form of both Eddas and *Völsunga saga*. The Völsung legend was not abandoned in Icelandic literature after *Völsunga saga*, as there are continued representations of this narrative in other forms, such as *rímur*.[44] This thesis will not, however, address these later Icelandic forms, but will instead move temporally and geographically to nineteenth-century Britain to examine its reinterpretations of the Völsung legend in English.

Sigurd the Volsung

In *The Vikings and the Victorians*, Andrew Wawn examines the Victorian fascination with Old Norse literature and culture.[45] He argues that 'the qualities that attracted the Victorians to eddas [… include] the cartoon-like bravery of eddic heroes' (p. 372). The development of a

[43] Anthony Faulkes, 'Introduction' in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), pp. vii-lix (p. xi).

[44] For an exploration of this topic see, for example, Shaun F. D. Hughes, '"Where Are All the Eddic Champions Gone?" The Disappearance and Recovery of the Eddic Heroes in Late Medieval Icelandic Literature, 1400–1800', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 9 (2013), 37-67.

[45] Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2000).

British interest in Old Norse literature has also been explored in the compilation of essays in *Northern Antiquity*, and by Heather O'Donoghue in *From Asgard to Valhalla* and *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth: A History*.[46] As O'Donoghue explains, the transmission of material from Old Norse into English was an extended process, but much of the attraction, especially in the early stages, was to mythological material.[47] Morris takes a different path from his contemporaries, as he is almost solely interested in the heroic poems. David Ashurst argues that 'it is significant that although Morris […] made translations of two mythological poems, *Þrymskviða* and *Baldrs draumar* […] he did not publish them despite the fact that they are at least as good as his renderings of the heroic poems'.[48] The first English translations of the heroic eddic poems were completed by William Herbert several decades before Morris's: *Helreið Brynhildar* in 1806, and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* and *Atlakviða* in 1839.[49] Herbert also produced 'Brynhilda', a poem that retells Brynhildr's meeting with Sigurðr in Gunnarr's form and the subsequent events leading to his murder.[50] The entire heroic corpus was translated by Benjamin Thorpe in the second volume of *The Edda of Sæmund the Learned*.[51]

Ashurst notes that Morris's interest in Old Norse was first mentioned in a piece published in 1856.[52] In 1868, after meeting Eiríkr Magnússon, who taught him Old Norse, Morris embarked on a series of joint translations with him, which included *Völsunga saga* in

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[46] Andrew Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1994); Heather O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (London: Tauris, 2007); O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[47] *Old Norse Myth* p. 148. See also David Ashurst, 'Eddic Myth, Victorian Values: The Popularisation of Old Norse Mythology in Britain, 1837 to 1876' in *Sang an Ægir: Nordische Mythen um 1900*, ed. by Florian Heesch and Katja Schulz (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009), pp. 45-71.

[48] 'Victorian Values', p. 65.

[49] William Herbert, *Horae Scandicae: Or, Works Relating to Old Scandinavian Literature* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1842), pp. 215-23, 203-14, 224-34.

[50] *Horae Scandicae* pp. 149-56.

[51] Benjamin Thorpe (trans.), *Edda Sæmundar Hinns Froða: The Edda Of Sæmund The Learned* (2 vols.) (London: Trübner & Co., 1866).

[52] Ashurst, 'William Morris and the Volsungs' in *Old Norse Made New*, ed. by David Clark and Carl Phelpstead (Exeter: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), pp. 43-61.

1870.[53] His was the first English translation of *Völsunga saga*, to which he added several poems from the *Poetic Edda* (*Gðr.I*, *HH.II*, *Sd.*, *Sg.*, *HB.*, *Br., Gðr.II*, *Akv.*, *Ghv.*, *Hm.* and *Od.*).[54] This literary interest was enhanced by Morris's visits to Iceland, which are detailed in his journals.[55] Yet Morris was clearly unsatisfied with merely translating the text. As Ashurst comments, for Morris, 'the act of literary creation was primarily and unabashedly one of re-creation, of refashioning received material' and so in 1876 he published *Sigurd the Volsung*, a reworking of the narrative into an epic poem.[56]

Critics have read *Sigurd the Volsung* as demonstrating Morris's political sensibilities above antiquarian interests. He was immensely proud of *Sigurd the Volsung*, which continued his interest in rewriting medieval texts previously evidenced by *The Earthly Paradise*. Yet contemporary critical reception was mixed, and it did not gain the popularity that Morris desired, despite it becoming a set text in many schools in the early twentieth century.[57] Theodore Watts-Duncan provides an illustration of this ambivalent contemporary reaction. He declares that 'on the whole, we cannot but think this poem Mr. Morris's greatest achievement' and yet comments that 'with regard, however, to the selection of the metre, we cannot think it a happy one for a poem of such a length'.[58] He also seems suspicious of Morris's choice of material:

> That this is a noble poem there can be no doubt; but whether it will meet with ready appreciation and sympathy in this country is a question not so easily disposed of. Dr. Hueffer is no doubt right in saying that the story of the Niblungs is the epic of all the Teutonic peoples; but are we of these? (ibid., p. 232).

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[53] See J. N. Swannell, 'William Morris as an Interpreter of Old Norse', *Sagabook* 15 (1957-61), 365–82 (pp. 368-70).
[54] The first of these translations appears within the text, as a chapter while the rest appear in an appendix. Morris also uses material from *Rm.* and *Sd.* in the text.
[55] Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris Volume XIII: Journals of Travel in Iceland 1871-73* (London: Longmans Green, 1911).
[56] 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 43.
[57] Charity Dye, '*The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*', *The School Review* 19:2 (The University of Chicago Press, 1911), 136-137 (p. 136).
[58] From Theodore Watts, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, December 1876, no. 2563, 753-5 in *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 231.

The often hesitant contemporary appreciation of *Sigurd the Volsung* is echoed by its more modern critical reception, as little work has been done on this text in comparison to Morris's other works.

Luella Lowe comments on the political aims of the text, arguing that Morris uses the narrative of *Sigurd the Volsung*:

> As one resource against the decrepitude of civilization of his century, which was being cast into a kaleidoscope of superficiality. He reverted to a free Northern society, one unbound by political fetters […] for Morris, it was "Art for life's Sake".[59]

In the collection of essays devoted to *Sigurd the Volsung*, Dennis Balch similarly analyses the text in terms of its representation of society, arguing that it 'implies the inadequacy of a social order based on a heroic ethic and prepares the way for a consideration of a more stable communal order' in his later texts.[60] More recent critical treatments have come from Simon Dentith, who analyses its function as a national epic, Herbert Tucker who addresses the impact of *Sigurd the Volsung*'s awareness of its fictional status, and Florence Boos, the foremost Morris scholar, who analyses *Sigurd the Volsung* in terms of its themes, including the representation of women.[61]

From the period of its publication, critics have commented on the style of the poetry. Dentith suggests that the whole format of *Sigurd the Volsung* makes it inaccessible, as it 'starts in his way without any prefatory matter; readers since the poem's publication have found this manner of writing intimidating'.[62] He argues that:

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[59] Luella Lowe, 'William Morris's Mythological Adaptations in *Sigurd the Volsung*' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1941) (p. 74).

[60] Dennis Balch, '"The Lovers of Gudrun", *Sigurd the Volsung*, and *The House of the Wolfings*: Three Chapters in a Tale of the Individual and the Tribe', in *After Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung* (Shiremanstown, Pennsylvania: William Morris Society in the United States, 1977), pp. 90-118 (p. 116).

[61] Simon Dentith, 'Morris, "The Great Story of the North", and the Barbaric Past', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 14:2 (2009), 238-254; Dentith, *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Herbert Tucker, 'All for the Tale: The Epic Macropoetics of Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*', *Victorian Poetry* 34:3 (1996), 372-394: Florence Boos, '"The Banners of the Spring to Be": The Dialectical Pattern of Morris's Later Poetry', *English Studies* 81 (2000), 1-27; Boos, 'Morris's Poetry at the Fin de Millénaire', *Victorian Poetry* 34.3 (1996), 285-98.

[62] 'Barbaric Past', p. 243.

> Morris is here attempting […] to give readers some sense or experience of antique or barbaric poetry. He is, for example, rigorously self-denying in the references he makes to the contemporary (nineteenth-century) world; there is only one moment in which he alludes to the modern age as a comparison. And his poetic practice, as we saw, emphatically eschewed the predominant traditions of English heroic poetry. This is not to say that in any way he is providing, or could provide, the same experience as reading the original Saga or the Edda which it partly incorporates; Morris's poetry can only ever allude to or suggest the poetic practices which they naturally include. But […] Morris evokes the barbaric world to insist on its historic distance from modernity. (ibid., pp. 79-80)

He also suggests elsewhere that 'this archaicising style, while it is not unique in the nineteenth century, is very distinctively Morrisian and was controversial both then and now'.[63] This apparent archaism attracts frequent critical comment. Yet, as John Kennedy has explained in relation to Morris's translations of the sagas, Morris does not so much offer an archaic version of English as one that is Icelandicised; he is not just creating a sense of distance with his linguistic choices, but is foregrounding Icelandic influences.[64] Dentith admires the use of this language in Morris's translations, but argues that it does not work for *Sigurd the Volsung*:

> The reader can negotiate the archaism of the translations as providing an equivalent of the 'absolutely antique' character of the original poems. But in the case of an original epic, the reader has to understand the archaism as emerging from a particular stage of society and at the same time recognise it as an elaborate exercise in historical reconstruction. There is no doubting the energy and elan, and the extraordinary facility, of Morris as he writes in this mode; it is just that the mode itself is almost self-defeating: no one in the nineteenth century can write a primary epic, just as no one now can be a skald. *Sigurd the Volsung* springs out of this fundamental impossibility, as though the whole poem were in inverted commas or was prefaced by an 'as if'.[65]

Dentith's work focuses on ideas of nationalism in *Sigurd the Volsung*, and does not address gender. Nevertheless, his analysis of Morris's poem as distancing its audience has implications for sexual difference. The temporal difference between his own culture and the setting of the poem allows Morris the freedom to experiment with alternative possibilities for

[63] 'Barbaric Past', p. 246.
[64] John Kennedy, *Translating the Sagas: Two Hundred Years of Challenge and Response* (Turnhout : Brepols, 2007), pp. 29-36.
[65] *Empire*, p. 83.

gender; indeed, his refusal to locate the poem in a particular time or geography increases this ability to offer different conceptions of identities to those of Victorian Britain in the 1870s.

Boos has extensively researched gender in relation to some of Morris's other texts.[66] She has also briefly considered sexual difference in *Sigurd the Volsung*, arguing that it presents 'proto-feminist roles of women'.[67] Yet there is no sustained critical analysis of gender in this text, and critics who work on *Sigurd the Volsung* tend to offer little insight into the Old Norse sources of the work.[68] Dentith, for example, argues that 'more generally, the poem has a sustained psychological power which is not one of the saga's characteristic effects'.[69] Yet if Dentith had analysed *Sigurd the Volsung* in comparison to the *Poetic Edda*, as well as *Völsunga saga*, he might have found some of this psychological impact. Similarly, Boos argues that 'Morris rearranged legendary materials in rather drastic ways' in his composition of *Sigurd the Volsung*, but does not reveal the ways in which he did this.[70] When Boos addresses the scene in which Herborg recounts her sorrows, for example, she comments on its analogues, stating that 'The Welshland Queen's account, a medieval 'ubi sunt' lament in female voice, recalls the 'Lay of Gormley' as well as the plight of Hecuba in Euripides's Troy cycle'.[71] Yet she does not observe that this character is a rewriting of Herborgr in *Gðr.I*, who recounts the same details of her woe. These critical gaps in the examination of gender in *Sigurd the Volsung*, and its relation to the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* are, therefore, what this thesis intends to fill.

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[66] See Boos, 'Jason's "Wise" Women: Gender and Morris's First Romantic Epic' in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris* ed. by David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 41-58; Boos, 'The Socialist New Woman in William Morris's *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 23 (1995), 159-75; Boos, 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in *The Sundering Flood*', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* I (1992), 12-233; Boos, 'Victorian Socialist-Feminism and William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *Nineteenth-Century Context*s 14:1 (1990), 3-32; Boos, 'An (Almost) Egalitarian Sage: William Morris's Later Writings and 'The Woman Question' in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. by Thais Morgan (New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 187-206; Boos, 'Sexual Polarities in William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere*', *Browning Institute Studies* 13 (1985), 181-200.

[67] 'Later Poetry', p. 23.

[68] The notable exception is David Ashurst; see 'William Morris and the Volsungs'.

[69] *Empire*, p. 81.

[70] 'Fin de Millénaire', p. 289.

[71] 'Dialectical Pattern', p. 26.

Of course, the most famous Victorian reworking of the Scandinavian Völsung legend is not Morris's epic poetry, but Wagner's operatic treatment in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. As Árni Björnsson has argued, despite using some elements from the medieval German version of this legend, which is most clearly expressed in the *Nibelungenlied*, Wagner extensively uses the Scandinavian tradition as a source for his musical reimagining.[72] In doing so, he provides a work that is both aesthetically appealing and interesting, especially in gender terms. Jane Ennis has examined the relationship of *Sigurd the Volsung* to *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and argues that it can be considered, to some extent, to be conceived as an anti-ring.[73] Nevertheless, this thesis restricts itself to literary texts, and to those in the English language. This constraint is based on grounds of genre and linguistics; as a German opera, the form of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* already makes it incongruous with an analysis of gender representation that is otherwise based on literary texts in Old Norse and English. In addition, this thesis aims to discover the alterations made to gender identity in British rewritings of the Old Norse sources. Wagner will be, of course, part of the unconscious of these writers' conceptions of the Völsung legend, but he is not an overt part of this tradition in the same way as Morris.[74] Indeed, his adoption of elements from the *Nibelungenlied* and his own imaginative response to this legend mean that significant changes are made to the narrative, and a full analysis of these are outside the scope of an investigation which already incorporates texts from the medieval, Victorian, modern and contemporary periods.[75] As Christopher Tolkien maintains:

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[72] Árni Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs: Icelandic Sources of Der Ring des Nibelungen* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003).

[73] Jane Ennis, 'A Comparison of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1993).

[74] The first performance of the Ring Cycle took place in May 1882 (in London), and so, for British audiences, may be considered to come after Morris's text, despite being created from 1848 onwards, with its first performance as a cycle taking place at the Bayreuth Festival in 1876.

[75] In contrast to my view, David Ashurst asserts that 'a comparison of the ways in which Wagner and Morris treated Siegfried-Sigurd, and the significance they vested in him, is revealing; nevertheless, such a comparison has by no means been a staple of critical analysis, no doubt because of the difficulties involved in handling the works' divergent media of German music-drama and English narrative verse, and yet the parallels between

> Wagner's treatment of the Old Norse forms of the legend was less an "interpretation" of the ancient literature than a new and transformative impulse, taking up elements of the old Northern conception and placing them in new relations, adapting, altering and inventing on a grand scale, according to his own taste and creative inventions. Thus the libretti of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, though raised indeed on old foundations, must be seen less as a continuation or development of the long-enduring heroic legend than as a new and independent work of art.[76]

The exploration of representations of gender identity in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in the context of its Old Norse sources would produce an interesting study, just as would an analysis of gender in the Icelandic texts produced beyond the medieval period which deal with the Völsung legend, but these will have to wait for another project and, most likely, another critic.[77]

Sigurd and Gudrún

Tolkien's *Sigurd and Gudrún* follows *Sigurd the Volsung* in its approach but only partly in its chronology. The text was published in 2009, thirty-six years after Tolkien's death, by his son, Christopher. Tolkien did not intend to publish this work, and so it is unclear whether it is in a finished state. The problematic status of these poems, like the Codex Regius lacuna, will be put aside for the purposes of this thesis; again, I can only analyse the materials that are available, rather than imagining what Tolkien might have done if he had prepared the poems for publication. His interest in Old Norse, like Morris's, developed at an early age. Shippey quotes from a speech delivered by a teenage Tolkien which demonstrates his appreciation for *Völsunga saga*, which he first read in Andrew Lang's *Red Book* rewriting and then in

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Wagner and Morris are so striking as to demand a study of the kind offered here; see 'Wagner, Morris, and the Sigurd Figure: Confronting Freedom and Uncertainty' in in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 219-237 (p. 219).

[76] Christopher Tolkien, 'Foreword', in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, pp. 3-15 (p. 10).

[77] For an analysis of gender in the Ring Cycle see, for example, Maria Euchner, 'The Ring's Rhinemaidens: Singing Seductresses or Women of Wisdom?' *Musical Times* 153 (2012), 37-51; Eva Rieger, '"Love is the Essence of the Eternal Feminine": Richard Wagner's Concept of Femininity with Reference to Brünnhilde' *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 6 (2002), 1-10.

Morris's translation, demonstrating a clear link between the two authors.[78] Due to his position at the University of Oxford, Tolkien may have taken a more traditionally scholarly approach to Old Norse texts, but as his famous lecture makes clear, he is also fascinated by literature on an aesthetic and emotional level.[79]

Several critics have noted the influence of Old Norse in Tolkien's more popular fiction, but *Sigurd and Gudrún* is the only direct rewriting of this material.[80] As Craig Franson notes in his review of the text, the posthumous publication of *Sigurd and Gudrún* 'marks the first serious attempt to produce a best-seller from material grounded not in Tolkien's invented legendarium, but rather in the real legends that were his life's study.'[81] In *Sigurd and Gudrún*, Tolkien offers a rewriting of some of the heroic poems from the *Poetic Edda* and parts of *Völsunga saga* (his narrative omits the part of the story before the entrance of Signý, and after Atli's death), with the addition of *Völuspá*, the first poem of the *Poetic Edda*. The published text also includes Tolkien's translations of some of the heroic eddic poems into Old English. This exercise suggests an interest in the Völsung legend as part of Britain's literary heritage, in a similar way to Morris, although Shippey suggests that it is written 'as if testing his own theory about the difference between the two poetic traditions' and thus demonstrating the variances between the actual English literary heritage and its analogue.[82] Christopher Tolkien believes the poems were composed in the 1930s, setting the narrative within a post-WWI context for the first time.[83]

There is very little criticism on *Sigurd and Gudrún*, and none on its representation of gender. This situation may well alter in later years; perhaps, as Shippey suggests, 'the poems

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[78] Shippey, '*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (review)', *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010), 291-324 (p. 292).
[79] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).
[80] See, for example, Jane Chance (ed.), *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London: Routledge, 2003); Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London: Harper Collins, 2005); Marjorie Burns, *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-Earth* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
[81] Craig Franson, '*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*', *Arthuriana* 19 (2009), 149-151 (p. 150).
[82] 'Review', p. 299.
[83] 'Foreword', p. 5.

will certainly bring the legends of the Völsungs and the Nibelungs to general attention in a way which has never happened before, not even from the works of Morris and Wagner'.[84] Shippey himself offers the only article-length treatment, although Pierre Berube offers an extensive guide to the ways in which the plot of *Sigurd and Gudrún* differs from its sources and analogues.[85] Franson argues that, in Tolkien's construction of Sigurd as a redemptive figure, 'more than simply bringing metrical, narrative and lexical continuity to the various narratives, Tolkien has introduced a novel element to the story'.[86] Shippey also emphasises the alterations of Tolkien's text, suggesting that 'Tolkien certainly succeeded in his stated goal of "organising" and "unifying" the Eddic material about the Völsungs, and making a coherent story out of it'.[87] Several critics have addressed gender in Tolkien's other work, but this remains an unexplored issue in the context of *Sigurd and Gudrún*.[88]

Moving from medieval to Victorian and twentieth-century literature offers a greatly expanded sense of the contexts of the texts. In the Old Norse sources, there is an uncertainty about authorship, dating and even content (especially in relation to the *Poetic Edda*). The problems of transmission in a manuscript culture mean that even when we can be fairly certain about authorship, as in the case of the *Prose Edda*, it is impossible to establish the changes that have occurred between the times of a text's composition and its recording in a manuscript witness. With Victorian and twentieth-century literature, we have fixed dates of publication (although the posthumous status of *Sigurd and Gudrún* obscures the date of composition) and certainty of authorship. It is tempting, therefore, to make much of these additional contexts. Ashurst, for example, discusses the love triangles in *Sigurd the Volsung* and *Laxdœla saga* (although these romantic entanglements may be said to be more like love

[84] 'Review', p. 319.
[85] Pierre H. Berube, 'Tolkien's *Sigurd and Gudrún*: Summary, Sources, & Analogs', *Mythlore* 28 (2009), 45-76.
[86] '*Sigurd and Gudrún*', p. 151.
[87] 'Review' p. 320.
[88] See, for example David M. Craig, '"Queer Lodgings": Gender and Sexuality in The Lord of the Rings', *Mallorn* 38 (2001), 11-18; David Doughan, 'Tolkien, Sayers, Sex and Gender', *Mythlore* 21 (1996), 356-59.

quadrilaterals) in the context of Morris's own personal life, and the relationship between his wife and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.[89] This thesis will not, however, attempt to discover a biographical interpretation of the texts. Of course, it will be informed by the text's contexts; this is unavoidable. As Jacques Derrida observes, there is no outside-of-the-text as its boundaries are always undecidable.[90] Context will be acknowledged in a less overt manner than by exploring how incidents in the text might relate to events in the author's life. As I have already made clear, the thesis intends to investigate the effects produced by literary texts, rather than to endeavour to uncover a conscious and unified authorial motivation.

Bloodtide and *Bloodsong*

Melvin Burgess is a British author of young-adult fiction, whose novels have often been the subject of controversy. *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* were published in 1999 and 2005, meaning that they respectively follow the notorious texts *Junk* (1996), Burgess's exploration of drug addiction, and *Doing It* (2003), which tackles teenage sex. Unlike other rewritings of the legend, which retain an historical setting, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* situate the narrative in a post-apocalyptic Britain. This futuristic temporality allows Burgess to investigate the problematic nature of scientific developments such as genetic crossbreeding and cloning. Burgess denies studying any previous material in the creation of *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, as he relied on his recollection of the Barbara Leonie Picard translation.[91] Indeed, his website mentions the power of this narrative which he 'read when I was a child and remembered all

[89] 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 47.
[90] See Jacques Derrida, '… That Dangerous Supplement …', in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 157-8. The alternative translation of 'there is no outside-the-text' is provided by Derek Attridge, in Derrida, *Acts of Literature* ed. by Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 102 n. 21. Derrida's original comments about context have been frequently misread, so he provides a later clarification: 'the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself confined to the library. It does not suspend reference - to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, since to say of history, of the world, of reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible. *Différance* is a reference and vice versa'; see *Limited Inc.*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 137.
[91] Barbara Leonie Picard, *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953)

my life'.[92] Yet Carolyne Larrington points out that Picard does not include the incestuous relationship between Signy and Sigmund so Burgess must have read this part of the story in another source.[93] Burgess's rewriting into young-adult fiction retains the violence of the original legend, but these novels did not receive the same dose of pearl-clutching outrage as some of his other texts.[94] Larrington has written the sole article-length critical discussion of *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*.[95] She does not, however, address the issue of gender, although this has received some critical attention in the context of Burgess's other works.[96]

Thesis structure

The thesis will examine the texts detailed above in chronological order. Within each chapter, the representation of gender will be categorised according to themes. These will not be the same for each chapter, but will be determined by the emphases of the text that is being addressed. In the first chapter, female identity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* is explored. I argue that there is a range of identities available to women in these texts, but female characters are most commonly represented in terms of their provision of representations of reality. In the second chapter, I discuss the expression of male identity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, arguing that the most important male identity is that of the warrior, although in *Völsunga saga* this is altered to offer a more courtly conception of identity. Nevertheless, more transgressive kinds of male identity are explored in the texts' representation of music, insults and shape-shifting. The third and fourth chapters examine

[92] Burgess, 'Bloodtide', available at http://www.melvinburgess.net/Bloodtide.htm (accessed 03/04/12).
[93] Larrington, 'Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*: Sigmundr, Sigurðr and Young Adult Literature' in *Eddische Götter und Helden – Milieus und Medien ihrer Rezeption* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2011), pp. 199-214 (p. 102).
[94] For an exploration of the reception of *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, see Larrington, 'Melvin Burgess's Bloodtide and Bloodsong' pp. 112-3. Burgess discusses the reactions to *Junk* and *Doing It* in comparison to *Bloodtide* in 'Sympathy for the Devil', *Children's Literature in Education*, 35:4 (2004), 289-300 (291-8).
[95] 'Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*'.
[96] See, for example Hanabusa Miyuki,'"So Much More Than Pretty": Body Modification and Boundary Transgression in Melvin Burgess's *Sara's Face*', *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 4.2 (2012), 67-85; Lydia Kokkola, 'Metamorphosis in Two Novels by Melvin Burgess: Denying and Disguising "Deviant" Desire', *Children's Literature in Education* 42.1 (2011), 56-69.

Sigurd the Volsung, and argue that Morris offers an expansion of male identity, accompanied by a reduction of possibilities for female identity and a silencing of the female characters. The final chapter addresses the twentieth and twenty-first century reimaginings of the Völsung legend, exploring Tolkien's narrative techniques and his positioning of Sigurðr as a redemptive figure, and the ways in which gender intersects with posthuman identities in Burgess's novels.

Chapter 1: Female identity in the heroic *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*

Old Norse literature privileges male experience. Most of the surviving medieval Icelandic prose and poetry focuses on male characters and concerns. Nevertheless, as Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir has argued, 'Old Norse sources offer their audiences many discrete and varied female images'.[97] The heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* offer extensive explorations of female experience, and many of their most memorable characters are female. An examination of gender in these texts, and in their reiteration in *Völsunga saga*, will extend existing considerations of female identity in Old Norse literature; with the exception of Clark and Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's work, there are no extensive critical analyses of gender in these texts, despite their ability to provide a fuller understanding of female identity in particular.[98] This chapter will, therefore, build on existing research to interrogate what it means to be female in the heroic *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, acknowledging both the differences and similarities between the representation of female identity in the various poems of the *Poetic Edda* and the prose narrative of *Völsunga saga*. *Völsunga saga* often lessens the direct expression of a female voice as some of the most memorable scenes from the *Poetic Edda*, such as Guðrún's expressions of grief, are briefer or absent from the text altogether.

In her influential exploration of gender in Old Norse literature, Clover explores a binary that is established not so much between biological men and women, but which lies:

> Between strong and weak, powerful and powerless or disempowered, swordworthy and unswordworthy, honored and unhonored or dishonored, winners and losers.[99]

In doing so, she astutely observes the importance of gender, but seems to endorse a binary system which is rigid (characters can move between the two binaries, but must be defined as

[97] Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, *Bodies, Words and Power*, p. 1.
[98] Jochens has looked at some parts of the Völsung legends in her work, but as part of an attempt to explore the historical position of women, which is not the focus of this thesis; see *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).
[99] Clover, 'Regardless', p. 14.

one or the other) and depends on a particular interpretation of actions; Clover moves beyond the idea of sexual difference as fixed, but suggests that there is an unproblematic endorsement of an active identity involving power and physical strength. An examination of femininity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, however, disrupts the idea of a simple binary. Not only do female characters partake in direct, physical action, but also the texts frequently establish the idea of female control through the creation of narratives. The *Poetic Edda* in particular focuses on the point of view of female characters, allowing them to narrate their own experiences, and their manipulation of the past and future. Indeed, although it may be generally true that male characters are the main perpetrators of violent acts, it is female characters who often direct or interpret these deeds. In this role of providing a record, of linking actions to ideas and meanings, the female characters can be understood as actively controlling representations within the text.

The origins of the word text connect it to weaving, which provides a useful metaphor for thinking about the female regulation of meaning in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Indeed, the role of women as weavers is illustrated in both *Gðr.II* and *Völsunga saga* (p. 62).[100] In *Gðr.II*, Guðrún and Þóra are depicted as creating a record of the drama involved in battle:

> Höfðo við á scriptom, þat er scatar léco,
> oc á hannyrðom hilmis þegna. (st. 15)
> (We two had drawn in the tapestry that which the men played, and the prince's retinue in fine embroidery.) [101]

The transformation of battle into embroidery draws attention to how war constructs identity, emphasising its function as a simulacrum of masculine behaviour.[102] The tapestry is also a

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[100] Carrie Roy comments that, in medieval Scandinavia, 'all women wove, knitted and spun'; see 'Practical Fastenings of the Supernatural', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009), 177-212 (p. 198). Similarly, Annika Larsson states that medieval Scandinavian women were often buried with spindle whorls and needles; see 'Viking Age Textiles' in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 181-5 (p. 184).

[101] Few tapestries such as the one described have survived; see Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991), p. 24. Robert J. Glendinning summarises Wolfgang Mohr's argument that this scene is 'related to or actually dependent on Danish-German sources'; see '*Guðrúnarqviða Forna*: A Reconstruction and Interpretation' in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 258-82 (p. 258).

way in which women, mostly excluded from combat, can become directors rather than observers of the action.[103] Through their sewing, these women are able to question the naturalness of a heroic identity. Producing embroidery is a powerful position as it creates a record of conflict that allows women to demonstrate their own interpretation of events. In *Völsunga saga*, then, when Bekkhildr stays at home to do *hannyrð* (fine work, p. 41) and is contrasted with her sister, Brynhildr, who is associated with battle, this opposition may not be one of active participation and domestic confinement, but instead reflect different ways to be influential.

1: Memory

> I am not offering a rhetorical invocation […] to a Remembrance (*Mémoire*) that one might naively believe to be orientated towards the past, a past whose essence one would learn through some narrative.[104]

Memory is crucial for the formation of gender identity; it establishes continuities of gender norms. In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, memory itself becomes gendered, as both texts include magical drinks which are used by female characters to aid or disrupt memory.[105] Through the administration of these drinks, female characters are able to regulate what is remembered and, therefore, what is considered to have taken place; the manipulation of memory is a control of representations of the past.[106] Derrida argues that narrative is an

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[102] Other critics have not offered this reading of the tapestry. Cronon reads the pictures in the tapestry as simply depicting 'the magnificence and might of the heroic world'; see '*A Reading*', p. 6. Glendenning states that 'these stanzas [about the needle-work] are evidently intended to show the inconsolability of Sigurðr's widow and the indestructibility of her memory'; see '*Guðrúnarqviða Forna*', p. 269.

[103] A valkyrie is one of the few identities that allows women a role in war, such as Sigrún in *HH.I.* An association between embroidery and control is alluded to by the juxtaposition in *Od.*: 'Brynhildr í búri borða racþi, hafði hon lýði oc lönd um sic' (Brynhildr, in her chamber, sat at table with embroidery; she possessed people and lands [st. 17]).

[104] Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 3.

[105] Clark notes that 'magic is frequently associated in Norse literature with effeminacy'; see *Gender*, p. 54.

[106] Judy Quinn has explored associations between drinks and knowledge; see 'Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry', in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. by Slavica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 175-217.

essential component of memory.[107] Memories of the past cannot be recalled as an archive of facts as they are always already part of a narrative. Pernille Hermann observes that, in Old Norse texts, the literature 'sometimes observes memory […] as a storehouse that can be depleted' (p. 5) and that 'the idea that writing guarantees memory is ubiquitous' (p. 8).[108] Yet a concept close to Derrida's is also present, which 'centers not only on past experiences, but the representations working in the present' (pp. 9-10). She observes that this different function of memory is implicit, in contrast to explicit mentions made to the idea of memory as a storehouse.[109]

There are several moments in the heroic *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* where memory is directly addressed. In the *Poetic Edda*, after Sigurðr releases Sigrdrífa from her armour in *Sd.*, the compiler states that:

> Hon tóc þá horn, fult miaðar, oc gaf hánom minnisveig. (prose before st. 3)
> (She took a horn, full of mead, and gave him a memory drink.)

The provision of this special beverage draws attention to the importance of the advice that Sigrdrífa will impart. Catharina Raudvere suggests that Sigrdrífa 'gives young Sigurðr the advice (*ráð*) he needs to become a complete hero'.[110] This moment establishes Sigrdrífa in an extended host role; not only providing sustenance, but also counsel.[111] The storehouse concept of memory depicted in the narrator-compiler's prose emphasises the significance of both the advice and the aid that Sigrdrífa offers. The narrator-compiler establishes Sigrdrífa as an educator of male behaviour.

[107] Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[108] Pernille Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Scandinavian Studies* (2009), 287-308.
[109] Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir also addresses the representation of memory in Old Norse literature, specifically in relation to gender; see 'Cultural Memory and Gender in Iceland from Medieval to Early Modern Times', *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (2013)), 378-399.
[110] Catharina Raudvere, 'The Power of the Spoken Word as Literary Motif and Ritual Practice in Old Norse Literature', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), 179-202 (p. 191).
[111] Quinn argues that knowledge is associated with drinking in eddic poetry; see 'Liquid Knowledge'. This inidcates the importance of the role of female hosts.

Yet this direct reference to a memory drink is erased from *Völsunga saga*. Instead Brynhildr says:

> Drekkum bæði saman, ok gefi goðin okkr góðan dag, at þér verði nyt ok frægð at mínum vitrleik ok þú munir eptir, þat er vit ræðum. (p. 35)
> (We will both drink together, and may the gods give us a good day, so that my wisdom can increase your fame and you will remember afterwards what we two plan.)

This reference is more oblique, as it is not clear that it is the drink which is enhancing memory, rather than the gods' assistance. Indeed, Sigurðr does not just ask Brynhildr for wisdom, but is more specific in his request:

> "Kenn oss ráð til stórra hluta." Hún svarar: "Þér munuð betr kunna, en með þökkum vil ek kenna yðr." (p. 35)
> ("Teach me advice about the important things." She answers: "You are better able to do that, but I will teach you with gratitude.")

Unlike Sigrdrífa, Brynhildr is constructed as less knowledgeable than Sigurðr, despite the quotation of fifteen stanzas of advice from *Sd.*, and her thankfulness places her in a subservient position. The expectation of a verbatim recall of a list of advice is not present in *Völsunga saga* to the extent that it is in the *Poetic Edda*, where Sigrdrífa's advice establishes her identity as wise and worthy of an audience. The female role of imparting vital counsel is diminished in *Völsunga saga*.

Although a drink is not explicitly used to enhance recall, there are two scenes in *Völsunga saga* where a beverage is used to induce amnesia. In the first incident, Grímhildr gives Sigurðr a magical drink, which makes him forget Brynhildr, at a feast where he is also welcomed as one of her family (p. 46). The Gjúkungar acceptance of Sigurðr is juxtaposed with Grímhildr's actions. She does not alter Sigurðr's conception of the past through an alternative reconstruction of events (perhaps by criticising Brynhildr or suggesting to him that she would not have taken the oaths seriously) but by a complete elimination of his recollection of her. The direct disruption of Sigurðr's memory confirms the importance of Grímhildr in her control of the representations of events for other characters and adjustment

of her family identity. By creating an asynchronous narrative for Sigurðr, where his relationship with the Gjúkungar occurs both before and after his meeting with Brynhildr, Grímhildr is able to focus his marital attention on her own daughter. This memory drink does not appear in the *Poetic Edda*. It may have been mentioned in the lacuna, but we cannot be certain of this and none of the other poems make any reference to it. Grípir states that Sigurðr will lose his memory through a plot against him. He does not mention the provision of a drink to achieve this, although the word he uses, *svic* (*Grp*. st. 33), can mean poison as well as treachery. In *Völsunga saga*, the memory erasure is represented less as a conspiracy and more as a pragmatic solution to join two noble families together. There is no attention paid to the problematic potential of this ability; the compiler-narrator describes the effect of the drink in a straightforward manner, and it is several years before Sigurðr and Guðrún marry. Indeed, later in the text when Brynhildr blames Grímhildr for instigating of the problems leading to Sigurðr's death, Guðrún is quick to dismiss this accusation (p. 52). There is nothing overtly unsettling about female manipulation of memory.

Grímhildr is involved in the other memory-erasing incident in *Völsunga saga*. Guðrún refuses to trust the Gjúkungar after Sigurðr's death and so:

> Færði Grímhildr henni meinsamligan drykk, ok varð hún við at taka ok mundi síðan engar sakar […] Ok eptir þat, er vili þeira kom saman, gerðist fagnaðr mikill. (pp. 62-3)
> (Grímhildr brought her a harmful drink, and she had to take it and afterwards remembered none of the harm […] And after that, when they came together, there was much joy.)

This memory erasure is also used to create family unity. Removing negative memories re-positions the past, and re-establishes a close connection. The alteration of Guðrún's memory results in great rejoicing. In providing this drink, Grímhildr demonstrates a concern for the happiness of her family and a desire to increase its prominence through a new alliance. In this scene, there is a direct quotation from *Gðr.II* (st. 22-3). Judy Quinn observes that the quotation of verses from the *Poetic Edda* in *Völsunga saga* usually occurs in incidents which

involve oaths.[112] This connection associates verse quotation with issues of veracity, intention and the performative power of words. The quotation asserts the possibilities for the manipulation of identity; just as an oath transforms its maker by altering their present and future self, a memory drink modifies the past, present and future identity of the person who ingests it. Verse quotation in *Völsunga saga* is used most extensively for female figures, marking them as different; their mastery of different textual genres reinforces their jurisdiction over the representation of narrative.

In *Gðr.II,* these events are narrated by Guðrún, who states:

Né ec sacar munðac [...]
þvíat hon sacar deyfði. (sts. 21-3)
(I did not remember the harm [...] with [the drink] she soothed the harm.)

The use of the verb *deyfa* to describe Grímhildr's actions suggests that they are well meant. Grímhildr is depicted as nurturing her family, by creating harmony and establishing beneficial connections to the wider community. In a similar way, Sigrdrífa provides advice to Sigurðr that will protect him from harm. The provision of memory drinks allows women to perform an active, caring role; female control of the past is depicted in a positive manner. The administration of memory drinks can have tragic consequences, but the concept of female manipulation of memory is not rejected wholesale.

These memory drinks demonstrate female characters' supernatural knowledge. Jóhanna has examined the representation of magic in the *Íslendingasögur* and its effect on female identity, arguing that 'magic [is] a tool women use to control their own lives and those of others, to uphold honor, to make financial gain, or to avenge their wrongs'.[113] The use of memory drinks in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* similarly enable female influence. Yet, Jóhanna also contends that 'the use of magic occurs when there are no husbands or male

[112] 'Trust in words: verse quotation and dialogue in *Völsunga saga*', in *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney, Nordiska Texter och Undersökningar 28 (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2004), pp. 89-100.
[113] Jóhanna, 'Women's Weapons: a Re-evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*', *Scandinavian Studies* 80.4 (2009), 409-36 (p. 430-1).

relatives who could act on [female characters'] behalf' (ibid., p. 428). In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, magic is not just a last resort. Grímhildr has a husband and sons but she chooses to take action, indicating the beneficial possibilities of memory alteration. Female characters are valued for their wisdom and their important role in their families and within the narrative.[114] Yet the ways in which the texts of the heroic *Poetic Edda* often work against each other, and the status of *Völsunga saga* as a rewriting, destabilises a storehouse concept of memory in which the past is something that is either present or not present in a person's recollections. Nevertheless, whether memory is conceived as a storehouse or as a narrative, there is a continued sense in which female characters are able to alter perceptions of reality.

2: Foretelling the future

> Nearly everybody in the Eddic poetry seems to prophesy sooner or later, but this supposed knowledge of the future does not affect anyone's actions. It is apparently a mere literary convention, designed to gratify a strange and unhappy taste.[115]

Prophecy can be understood as a counterpart to memory, in that it is a narrative of the future. Indeed, in a rewriting, prophecies become memories in a more direct manner as they depict events that have already occurred in previous versions so are simultaneously part of the narrative past and future. Prophecy is a way of disrupting a sense of temporal continuity. Paul Ricoeur argues that all narrative 'presentifies the past', and Mark Currie suggests that the present is always envisaged as an 'object of future memory', but prophecy draws particular attention to temporal play with its blurring of the boundaries between past, present and

[114] Purveying wisdom is often depicted as a female role in other *fornaldarsögur*. Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir comments on the usefulness of this role, arguing that 'the role of counsellor is gendered as female, but the content of women's counsel is universal; it essentially revolves around adhering to social mores and being prudent, that is to say, showing forethought, caution and sound judgement in all matters'; see 'Wisdom and Women's Counsel' in *Making History: Essays on the fornaldarsögur*, ed. by Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay. (London: Viking Society, 2010), pp. 69-84 (p. 70).
[115] Gildersleeve, 'Brynhild', p. 362.

future.[116] Prophecy also invites an awareness of how concepts of fate and character agency work in a text by illustrating the reaction of characters to diegetic prophecy. It is often surprising to an implied audience when a character does not make changes if they are told about problems that will arise from their behaviour. In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, it is mainly female characters who prophesy. Prophecy can, therefore, function as another method of female control.

2:i Prophecy

The *Poetic Edda* commences with *Völuspá*, a poem where a female figure foresees the future. *HH.*, which opens the heroic section of the Codex Regius, similarly contains a female prophecy in its second stanza:

> Nornir qvómo,
> þær er öðlingi aldr um scópo;
> þann báðo fylki frægstan verða
> oc buðlunga beztan þiccia. (st. 2)
> (The Norns came, they who controlled life for that nobleman; they enabled him to become the most famous king, and be thought to be the best prince.)

In this poem, the Norns are not just able to see into the future, but are able to shape Helgi's life. As well as establishing Helgi's identity as a king, the prophecy also constructs the powerful position of the Norns. Jenny Jochens suggests that:

> The most consistently reported and impressive feature of the ancient female divinity was clearly her power to predict the future. That mortal *völur* continued in human society suggests that belief in such female power was pervasive.[117]

In the *Poetic Edda*, female prophecy is linked to the ability to shape fate and the possession of authority.

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[116] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative (Temps et Récit)* Vol. 3, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 66. Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5. He sees this as twentieth century development (p .6).
[117] Jochens, *Images of Women* p. 82. Indeed, Judy Quinn argues that 'the notion that supernatural female figures influence men's fates' is one of the 'fundamental aspects of the mythology'; see 'The 'Wind of the Giantess': Snorri Sturluson, Rudolf Meissner, and the Interpretation of Mythological Kennings along Taxonomic Lines', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 207-259 (p. 209).

The Norns' decree is part prophecy, and part announcement of their desires. The borderlines between a prophecy and a curse are also permeable. In *Gðr.I*, Guðrún declares:

> Mana þú, gunnarr, gullz um nióta,
> þeir muno þér baugar at bana verða. (st. 21)
> (You will not, Gunnarr, make use of the gold, the arm rings will become your slayers.)

It is not certain whether this is what Guðrún desires should happen, or if it is what she predicts as an outcome for her brother. The difficulty in classifying Guðrún's statement means that it is not clear whether she is in control of events or not. In *Sg.*, it is more explicit that Brynhildr is prophesying, as she is unable to manipulate forthcoming events to accord with her wishes. After the revelation of Guðrún's future mariticide, Brynhildr comments:

> Sœmri væri Guðrún, systir occor,
> frumver sínom fylgia dauðom,
> ef henni gæfi góðra ráð. (st. 61)
> (It would be more fitting if Guðrún, our sister, accompanied her first husband in his death, if good counsel was given to her.[118])

Her speech suggests that fate is not inescapable; Guðrún should be advised to kill herself now to prevent forthcoming turmoil. In both *Sg.* and *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr predicts Gunnarr's desire for Oddrún (st. 58; p. 60). Although Gunnarr's relationship with Oddrún appears in *Odd.* (st. 20-26) and *Dr.*, this is not mentioned in *Völsunga saga*. Brynhildr's extensive prophecy establishes her as someone with important knowledge. Yet, issues with the veracity of her predictions undermine her as a figure of authority. Gildersleeve asserts that 'divine valkyrie though Brynhildr was, we should not, I think, take her prophetic power very seriously'.[119] Although I disagree with her dismissal of this scene, she correctly identifies an ambivalent attitude towards the use of prophecy in the text. Brynhildr's prophecy is close to a literal performance, as she seems conscious of her audience, but it is not performative in Currie's sense where 'a possible future produces the event to which it is said to be added

[118] Most editors correct *occur* (our) to read it as *yccor* (your) which accords with the family relationships in the text; see Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda Volume I: Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 217.
[119] Gildersleeve, 'Brynhild', p. 362.

on'.[120] She cannot make Gunnarr's relationship with Oddrún appear in the text. The Norns are the only female characters who are fully in control of fate.

As the *Poetic Edda* is a compilation of poetry rather than a continuous narrative, it is rare that any prophecies are enacted within the poem that they appear in; as a whole, this anthology does not confirm a female ability to know the future. Some prophecies that Brynhildr makes in *Völsunga saga*, however, are corroborated by the text. In *Sd.*, Sigrdrífa hesitantly suggests that Sigurðr may not live long (st. 37). In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr is more certain about what will befall him, predicting that he will be killed by his wife's kinsmen (p. 40) and that she will not share a household with him (p. 43). Earlier in *Völsunga saga*, Signý's prophecy is also confirmed. She tells her father that:

> Veit ek af framvísi minni ok af kynfylgju várri, at af þessu ráði stendr oss mikill ófagnaðr. (p. 5)
> (I know from my prophetic ability and our family characteristic that this plan will cause us great unhappiness.)

These prophecies establish a close connection between female figures and knowledge of the future. These prophecies, despite their truth, are dismissed by the men they are told to. Nevertheless, events suggest that the women should have been listened to. In any text, prophecy can be a disruptive force as it interferes with a straightforward temporal progression. The ability to disorder a narrative can, therefore, be an active female role.

Despite a close connection between women and prophecy, there are moments in both texts where male characters offer a narrative of the future, such as Grípir in *Grp.*, the poem from the heroic section of the *Poetic Edda* that is focused most clearly on prophecy. In *Völsunga saga*, we are told that Sigurðr is desperate to have his future revealed (p. 28). If the implied-reader is similarly keen, they will be disappointed as *Völsunga saga* removes the content of Grípir's prophecy. This is presumably due to the imperatives of a continuous prose narrative. Yet the absence of the prophecy undermines this as a male role. Similarly, although

[120] Currie, *About Time* p. 42.

Völsunga saga describes Sigurðr as a prophet (p. 41), his ability is not demonstrated in the text, and if Sigurðr is able to foresee his future it is curious that he still visits Grípir. Nevertheless, these instances show that prophecy is not an exclusively female ability.[121] Indeed, prophecies in both *Fm.* and *Völsunga saga* are delivered by animals. Birds make predictions that Reginn will betray Sigurðr, and suggest that he kills Reginn first. As Sigurðr immediately decapitates Reginn, it is unclear whether the birds are correct. Paradoxically, their prophecy can only be proven to be accurate if it is ignored. In *Fm.*, the birds refer to themselves as *systra* (sisters) (st. 35). This reinforces the connection between femininity and prophecy, although the birds are ungendered in *Völsunga saga*. Their prophecies are vaguer than those of other characters, although the birds do have the ability to influence events.

Although prophecy is not exclusively female, a clear connection between women and prophecy exists in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Like the portrayal of memory drinks, the use of prophecy promotes female knowledge. Prophecy, however, is not depicted as beneficial in the texts, as characters do not profit from knowing their future. Furthermore, only the Norns have the ability to construct the future; other prophets can foretell events, but not manipulate them. Yet the continued association of women with this role provides a further connection between female identity and the control of narrative. Prophets always provide a précis of the future, and in doing so, can focus both other characters and the implied audience on particular events, offering an individual representation of the narrative. Even without the ability to alter future events, this guidance of the experience of the future is an important and influential role, which is expressed most clearly in the interpretation of dream prophecies.

[121] Philip Lavender argues that there is a Christianising imperative in other examples of male prophecy in Old Norse literature. He suggests that 'the change from pagan female to male paradigms of wisdom [… make] the pagan religion appear more like the Christian one'; see 'Merlin and the Völva', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 111-139 (p. 119).

2:ii Dreams

Br. contains the first prophetic dream of the heroic *Poetic Edda*.[122] Brynhildr informs Gunnarr about her vision of him being captured by enemies (st. 16). Yet her prophecy of the destruction of the Niflungar is not fulfilled in *Br.*, and the Niflungar are not completely wiped out as Guðrún's death is absent from the *Poetic Edda*.[123] This dream, however, does depict events clearly. This is not the case for most of the dream visions in the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga* where events frequently transpire in animal or plant metaphors. The difficulty of interpretation of these kinds of dreams is illustrated in *Gðr.II* and *Völsunga saga* where Atli asks Guðrún to explain his nightmare of her stabbing him with a sword (st. 38, p. 64). Guðrún suggests that:

> Þat er fyr eldi, er iárn dreyma,
> fyr dul oc vil drósar reiði. (st. 39)
> (Fire will follow, when iron is dreamt of, and pride and wilfulness will follow a woman's anger.)

It is likely that Guðrún is denying a literal interpretation of the dream as she does not want to raise Atli's suspicions. The solution that she offers is proven true in other texts of the *Poetic Edda*, as there is a fire in *Akv.*, and Atli could be said to exhibit an excess of pride in *Akv.* and *Am.*. Yet this example shows that the need to interpret dreams leaves them subject to manipulation. Nevertheless, this scene establishes dream analysis as a female role.[124]

Atli also describes his dreams of plants and animals (*Gðr.II* st. 40-2, *Völsunga saga* p. 64). These include reeds, which he does not want damaged, being uprooted and offered to him as food, and hawks' hearts, which he eats. It is easy to interpret the dream as an accurate

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[122] Dreams in Old Norse literature more generally have been explored by several critics; see G. Turville-Petre, 'Dreams in Icelandic Tradition', *Folklore* 69:2 (1958), 93-111; Richard Perkins, 'The Dreams of *Flóamanna saga*', *Sagabook* 19 (1974-77), 191–238; Jamie Cochrane, 'Word-Play on *Björg* in Dreams and Elsewhere', *Sagabook* 28 (2004), 95-104.

[123] It is possible that Guðrún's survival is considered irrelevant, and Brynhildr is only foretelling the destruction of the male members of the family.

[124] This is not always the case elsewhere in Old Norse literature. In *Laxdœla saga*, for example, Gestr, a male character, interprets Guðrún's dreams; see *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit V (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), pp. 1-248.

representation of events through familiarity with the narrative. Yet without the actual knowledge or memory of events, the prophecy could have multiple meanings. Although all Atli's dreams in *Gðr.II* are metaphoric, his final dream in *Völsunga saga* is completely literal:

> "Þat dreymdi mig enn," segir hann, "at ek lægja í kör ok væri ráðinn bani minn." (p.65)
> ("I also dreamed", he [Atli] says, "that I lay in bed and plans were made for my death.")

The absence of symbolism suggests the desire for a single interpretation of events, but this is still a partial representation of the future. His dream does not provide the details of the plot to kill him and also leaves out Atli's own scheme against the Gjúkungar. Georgia Kelchner asserts that similar dreams have clear meanings and 'require no interpretation'.[125] Yet, even literal dreams can still provide multiple explanations of events. Similarly, in another scene, Guðrún seeks advice from Brynhildr to decipher her visions of a desirable stag (p. 46). Massimiliano Bampi has written about the meaning of Sigurðr being represented as a deer.[126] Yet, in *Völsunga saga*, a literal explanation of the dream, which identifies the deer as Sigurðr, is not consistent with later events; for example, there is no contest to win Sigurðr, as the dream implies.

In both *Am.* and *Völsunga saga*, dreams warn several characters that the Gjúkungar's visit to Atli will end in disaster. This time, men provide different explanations of the meanings of the visions. Kostbera's dreams are not prophetic in a detailed way, but rather act as a general warning. Her husband, Högni, dismisses her dreams by offering alternative, mundane interpretations of her horrific visions; a fire simply signifies the disposal of old

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[125] Georgia Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 62. Adriënne Heijnen discusses Kostbera's dream vision of an eagle (*Am.* st. 19), interpreted as Atli's spirit, and similarly argues that 'one the behaviour of a *fylgja* is observed, either in dreams or visions, there is no way of escaping events'; see *The Social Life of Dreams* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2013), p. 91. She does not, however, acknowledge the vague presentation of these 'events' making their realisation uncertain.

[126] Massimiliano Bampi, '"Gofuct dýr ec heiti": Deer Symbolism in Sigurðr Fafnirsbani?' in *Á austrvega: Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint papers of the 14th International Saga Conference, Uppsala 9th-15th August 2009*, ed. by Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (Gävle: University of Gävle Press, 2009).

linen, and a blood-covered eagle merely represents a slaughter of oxen for food (*Am.* st. 16, 19; *Völsunga saga* p. 67). Gunnarr also attempts to reject the warnings from the dreams of his wife, Glaumvor (*Am.* st. 21). The conversation ends with his declaration that: 'seinat er at segia' (it is too late to talk) (st. 29). This suggests he is not convinced that Glaumvor is wrong, but he just does not want to listen to her. In *Völsunga saga*, he admits defeat more openly. He states that: 'vant gerist nú at ráða' (it now becomes hard to give an interpretation) (p. 67). He can no longer counter his wife's prophecy but still refuses to take heed of her warnings. Yet, as when Völsungr ignores his daughter's pleas to end her marriage to Siggeirr, it is not so much that Gunnarr does not believe the prophecy that has been made by his wife, but rather that he feels that it would be cowardly for him to act on it.[127] Women are a source of knowledge of the future, but this wisdom is ultimately useless due to the stubbornness and courage of the men they advise.[128]

An exploration of memory and prophecy in the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* indicates that there are definite roles for women. The dispensation of magic drinks is an extension of the female host role. The storehouse concept of memory positions women as guardians of knowledge who can have authority over their families and the wider society. In the *Poetic Edda*, despite *Grp.* focusing on a male prophet, there is a close connection between women and prophecy. Dream sequences in particular offer women such as Guðrún the opportunity to offer their own versions of the future. Furthermore, dream interpretation can also act as a method of female bonding; this reinforces the idea of prophecy

[127] Karen Bek-Pedersen argues that 'when Gunnarr and Högni choose to visit Atli in spite of all the warning signs and face almost certain death in doing so, this does not mean that they are, hypothetically, unable to make another choice; it means that they, being the characters that they are, make *this* choice. What defines them is not resignation but active response to the challenge' [original emphasis]; see 'Fate and Weaving: Justification of a Metaphor', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009), 23-39 (p. 31).
Ironically, Gareth Williams argues that, for Viking forces, 'an important part of their campaign strategy often seems to have been to avoid battle unless they felt confident of victory'; see 'Raiding and warfare' in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink, pp. 193 – 203 (p. 196).
[128] Clark argues that 'in view of the fact that the brothers also ignore quite clear warnings from their wives in the form of ominous dreams, their reinterpretation of which is highly implausible, one has to wonder whether the poet is not characterizing the undoubtedly heroic brothers as also being obstinately short-sighted [… but] the final emphasis is on the brothers' heroic acceptance of their fate'; see *Gender*, pp. 31-2.

as a female experience. Rory McTurk argues that: ‘the extensive use in the family sagas of analepsis and prolepsis, which function as binding devices, remind[s] the audience of what has already happened in the story and giv[es] an idea of what is to follow’.[129] Yet in both *Völsunga saga* and the *Poetic Edda*, prophecies are fallible. The uncertain nature of prophecy in the *Poetic Edda* is understandable, as in a series of short poems it is less likely that a prophecy will be validated in the same text. Yet the incorrect prophecies in *Völsunga saga* could be avoided. The emphasis on the ways in which the past, present and future can only be accessed through representation strengthens the role of female characters who are associated with creating narratives. Both female identity, and the particular iteration of a Völsung narrative, is constructed by the roles that women play in the texts, as prophets, hosts or the controllers of memory.

3: Community and dialogue

> In dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is.[130]

A conception of memory as a fixed storehouse which preserves events for later recall is undermined by the *Poetic Edda*’s anthology format. Many of the poems of the *Poetic Edda* narrate the same events in different ways.[131] When read together, a dialogue arises between the poems which display diverse attitudes to identity. Mikhail Bakhtin observed a similar phenomenon in Dostoevsky’s novels which he describes as ‘a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices’ (p. 6). Critics have observed a similar style in many other texts, including Old Norse literature.[132] It is inevitable that a compilation such as the *Poetic Edda* will be dialogic;

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[129] Rory McTurk, ‘Snorra Edda as Menippean Satire’ in *Myth, Legends, and Heroes*, pp. 109-130 (p. 125).

[130] M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 252.

[131] Judith Jesch explores the differences between *HH* and *HH.II*; see *Women*, pp. 169-75. E. M. Meletinsky describes the problematic nature of the differences between the poems; see *The Elder Edda and Early Forms of the Epic* (Trieste: Parnaso, 1998), p. 173.

[132] See, for example, Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings: Saints’ Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings’ Sagas* (Tempe, Arizona: ACMRS, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007).

the manuscript collects works from varied sources and it would be more surprising if there were a universal objective.[133] But the texts also form a dialogue within themselves, not least through their extensive use of direct speech. Bakhtin argues that ‘only in communion, in the interaction of one man with another’ (p. 252) can characters’ identities be revealed. This notion of dialogue goes beyond a simple observation that a large amount of conversation adds a theatrical atmosphere to a text.[134] Dialogue is performative in itself and its formation of character belies a conception of identity as fixed.

Dialogue is used as a narrative technique throughout the *Poetic Edda*. In *Gðr.I*, a conflict between different points of view is not obvious as the emphasis is on a shared female community, like that of *Od.*.[135] The shared emotion of grief constructs female identity in this text as collective. As Peter De Bolla argues:

> Sharing [an emotion such as] joy, say, in which the operative sense of sharing is to prohibit sole ownership, […] requires a concept of subjectivity that is grounded in the collective or the communal […]: a commonly held object made by the participation of two or many ‘persons’.[136]

The requirement for Guðrún to be united with other women in their sorrow before she can verbally express her own anguish supports this concept of the subject constructed by emotion. The scene in *Gðr.I* of the women discussing the tragic events of their lives invokes a subjectivity based on a common experience.

Yet the dialogue also demonstrates that each loss is experienced in an individual manner. Giaflaug numerates her bereavements which total ‘þriggia dœtra, þriggia systra,/ átta brœðra’ (three daughters, three sisters [and] eight brothers) (st. 4). Her grief depends on the

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[133] Indeed, Clunies Ross observes the dialogic nature of all Old Norse poetry as she argues that it was ‘a kind of powerfully concentrated and directed speech act’; see *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 76.
[134] Gunnell, for example, merely analyses whether dialogue indicates a dramatic origin for the *Poetic Edda*; see *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 234-81.
[135] The poem initially mentions that the audience is comprised of both men and women, but it is only women who speak in the poem, so a shared community of female experience is still established.
Clark argues that *Hm.* demonstrates the importance of community, but he does not address the depictions of female community in the *Poetic Edda*; see *Gender* ,p. 87-8.
[136] Peter De Bolla, ‘Afterword’, *Textual Practice* 22.1 (2008), available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502360701842165.

sheer number of deaths, and is calculable. In contrast, Herborgr goes beyond an arithmetical summary as she describes her time in captivity after her husband's demise (st. 10). Solitude is emphasised in Herborgr's account. Even when she joins a new society, it is not of her choosing and so she still feels isolated. Once Guðrún is able to share her grief with the other women, she offers yet another explanation of a similar experience: 'em ec svá lítil, sem lauf sé' (I am as little as a leaf) (st. 19).[137] Guðrún mourns for the high status that accompanied her relationship with Sigurðr.[138] The dialogue between the women reveals different conceptions of bereavement, and demonstrates the diverse identities that the women can express.

Gðr.I does not just clarify identity through alternative attitudes to grief. Towards the end of the text, Gullrönd argues with Brynhildr about the cause of Sigurðr's death and the ensuing conflict, and insists that she has created 'sorg […] siau konunga/ oc vinspell vífa mest' (sorrow for seven kings and spoiled friendships for many women) (st. 24). Yet Brynhildr asserts that 'veldr einn Atli öllo bölvi' (Atli alone caused all the misfortune) (st. 25). The different versions of the same event also fashion the characters of Gullrönd and Brynhildr; Gullrönd as the defender of Guðrún, and Brynhildr as powerless to prevent the machinations of her brother. Indeed, Brynhildr presents herself as a victim more clearly when she declares that 'þess hefi ec gangs goldit síðan' (for this course of action I have suffered since) (st. 26). Although the women see her merely as a disruptive outsider, Brynhildr portrays herself as a grieving woman just like them. In *Gðr.I*, dialogue is used to construct and contest female identities.

HB. is a dialogue between Brynhildr and a female giant who criticises her behaviour, stating:

[137] Clark has explored the use of this phrase in the context of other tree imagery in the poem, and its relation to the destruction of kinship bonds; see 'Kin-Slaying', pp. 25-9.
[138] Identity is also formed differently in other poems; for example, in *Hm.* Guðrún emphasises her solitude [st. 5] and in *Ghv.* she focuses on the loss of her close bond with her husband [st. 20].

Betr semði þér borða at rekia
heldr enn vitia vers annarrar. (st. 1)
(It would befit you better to embroider than to visit another's husband.)

This speech creates a particular portrayal of Brynhildr: as someone who has behaved inappropriately and should be taking a more domestic role. Through her criticism of Brynhildr, the giantess also establishes her own character as a person who is judgemental and values fidelity. Yet despite her conservative approach to femininity, the female giant presents the production of identity as a choice, undermining the idea of a natural and unbreakable association between women and a particular expression of sexual difference. Brynhildr's response acknowledges her different characteristics:

Gaf ec ungom sigr Auðo bróður;
þá varð mér Óðinn ofreiðr um þat.
Lauc hann mic sciöldom. (st. 8-9)
(I gave victory to Auðr's young brother; then Óðinn became angry with me for that. He enclosed me with shields.)

The identity that Brynhildr creates for herself is contradictory, as she positions herself as both heroic warrior and a victim subject to the desires of Óðinn.[139] She views her own character as fractured and working against itself.

In *Völsunga saga*, many of these examples of how female identity can be constructed through dialogue are removed from the text. Brynhildr does not argue with a giantess, and Guðrún is not encouraged to weep by other women.[140] Yet *Völsunga saga* does present a dialogue between Brynhildr and Guðrún, as they argue whilst washing in the Rhine (p. 50). In this conversation, the women contest identities solely through their male kin.[141] Brynhildr suggests that she is more important than Guðrún because she has a more impressive father,

[139] A valkyrie's identity is inherently contradictory as she is associated with both war and sexuality. Brynhildr's inconsistent character is emphasised in *Br.* where she alternates between crying and laughing when thinking about Sigurðr's murder [st. 15]. Karen Swenson observes how Brynhildr represents the two traditions of valkyries but does not acknowledge how these identities are constructed rather than just reflected by the text; see *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*, Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture 3 (Columbia: Camden House, 1991), p. 71.
[140] Morris adds in the details of Guðrún's grief to his translation of *Völsunga saga*.
[141] Bjørn Bandlien argues that women construct social ideals of heroism as 'their love is always directed to the best man'; see *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Old Norse Society,* trans. by Betsy van der Hoek (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), p. 39.

and her husband has exhibited great courage and ability. Guðrún does not reject the suggestions that the men they are linked to should define their statuses; instead, she denies Brynhildr's appraisal of her husband. Here, female identity is created through dialogue, but only in relation to male status.

Dialogue in the *Poetic Edda* can be performative in two senses: in its ability to compel a person reading the text aloud to act out the speech of the various characters, rather than just reciting it, and in its construction of identities. The diverse representations of female identity indicate its changeable nature; it is produced through the actions and words of a person as they define themselves against an interlocutor. Female identity is not contested through a female community in this manner in *Völsunga saga*; instead, identity for female figures is established by their male relations.

4. Whetting and lamenting

Dialogue is not the only way in which identity and gender can be established. As explored by Clark, amongst other critics, there is a close connection between femininity and the desire for vengeance.[142] This demand for retribution is demonstrated in the violent behaviour of female characters, in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, and also in their encouragement of male brutality. Whetting in Old Norse literature has been extensively studied, with critics such as Jochens and Judith Jesch seeing female whetters as scapegoats for male violence, although Clark has disagreed with this simplification.[143] Whereas female violence could be considered as masculine behaviour if Clover's binaries of Old Norse gender are accepted, there is something particularly feminine about goading.[144] Just as associations with memory, prophecy and dialogue allowed female characters to be depicted as regulating narratives, whetting is a way of indirectly manipulating events. In a similar way, lamenting can also

[142] Clark, *Gender*, pp. 35-9.
[143] Jesch, *Women*, pp. 182-91; Jochens, *Images of Women*, pp. 209-11; Clark, *Gender*, pp. 42-4.
[144] Clover, 'Regardless', p. 380.

construct a particular version of events; just like goading, it can establish the original deed as something that is wrong, and that needs to be avenged. Much of the extended examples of female speech in the *Poetic Edda* in particular can be categorised as either lament or whetting; this is clearly established as an important female role.

4.i: Sigrún

Sigrún has the first female speaking role of the heroic *Poetic Edda*. From the outset, she is associated with battle, and her first words incite Helgi to wage war against her intended spouse:

> Þá komr fylkir fára nátta,
> nema þú hánom vísir valstefno til
> eða mey nemir frá mildingi. (*HH.I* st. 19)
> (The hero will come in a few nights, unless you challenge him to battle or take the maiden from the warrior.)

The earlier depiction of Sigrún, as covered in blood and with active weaponry (st. 15), suggests that she would be more than capable of taking matters into her own hands and defeating her fiancé, especially if he really is 'sem kattar son' (like a kitten) (st. 18). It appears that she is asking for Helgi's help not as a valkyrie-in-distress figure but in order to test his own martial prowess. This representation of whetting involves the examination of a man's courage to ensure that he will make a suitable partner. Yet, another explanation of her behaviour is that, although she is physically capable of participating in a battle, in this text this is not a thinkable identity for her when she is interested in obtaining a husband; perhaps marriage relations compromise a martial identity for a woman in *HH.I*, whilst increasing the importance of a heroic identity for a man. Either way, this is a portrayal of whetting behaviour that does not lead to violence that is portrayed as destructive or excessive.

In its alternative version of this opening narrative, *HH.II* describes quite a different motivation for Sigrún:

> Þar hitti Sigrún hann oc rann á háls hánom oc kyssti hann oc sagði hánom erindi sitt.
> […]
> Fyrr léz hon unna af öllum hug
> syni Sigmundar, en hon sét hafði. (*HH.II* prose and st. 15)
> (There Sigrún found him [Helgi], and ran to throw her arms about his neck, and kissed him, and told him her errand. […] She said she had loved Sigmund's son with all her heart before she met him.)

Here, Sigrún wants to be rescued from an arranged marriage by the man she actually desires. In *HH.I*, we have a strong, martial woman, clearly marked by active participation in battle. In *HH.II*, although Sigrún is described as a valkyrie, this identity is not clearly performed. She is subject to the decisions of men and her only recourse is to male assistance. *HH.II* also concentrates on Sigrún's emotions, which are not described at this point in *HH.I*. In *HH.II*, Sigrún appears to be acting out of her love for Helgi, rather than a desire to obtain the most successful husband. Nevertheless, her instant declaration of amorous feelings towards Helgi could also be a method of manipulating him into doing her bidding. If, in this poem, Sigrún cannot be imagined in a position of direct involvement in violence, then it is imperative that she is as persuasive as she can be. In *Völsunga saga*, neither Sigrún's martial appearance nor her intense feelings for Helgi are mentioned.

These varied Sigrún figures encapsulate some of the extremes of the different versions of femininity available in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, even within the same part of the narrative. There are strong women who are able to take action into their own hands and compete on similar terms to men, but there are also women whose only power lies in persuading men to do their bidding. These female figures lie on either side of the binary described by Clover, as powerful and powerless.[145] Yet both types of women are linked to the incitement of violence in the text.

[145] Clover, 'Regardless', p. 380.

4.ii: Whetting

In the *Poetic Edda*, the initial depiction of Brynhildr is of her goading violence. In these poems, Brynhildr is differentiated from Sigrdrífa, the valkyrie who is awoken from sleep by Sigurðr. The narrative from *Völsunga saga* where we are told about Brynhildr's second meeting with Sigurðr (what would be her initial meeting in the *Poetic Edda*) is absent from the Codex Regius manuscript. In the existing text of the *Poetic Edda* Brynhildr is first mentioned in *Br.*:

> Þic hefir Brynhildr böl at gerva
> heiptar hvattan, harm at vinna;
> fyrman hon Guðrúno góðra ráða,
> enn síðan þér sín at nióta. (st. 3)
> (Brynhildr has whetted hatred against you, stirring up evil and urging them to harm; she grudges the honour Guðrún has and that she has the pleasure of you.)

Brynhildr is depicted as a trouble-maker. Moreover, the motivation for Brynhildr's whetting seems weak, and unlikely to engender sympathy in the text's audience: she is merely jealous of Guðrún's high-status husband. Yet, in this poem, we only have Högni's accusation of Brynhildr's responsibility for inciting this murder. Indeed, her reaction to the killing in *Br.* is one of disapprobation of the deed. In *Sg.*, however, Brynhildr clearly threatens Gunnarr to persuade him to kill Sigurðr:

> Af þeim heiptom hvetiaz at vígi. (st. 10)
> (In her spite began to turn [Gunnarr's] mind to murder.)

The poem depicts her initially as a jealous woman, who covets her brother-in-law, and a justification of her actions is not provided until after the murder. Delayed like this, her defence ultimately seems inadequate to disrupt the original image of Brynhildr as envious and vindictive. The initial impression of her as violent, vengeful and manipulative is countered to some extent in the *Poetic Edda* through illustrations of her intellect (in her defeat of the female giant in *HB.*), her grief and her inability to control her own life. Yet her vindication is incomplete; ultimately, she seems to be depicted in a negative manner in the

texts. The involvement of a woman with indirect violence is understandable, but not fully justifiable.[146]

In *Völsunga saga*, we first encounter Brynhildr in armour, although the unnaturalness of a woman dressed in such attire is suggested by Sigurðr mistaking her for a man (p. 35). She describes her martial abilities, but then reveals that her actions have led to a punishment from Óðinn. Of course, Óðinn is angry with her because she supported the opposite side to him, but this also adds to a sense of the inappropriateness of female participation in battle. Indeed, when we meet Brynhildr next, she is praised for being accomplished in domestic arts rather than battle (p. 42). Her inability to use violence for her own means is clearly illustrated by her reproach to Gunnarr, after she has been informed of the shape-shifting trick:

> "Ek munda þeim verða at giftast, sem hann vildi. […] Þá hugsaða ek með mér, hvárt ek skylda hlýða hans vilja eða drepa margan mann. Ek þóttumst vanfær til at þreyta við hann […] fúsari værim vér at drepa yðr [Gunnarr]." Síðan vildi hún drepa Gunnarr konung, en Högni setti hana í fjötra. (p. 53)
> ("I must be given [in marriage] to the one, as he wished […] Then I thought to myself about whether I should obey his wishes or kill many men. It seemed to me that I was incapable of contending against him […] I would be more willing to kill you [Gunnarr]." Then she would have killed King Gunnarr, but Högni set her in chains.)

Brynhildr clearly wants to take matters into her own hands, but is repeatedly unable to.

In this desire, Brynhildr is different from Sigrún. She does not easily relinquish her role as valkyrie or warrior for marriage, and she is prepared to fight her own battles (indeed she also threatens Sigurðr in their later encounter [p. 55]), although ultimately she is unable to. The differences between the two characters could be explained by Sigrún being able to choose her desired husband, whereas Brynhildr is tricked out of marrying the man she actually loves. But her situation is more complex than this; Óðinn's punishment demonstrates that, for her, direct involvement in violence is repeatedly problematic. Brynhildr's whetting is

[146] Sigurður Nordal argues that Brynhildr's actions construct her as a hero. He states: 'another characteristic of a hero was the ability to make decisions in difficult situations and to take appropriate action. One of the most severe trials to which people were put by fate was having to choose between two evil alternatives. Such choices constitute the most dramatic themes of the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*. […] Brynhildr's course of action, though savage, was heroic'; see *Icelandic Culture* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 134.

a last resort, rather than a useful strategy. As Bek-Pederson argues, there is a 'sense that this is the only appropriate way out of the predicament [she] finds [herself] in'.[147] Jochens observes that Brynhildr does not inhabit the more active role of the avenger like Guðrún or Signý; for Brynhildr, inciting 'becomes her defining trait'.[148] In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr's actions are shown to have disastrous consequences, but in *Völsunga saga* the effect of explaining her motivations (perhaps necessary in a continuous narrative) is that she appears less monstrous. Indeed, later in the text, when Guðrún is mourning the loss of Sigurðr, she places the blame entirely in her brothers' hands, describing them as jealous of her husband (p. 61). She does not mention Brynhildr's involvement at all. In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr's whetting behavior seems reasoned, and the desperation leading to her desire for violence is clearly illustrated.

The title of *Ghv.* (although not part of the manuscript) refers directly to the character's whetting behaviour. Yet only four stanzas demonstrate her urging of her sons to revenge the death of her sister. Even if Hamðir's response is included, the whetting exchange only extends to eight stanzas – just over a third of the poem's twenty-two total verses. In fact, Guðrún spends more of the poem recounting her grief than she does encouraging violence.[149] The narrator links this grief closely to her whetting, calling it 'trauð mál, talið af trega stórom' (reluctant words, spoken from great grief) (st. 1). Indeed, the prose introduction to the poem emphasises her previous despair, as it recounts her failed attempt at suicide and her further distress at her daughter's death. Clark suggests that 'there is a transference of ideas between the kindling of *sorg* (in st. 1) and Guðrún inciting her sons, with the result of

[147] Bek-Pederson, 'Fate and Weaving', p. 31.
[148] Jochens, *Images of Women*, p. 162; p. 171.
[149] Clover argues that there is significant overlap between the genres of a *hvöt* and that of a lament. She states that 'the very fact that the same set of verses that in *Hamðismál* was harnessed to a lament could here be reharnessed to a *hvöt* suggests an easy transfer between the two themes'; see 'Hildigunnr's Lament' in *Cold Counsel: The Women of Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. by K. Swenson and S. M. Anderson (New York; London: Garland, 1999), pp. 15–54 (p. 26).

sorg.'[150] This prose section also contrasts the active Guðrún of *Akv.* and *Am.* with the Guðrún of *Ghv.* who is unable even to take her own life.[151] Guðrún's anger at her sons stems from her perception of their lack of concern for their sister's murder. She does not want to be alone in her sorrow. Guðrún in *Ghv.* and *Hm.* (and the corresponding parts of *Völsunga saga*) becomes a passive figure who can only lament and urge others to act.[152] Yet her influence over her sons means that whetting does allow her some ability to bring about revenge. Even more so than in the representation of Brynhildr's whetting in *Völsunga saga*, goading others to perform violence appears a rational act; one that can be instigated by either anger or sorrow.

Although the *Poetic Edda* and in *Völsunga saga* offer varied versions of Guðrún and Brynhildr, whetting is often presented as either the only option available to the female figures within the texts, or the only acceptable option. Indeed, Clover argues that whetting was an acceptable and necessary role, and just as men had an obligation to avenge attacks against their kin, 'it was no less the duty of women to remember and remind'.[153] This connects whetting to the female control of memory and prophecy; all these abilities depict women as controlling the narrative. A valkyrie identity can enable female characters, such as Sigrún or Brynhildr, to be directly involved in violence. Nevertheless, the valkyries in the text do not have complete freedom of action, and this is an identity that seems to have to be relinquished once a character forms a relationship with the opposite sex. Goading behaviour is therefore often presented as a solution to a female character's inability to influence events in other ways, and as the result of grief or desperation, although it is frequently also constructed as a negative behaviour. Yet, there may not be a qualitative difference between a woman whetting

[150] Clark, *Gender*, p. 23.
[151] Clark suggests that the end of the poem shows Guðrún preparing to commit suicide; see *Gender*, p. 70. Yet it is not clear who the funeral pyre is for.
[152] Clark comments that she is here 'a victim or pawn of heroic society'; see *Gender*, p. 26.
[153] Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', p. 17. Similarly, Jochens argues that whetting is often shown to have 'better results than single acts of aggression for personal revenge'; see *Images of Women*, p. 133.

and a male figure like Atli directing violence but not involving himself in the battles he instigates.

4.iii: Lament

> The horror becomes tragic only through its grief.[154]

> Wild is the wailing of women.[155]

Clover asserts that 'whetting and lamenting are two sides of the same coin'.[156] Certainly both are associated with female characters in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. The representation of grief in the *Poetic Edda* especially offers a strong counter to William Miller's suggestion that medieval emotion is often abjected; grief is presented in an affecting, complex and varied manner. [157] Miller also discusses the ways in which emotions are produced by culture, and can be gendered (p. 95). This seems to be particularly applicable to the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, as grief is depicted as a feminine emotion. Bjørn Bandlien argues that the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* 'are far more taken up with women's emotions than those of men. Miller also argues that:

> Emotional terms might be terms of art whose primary referent is not the emotions, but which serve instead as surrogates or shorthand for describing ritualized behaviour or making normative claims. (p. 97)

It is possible that the expression of grief in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* becomes ritualised to some extent; this is most obviously portrayed in the scene where Guðrún is unable to publicly grieve which was discussed in the section on community earlier in this chapter (p. 54). Phelan explores the construction of identity through a concept that he calls 'lyricality', which is most obviously present in dramatic monologue. He suggests that:

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[154] Dronke, 'The Lay of Attila', *Sagabook* 16 (1962-5), 1–21 (p. 11).
[155] *Sigurd the Volsung*, p. 232.
[156] Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', p. 27.
[157] William Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas' in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 89-109 (p. 89).

> The dynamics of audience response stem from adopting the speaker's perspective without judging it. Thus, the double movement of lyric is toward fuller revelation of the speaker's situation and participation in what is revealed.[158]

In the *Poetic Edda*, dramatic monologues are used exclusively for female characters. The use of this form provides identification with the identities and perspectives of the women in the texts, particularly in regards to lament, thereby creating an influence upon the implied reader.

The idea of a clear connection between grief and a female desire for vengeance is first demonstrated in *HHv*. On hearing of the death of her husband, Helgi, Sváva declares:

> Mér er harðliga harma leitat;
> ef hann sær um léc eða sverð um beit,
> þeim scal ec gumna grand um vinna. (st. 38)
> (An awful harm has now come to me; if the sea washed over him or a sword bit him, then I shall perform injuries on the men concerned with this.)

The emotion of grief is not dwelt on, and immediately transforms into the desire to avenge his murder. Indeed, grief is something to be avoided in this poem. Heðinn (Helgi's brother, and also his murderer) instructs Sváva to keep her feelings of distress in check:

> Bið ec þic, Sváva - brúðr, grátattu! (st. 41)
> (I ask you this, Sváva – bride, do not weep!)

Obviously, it is in Heðinn's own interest to instruct Sváva to dry her tears and become his wife; Clark observes that he 'prioritizes his own homosocial bond with his brother over his love for Sváva'.[159] But sorrow is presented here as unconstructive.

Yet in *HH.II*, grief appears central to the character of Sigrún. Her distress is not short-lived, and the prose following the poem informs the reader that she dies of sorrow and grief. Her weeping is mentioned throughout the poem (sts. 28, 30, 38) and is dwelt upon when Helgi reappears as a ghost. He tells his wife that he is covered with her tears (st. 46). In her translation, Larrington suggests that the reference to *dýrar veigar* means that Sigrún has taken some mead or similar beverage into the mound for the husband and wife to share.[160] But the

[158] Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction*, p. 23.
[159] Clark, *Gender*, p. 61.
[160] Larrington, *The Poetic Edda: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996), p. 281.

‘precious liquid’ that they share could also be Sigrún’s tears. In *Völsunga saga*, these scenes do not appear. Instead, the first incident of female sorrow is when Signý weeps because her father will not listen to her warnings about her new husband, Siggeirr (p. 7). Signý also learns the lesson that grief is not a useful emotion; her tears do not prevent the treachery of her husband or the death of most of her family. When her brothers and father are killed, she does not grieve but instead takes action to save Sigmundr, to assist him in taking revenge against Siggeirr.

Völsunga saga and the *Poetic Edda* include diverse representations of female grief, especially in the case of Guðrún. Some of the differences between the Guðrún figures of the *Poetic Edda* and of *Völsunga saga* can be elucidated through an examination of a key scene: Guðrún’s discovery of, and reaction to, the death of her husband, Sigurðr, who has been killed by her brothers on the urging of her sister-in-law, Brynhildr. In the *Poetic Edda*, the first time Guðrún is mentioned is in *Br.* in the context of her marriage to Sigurðr and his death. In this poem, Guðrún’s part is very small, consisting of two verses. Her character is therefore constructed around the only aspects that are revealed: her isolation from the other characters (we are told that she stood outside [st. 6], as well as being distanced from all the other characters by her lack of knowledge of her husband’s death), and her immediate desire for revenge. Her grief is implied rather than demonstrated.

Sg., which uses much of the same story as *Br.*, creates a distinct version of Guðrún. We are given more background about her relationship with Sigurðr, who caresses her in bed. Sigurðr’s death is also portrayed in a new way:

> Sofnuð var Guðrún í sæingo,
> sorga laus, hiá Sigurði;
> enn hon vacnaði vilia firð,
> er hon Freys vinar flaut í dreyra.
> Svá sló hon svára sínar hendr,
> at rammhugaðr reis up við beð:
> “grátaðu, Guðrún, svá grimmliga”. (st. 24-5)

> (Guðrún was fallen asleep in bed, without sorrow, next to Sigurðr; but she woke up bereft of joy when she floated in the blood of Freyr's friend. She struck her hands so heavily that the strong-minded one rose up in the bed: "Do not weep, Guðrún, so fiercely".)[161]

Instead of depicting her thoughts of revenge, this poem demonstrates Guðrún's intense grief at the loss of her husband. She is also closely linked to embodiment; her sorrow is illustrated physically, rather than verbally, and Sigurðr's death is portrayed in gruesome physical detail. In this poem, Guðrún is a character who suffers a distressing loss when her husband is murdered in the bed they have previously lovingly shared.

Phelan has categorised the different judgements made by the text's audience, which include:

> Interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative [and] ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions […] individual narratives explicitly or more often implicitly establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments.[162]

The two poems establish different standards for the implied reader to judge Guðrún. In *Br.*, Guðrún reacts to the betrayal of her brothers, and so her desire for revenge seems logical. In *Sg.*, a close relationship has been established between Guðrún and Sigurðr, and so a desire for vengeance alone would be unexpected. The depiction of her intense grief creates sympathy for Guðrún, and encourages a deep identification between the implied audience and the character. It is also more likely to conform to audience expectations of a reaction to the loss of a partner.

Indeed, Guðrún's sorrow is focused on by the other poems which describe the aftermath of Sigurðr's death. *Gðr.I* describes how Guðrún is unable to lament. This poem, like *Br.* and *Sg.*, has a third person, external narrator, but it makes more frequent use of psychonarration where her consciousness is revealed by the compiler-narrator, increasing a

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[161] Sigurðr's instruction echoes that of Heðinn to Sváva.
[162] Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction*, pp. 9-10.

sense of identification with her.[163] We are told that she is sorrowful and 'svá var hon móðug, mundi hon springa' (so impassioned that she might have burst asunder) (*Gðr.I* st. 2), despite her initial inability to weep. As in *Br.,* Guðrún also explicitly desires revenge. The placing of her intense grief in the context of the stories of the other women associates this kind of suffering with femininity; it becomes a rite of passage which connects the women. Yet Guðrún's anger, and desire for revenge, sets her apart from the other women who have lost members of their family.

In *Gðr.II*, the whole poem is narrated by Guðrún. Once Sigurðr's death has been described by Högni, she immediately wishes him to suffer as well. Guðrún then describes her inability to lament, and her retreat into the forest:

> Nótt þótti mér niðmyrcr vera,
> er ec sárla satc yfir Sigurði;
> úlfar þóttomz öllo betri,
> ef þeir léti mic lífi týna
> eða brendi mic sem birkinn við. (st. 12)
> (The night seemed to me to be completely black, when I sat in pain over Sigurðr; it seemed to me best of all if I let my life be lost to wolves or I was burned up like birchwood.)

Like Guðrún's speech in *Gðr.I*, the language used here is simple and affecting, and demonstrates the extent of her grief. Her desire for revenge against her brothers is depicted in *Gðr.II* as something uttered in desperation and sorrow, rather than something deliberately malicious. A juxtaposition of her happy childhood relationship with her siblings increases the sense of betrayal, and her desire for death alludes to the hopelessness of her situation. Despite the temporal dissonance between Guðrún as narrator, and Guðrún as the character experiencing the death of her husband, her emotions are depicted in a vivid and arresting manner, creating the impression that her distress has not lessened over time.

The *Poetic Edda* offers alternative versions of Guðrún's character in the aftermath of Sigurðr's death, which encourage different audience judgements. Guðrún is depicted as

[163] Cohn explores psychonarration in *Transparent Minds*, pp. 20-30.

merely angry at her brothers, or in deep distress at the loss of her lover, or a mixture between the two, and is alternately passive and active in her reaction to events. The Eddic poems are often treated as a homogenous group. But it is possible that the poems may have been purposely composed to offer alternative explanations for behaviour or events, and to create a dialogue around the characters and narrative.[164] Yet, when the poems are transformed into a continuous prose narrative, in *Völsunga saga*, these different Guðrún figures must be harmonised into a single character who exists throughout the text.

The constructions of Guðrún in the *Poetic Edda* place their emphasis on character. The poems are often situated within the plot by the compiler-narrator, but are more concerned with presenting character's actions and emotions. Much of the text appears as direct speech, and first-person narrators are used for some of the poems, allowing even more direct access to the character's thoughts and feelings. In contrast, *Völsunga saga* emphasises the plot. In order to provide a coherent representation of the story, contradictions are minimised, and the saga-style prose means that much of the story is told by the external narrator who rarely shows what is occurring in characters' minds. The additional material at the beginning of the text, which provides a more extensive background to the story, creates the impression of narrative patterns. In the case of Sigurðr's death scene, for example, the irony of Guðrún's grief is evident because a previous scene has depicted Sigurðr re-declaring his love for Brynhildr and offering to leave Guðrún and marry her instead. *Völsunga saga* removes detailed depictions of Guðrún's grief. None of the material from *Gðr.I* is included, and most of the description of her emotions from *Gðr.II* is absent. Indeed, although the detail of her

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[164] See, for example, Philip N. Anderson, 'Form and Content in *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation' in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 139 -158. He states that Eddic poems could be intentional remodellings of other poems (p. 155). Paul Acker has argued against this notion, stating that similarities between poems such as *Akv.* and *Am.* are instead signs of formulaic constructions; see *Revising Oral Theory: Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse* (New York and London: Garland, 1998), p. 78. Yet even if Acker is correct, the manuscript context in which the *Poetic Edda* exists means that the poems can be read as conscious re-workings of each other. Indeed, other medieval-Icelandic literature, such as the *Íslendingasögur* which have little authorial intervention, seems designed to privilege debate.

speaking to Sigurðr's horse, Grani, is retained, her weeping at this point is not mentioned. In *Völsunga saga*, it appears that Grani is more emotional than Guðrún. We are told that, when she enters the woods, she wants to die, but the motivation for this desire is not clarified. Her lament from *Gðr.II* is reduced to a complaint about her life being more enjoyable with a high-status husband. It would initially appear that the rewriting of eddic poetry into saga prose attempts to close narrative gaps and produce a less ambiguous version of Guðrún. Yet in not allowing access to her thoughts and emotions, the narrator not only distances her from the implied reader but also renders her as less knowable and makes interpretative judgements about Guðrún harder, as her motivations are less accessible. By reducing the emphasis on her grief, Guðrún appears less sympathetic. Through the removal of her anger at her brothers and desire for revenge, and much direct narration of her thoughts, she is portrayed as passive and less complex. By not depicting anger and the desire for revenge as a normal part of the grieving process, the text also makes her later revenge against Atli all the more monstrous. In *Völsunga saga*, the implied reader is discouraged from experiencing the distress of Guðrún, and encouraged to judge her more controversial actions in a harsher manner.

The idea of an audience judgment is complicated when grief becomes a performance as well as an emotion in *Sg.*, which presents Brynhildr's death in a theatrical manner.[165] She decides that her life is no longer worth living after Sigurðr's murder, and announces her intentions to an audience who attempt to prevent her suicide (st. 42). Brynhildr is aware of her spectators and involves them, encouraging her servants to join her in death (st. 49).[166] She is not so distraught that she wishes to die as quickly as possible (in contrast, for example, to Guðrún in *Gðr.II* [st. 12]). Her own grief becomes insufficient, as her feelings are authenticated by the observation of others. Brynhildr's suicide is a public event and involves

[165] Theatricality is also associated with Brynhildr in *Br.* when we are told 'þögðo allir við því orði' (all were silent at these words [st. 15]): an audience is present to hear her declarations.

[166] Neil Price has discussed the archaeological evidence for people being sacrificed to be buried alongside an important figure in medieval Scandinavia; see 'Dying and the Dead: Viking Age Mortuary Behaviour' in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 257-73 (p. 266).

her playing the part of a grief-stricken wife, which requires appropriate props and attire (st. 47). Her grief, when shared publicly, becomes an iteration of behaviour associated with the loss of a loved one. Her subject position, which may be initially unclear as she is mourning another woman's husband, becomes comprehensible through the repetition of actions associated with a particular role.

Brynhildr's final request is for a funeral pyre to be built for her and Sigurðr, according to detailed instructions.[167] Her demands are specific, and present the funeral as a theatrical event.[168] The two bodies will also become a strange recreation of previous actions; their positioning on the pyre becomes a performance of their previous bed sharing.[169] Yet, Brynhildr's request for her body to be burnt next to Sigurðr on his funeral pyre emphasises the unreality of her situation; it was Guðrún rather than Brynhildr who was Sigurðr's wife, and she is recreating a situation where Sigurðr pretended to be Gunnarr rather than a scene of love between her and Sigurðr. The image of the two lovers on the pyre, who will not be separated by death, is artificial; an iteration of the couple's actions in a different context produces a relationship which did not actually occur in life. Brynhildr's insistence on a ostentatious funeral could also be an attempt to reclaim Sigurðr's identity as a heroic individual, who deserves public mourning, rather than a suspected adulterer; Sigurðr is constructed as a grievable figure through Brynhildr's requirements for his funeral.[170] In *Sg.*, Brynhildr's misery is transformed into a public performance. There is no clear distinction between authenticity and theatricality; the binaries between truth and fiction are disrupted.

[167] Her instructions are extended even further in *Völsunga saga*; see p. 61.
[168] Neil Price's analysis of the archaeological evidence suggests that Old Norse funerals are likely to have been theatrical spectacles; see 'Passing into Poetry: Viking-age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology', *Medieval Archaeology* 54 (2010), 123-156. But this is the only description of a funeral in the *Poetic Edda* that includes drama; in *HH.II* Helgi is just placed into a mound [p. 158] and bodies are simply washed and buried in *Sd.* [st. 33-4].
[169] Sigurðr and Brynhildr previously shared a bed when Sigurðr wooed her for Gunnarr; see [*Sg.* st. 4].
[170] Brynhildr acts in a similar way to Antigone whose insistence on burying her brother/ father constructs his life as grievable; see Butler, 'Antigone's Claim: A Conversation With Judith Butler', ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Roberto Farneti, *Theory and Event* 12:1 (2009), available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/toc/tae.12.1.html (accessed 28/03/11).

Grief is not just an emotion that is depicted as being naturally associated with women. It is also something that can be constructed, perhaps to reinforce female identity as well as gain a sympathetic readerly judgment.

Female grief is central to the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*. The poems of female lament are some of the most memorable of the compilation due to their arresting presentation of emotion. The sharing of grief can provide an opportunity for bonding, whether it is between a husband and wife or a community of women. It can also be a trigger for a desire for violence, and the extent to which grief is depicted as a motivation can exert an influence on audience judgment of characters. The existence of a performative element to grief blurs the definition of authenticity, and disrupts the portrayal of grief as an essentially female emotion. Lamenting is also a way in which the female characters of the texts can offer their own version of events; it, therefore, offers a unique way for female characters to gain sympathy and positive judgment from an implied audience, as this is a technique that is not used for male characters. Yet this role is diminished in *Völsunga saga*, just as opportunities for the construction of female identity through dialogue were reduced. The alteration of the narrative to one that is consistently related by a third-person narrator provides fewer occasions for the direct expression of a female version of events; female control of narrative is a role that is emphasised much more strongly in the *Poetic Edda*.

5: Violence

Thus far, this chapter has established that female characters are depicted in terms of their ability to manipulate events, to a greater or lesser extent, through their regulation of representation. The female figures of both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* provide meanings and interpretations for the actions of their male counterparts, and control the narrative through whetting, lament, memory alteration and prophecy. Yet some of the most

memorable moments of these texts are those of female violence. Violence and narrative control, through techniques such as prophecy or whetting, demonstrate two facets of female identity; the ability to act directly, and the capacity to assert influence in an indirect manner.

There are possibilities for female characters to accomplish their own violent acts in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. In *Völsunga saga*, these opportunities are connected to the representations of characters as mothers, which are depicted in a different manner from the *Poetic Edda*.[171] In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr, one of the most important female characters of the text, becomes a mother. This iteration of the legend mentions her daughter, Áslaug, although her decision to have her daughter fostered distances her from this identity.[172] Critics have assumed that the purpose of Áslaug's appearance is to connect the two sagas in the manuscript, but it also suggests that motherhood (and perhaps also sex with Sigurðr) is a vital component of femininity. Yet, as the first mother in the text, Rerir's wife, dies when her six year old child is finally cut out of her uterus (p. 3), women are detached from a naturalised child-bearing role. Motherhood is portrayed as problematic, and closely connected to violence.

Signý is one mother who is introduced into the narrative of *Völsunga saga*. After her first child is sent to her brother, Sigmundr, has his bravery tested and is found wanting, she says:

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[171] Uli Linke has explored the mythological origins of the association of women with creation in Old Norse literature; see 'The Theft of Blood, the Birth of Men: Cultural Constructions of Gender in Medieval Iceland' in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 265-8. She argues that 'Icelandic models of social order are embedded in mythological images of sex, birth and creation' (p. 265). There seems to be much less interest in the actions of fathers in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, so parenthood is much less of a male role. Indeed, absent fathers are something of a theme in the texts.

[172] Carola Gottzmann argues that the presence of a child of Brynhildr and Sigurðr suggests that his marriage to Guðrún was an error, as this relationship did not produce offspring; see '*Völsunga saga*: Legendary History and Textual Analysis' in *Preprints of the 4th International Saga Conference* (Munich: Institut fur nordische Philologie, 1979), p. 16. Fostering was common in medieval Iceland but biological parents did not completely gave up interest in their offspring; see Anna Hansen, 'Fosterage and Dependency in Medieval Iceland and its significance in *Gísla Saga*' in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 73-86 (pp. 78-9). Whereas, Brynhildr becomes childfree to the extent that Sigurðr does not seem to be aware of his daughter's existence. Carolyne Larrington addresses the fate of Áslaug in Ragnars saga; see 'Revisiting the Relationship'.

"Tak þú hann þá ok drep hann. Eigi þarf hann þá lengr at lifa." Ok svá gerði hann. (p. 9)
("Then seize and kill him. There is no need for him to live any longer." And he did so.)

Her instruction for her brother to kill her son is callous, especially as the scene is repeated with another child. In the next chapter, Signý's direct violence towards her children is described by the narrator:

Hún hafði þá raun gert við ina fyrri sonu sína, áðr hún sendi þá til Sigmundar, at hún saumaði at höndum þeim með holdi ok skinni. Þeir þoldu illa ok kriktu um. Ok svá gerði hún Sinfjötla. Hann brást ekki við. Hún fló hann þá af kyrtlinum, svá at skinnit fylgdi ermunum. Hún kvað honum mundu sárt við verða. (p. 10)
(She had made a trial for her sons, before she sends them to Sigmundr, that she sewed their arms with their flesh and skin. They endured this badly and complained about it. And she did so to Sinfjötli. He did not flinch. She stripped the tunic from him, so that the skin accompanied the sleeves. She said that this would hurt him.)

The description of Signý's sons' responses to their skin being stitched emphasises the cruelty of Signý's actions. Signý is not condemned by the narrator for performing this task, but it is hard to tell whether that is because the narrator felt that censure was not needed (as the act is obviously abhorrent), or because it is not deserved. Her act is depicted as a practical method of confirming Sinfiötli's superiority, and his ability to enact the revenge Signý and her brother desire; the reaction of Siggeirr's offspring is criticised more than Signý's method of assessing their courage. Signý is not openly condemned as monstrous for her savage act.

The use of children as part of a plan for retribution is repeated in Guðrún's serving of her children to Atli, an incident which occurs in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. In *Gðr.II*, Guðrún rejects Atli as a potential suitor, warning of the problems that will ensue:

Hann mun Gunnarr grandi beita
oc ór Högna hiarta slíta.
Muncað ec letia, áðr lífshvatan
eggleics hvötuð aldri næmic. (st. 31)
(He will prepare dangerous bait for Gunnarr, and will tear the heart from Högni. Then I will not rest before I take the life of the sword warrior, the vigorous man.)

Guðrún presents violence as the logical result of the murder of her brothers, and she depicts herself as the fitting perpetrator of that revenge. Yet in this poem, her brutal actions are not

directly depicted. Instead, they are narrated as part of a dream sequence (*Gðr.II* sts. 40-2). The child killing becomes unnarratable, and so this deed is positioned as horrific. Yet, as the murders do not actually take place in this poem, and are merely dreamed about, Guðrún herself is not represented as irredeemably evil; there is still the possibility that the events described will not actually happen.

Guðrún's prolicide occurs in both *Akv*. and *Am.* In *Akv.*, she serves Atli their children, and then confirms what he has done:

> Sona hefir þinna, sverða deilir,
> hiorto hrædreyrug við hunang of tuggin;
> melta knáttu, móðugr, manna valbráðir. (st. 36)
> (The gory hearts of your sons, giver of swords, you have chewed with honey; you are digesting human meat, fierce one.)

The phrasing implies that Atli is at fault; she gives the active role to Atli, suggesting that he has acted violently in devouring the bodies of his children. It also means that she becomes completely detached from the situation. It is Atli who has consumed the children, and it is Atli who will mourn the lack of their company. Guðrún, despite being their mother, assumes no role in the family, or in the horrific violence that has occurred. Indeed, although the poem describes the general reaction to this news as one of community distress, Guðrún sets herself apart by refusing to weep. Her lack of tears increases the sense of her as monstrous, but also recalls her inability to cry at the death of Sigurðr, as recounted in *Gðr.I.* It is hard to excuse such a horrific prolicide, but the narrator appears to be emphasising her anguish rather than her cruelty.[173] Killing her sons is not the only violence perpetrated by Guðrún in this poem. She attacks Atli when he is too drunk to defend himself; the mention of his inebriation suggests she is acting in a dishonourable manner.[174] She then takes revenge on everyone associated with him, unleashing a cascade of violent chaos. Guðrún is able to act for herself

[173] Clark comments that 'there is no explicit condemnation of Guðrún's actions in *Atlakviða*'; see *Gender*, p. 28.
[174] Dronke concurs with this interpretation and goes further to seemingly have sympathy for Atli in her summary of the narrative: 'Atli is so drunk and trusting in his drunkenness that he is easy to murder'; see 'Attila', p. 5.

but the results of this female violence are excessive and seem unjust. Nevertheless, the final stanza has an ambivalent tone, both marvelling at and being shocked by Guðrún's actions.[175]

Am. depicts Guðrún in a different manner.[176] Here, she joins in with the fighting as soon as her brothers arrive, and proves herself valuable in battle.[177] *Am.* also includes Guðrún's less honourable violent actions, and directly depicts the murder of her children.[178] This makes her actions more disturbing, not just because of, in Clark's words, 'the awful pathos' of her children's fear and shock, but also because she reveals that the prolicide is a long-standing desire (st. 78) rather than a spur of the moment act of a woman desperate to avenge the loss of her brothers.[179] Clark argues that *Am.*'s portrayal of this scene 'surely necessitates a negative construction of Guðrún's action'.[180] Yet instead of the audience reaction of widespread distress found in *Akv.*, we are only given Atli's response to the prolicide in *Am.*. He calls Guðrún savage, but the exchange between husband and wife has accusations of cruelty on both sides. Guðrún's murders lose some of their horror when we are reminded that Atli has killed her brothers. Indeed, Guðrún's subsequent actions are more controlled and honourable. She still murders Atli in his sleep, but with the assistance of Högni's son, suggesting it is not just her own desire for further violence. Furthermore, she does not burn down the hall and kill the remainder of Atli's men. In contrast, she provides Atli with an appropriate funeral, and tries to kill herself. The portrayal of Guðrún's violence

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[175] Clark describes the tone as one of 'horrified admiration' and later describes her as being portrayed in this poem as an 'impressive monster'; see *Gender*, p. 28 and p. 30.

[176] Theodore Andersson and Clark have also explored the ways in which this poem reworks *Akv.*; see 'Did the Poet of Atlamál Know Atlaqviða?', in Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (eds.), *Edda: A Collection of Essays, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies*, 4 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 243–57 and *Gender*, pp. 30-4.

[177] This scene is retained in *Völsunga saga*, although it is reduced. Finch argues that 'the compiler's avoidance of the details of Guðrún's prowess in battle, whatever his real reason, can hardly be due to squeamishness in the description of battle scenes. See e.g. *Völsunga saga* 29/24 ff. where skulls are cleft and arms bloody to the shoulders!'; see 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources', p. 335. This suggests a reduction of the conception of Guðrún as a warrior.

[178] Tom Birkett argues that 'this extended scene has the dual effect of humanizing and vulgarizing the devastatingly impersonal murders related in the earlier poem'; see 'A Cautionary Tale: Reading the Runic Message in *Atlamál in grœnlenzko*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 9 (2013), 1-18 (p. 3).

[179] Clark, *Gender*, p. 33.

[180] Clark, *Gender*, p. 33.

in *Am.* is complex and this poem does not simply represent her as wicked. It is in perpetrating these acts, as in *Akv.*, that she is presented as most active and in control of her own life.[181]

Guðrún's prolicide also appears in *Völsunga saga*. As with *Am.*, the murder is narrated:

> Tók hún sonu þeira Atla konungs, er þeir léku við stokki. Sveinarnir glúpnuðu ok spurðu, hvat þeir skyldu. Hún svarar: "Spyrið eigi at bana skal ykkr báðum." Þeir svöruðu: "Ráða muntu börnum þínum sem þú vilt. Þat mun engi banna þér. En þér er skömm í at gera þetta." Síðan skar hún þá á háls. (p. 72)
> (She seized the sons she had by King Atli as they were playing along the wall. The children became downcast and asked what would happen. She answers: "Don't ask that, I am going to kill you both." They answered: "You can do what you like with your children. No one will forbid you. But this will bring shame on you." Then she cut their throats.)

The saga becomes bookended by two similar incidents of cruelty to children towards the beginning and end of the text. Yet the two women involved, Signý and Guðrún, are portrayed very differently. Although Signý's treatment of her sons is brutal, it is related in very matter-of-fact terms by the narrator. Indeed, her instructions to kill her child are barely deemed worthy of repetition, suggesting that the implied reader will be bored by the duplication of events rather than shocked at her attitude to her children. Yet with Guðrún's murder of her sons, the children's fright and confusion is mentioned, which creates sympathy for them and depicts Guðrún as pitiless. The children themselves warn Guðrún that she is acting shamefully, and her deeds are described by both Atli and another character, her later son Hamðir, as evil. Nevertheless, Guðrún is allowed to defend her decision as being necessary to avenge her brothers' deaths. *Völsunga saga* depicts two women who appear prepared to act in an immoral way in order to enact revenge; the portrayal of motherhood seems to be associated with vengeance as well as cruelty to children.

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[181] Auður Magnúsdóttir suggests that these kinds of active identities are only temporarily available to women, as they involve taking on a male role. She argues that ''women can take a man's place in his absence, but have to withdraw when he returns'; see 'Women and Sexual Politics', in *The Viking World* ed. by Stefan Brink (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 40-8 (p. 46).

It is curious that Grímhildr is the woman who is most openly criticised in *Völsunga saga* as being 'grimmhuguð' (an evil disposition) (p. 44), and yet she acts to protect her children, in contrast to Signý or Guðrún. It is rare for women to be connected unproblematically to motherhood in the text; the relationships between the female characters and their children are seldom free of tragedy. A later portrayal of Guðrún's role as a mother, when she incites her male children to avenge her daughter's death, is ambivalent (p. 76); as Clark points out, her sons are blamed for their actions as much as Guðrún.[182] Indeed, she provides Hamðir and Sörli with enchanted armour to protect them (p. 77). The image of Guðrún as a loving mother who wishes to obtain retribution for the murder of her daughter, but recognises the potential dangers of revenge and so does her best to defend her surviving children from harm, contrasts sharply with the woman who fed her sons to her husband. The alteration of Guðrún's identity as a mother within the same narrative suggests the wide possibilities for femininity that motherhood enables.

The mistreatment of children does not seem to necessarily lead to an abject form of femininity, perhaps because of a repeated connection between motherhood and violence that is present throughout *Völsunga saga*. An expected opposition of cruelty to children and good mothers is significantly complicated. Instead, children seem to be a method through which agency can be gained for women, either through violence, or by ensuring that the family line will continue in the most honourable manner. It is noticeable that this is an exclusively female domain in the text; fathers are barely mentioned in relation to their progeny, and none use their offspring in a comparable manner. Female violence is depicted as problematic, with the exception of Guðrún's role in the battle against Atli, although even this action involves her disrupting her family by attacking her husband's troops.

[182] Clark, *Gender*, p. 42.

6: Conclusion

A quote by Pat Robertson, the American founder of the Christian Coalition and right-wing advocate, has developed into something of an internet meme, and is even printed onto mugs and t-shirts. In a letter quoted in the *Washington Post*, Robinson denounced feminism, which he asserts is an:

> Anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, [and] practice witchcraft.[183]

It appears that the image created by an initial encounter with the Völsung legend, of women who are monstrously violent and disrupt their families, is an enduring one. Yet this is not an accurate depiction of female identity in *Völsunga saga* and the *Poetic Edda*;[184] although they do present female violence and supernatural identities, the more persistent and positively portrayed role for women is as producers of narrative representations.

This chapter has demonstrated that in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, female identity is distinct from male identity, as female characters are portrayed as having more in common with each other than with male characters who do not fit in with a hegemonic masculinity, although there are instances where the latter are depicted in a similar way to women, such as the connection between Grípir and prophecy. Helga Kress offers a depressing summation of the role of women in Old Norse literature, and eddic poetry in particular:

> Women's possibilities in society are limited to subordination, exile or death. [...] The strong women this literature depicts are not free. But they are strong, and their strength consists in resisting oppression – they refuse to be oppressed. They do not

[183] Maralee Schwartz and Kenneth J. Cooper, 'Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked', *Washington Post*, 23 August 1992, available at http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-1021641.html (accessed 01/10/14).

[184] Similarly, Giselle Gos states her desire to 'ope[n] up the discussion of women in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and move it away from an excessive focus on their role in inciting male violence'; see 'Women as a Source of *heilræði*, "sound counsel": Social Mediation and Community Integration in *Fóstbræðra saga*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009), 281-300 (p. 281).

> succeed, but their protest is everywhere in the text. That is what Old Norse literature is primarily about.[185]

Nevertheless, in *Völsunga saga* and the *Poetic Edda* women are not just defined through their exclusion from male activity such as combat. There are possibilities for women to gain authoritative identities where their knowledge and ability is recognised, such as a control of memory or prophecy. The ability to provide representations of events, whether through the alteration of memory, prophecies, the establishment of identity through dialogue, whetting or lament, is powerful. Erin Goeres has observed the erasure of the female authorial voice in *Strengleikar*, a compilation of Old Norse translations of Breton *lais*, suggesting that 'a fascination with literary origins permeates the collection, but that this fascination is tempered by anxieties about the role played by women in the production of literary texts'.[186] This discomfort with female authorship demonstrates the important nature of this role. It is unlikely that either the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga* were compiled or composed by women; even so, the persistent presentation of female characters who are in control of the narrative means that the female characters in these texts exceed the position of protest that Kress describes. They are depicted in a position of control over meaning-making, and the interpretation of events.

Whetting in particular is a clear way in which events can be influenced without direct participation in violence, and is comparable to the ways in which high-status males can order their troops without personally involving themselves in combat. Whetting behaviour is often shown to emerge from grief, which is an emotion that is closely connected to female identity; it is rare for men to be seen to mourn, or for extensive descriptions of their upset to be narrated. This focus on female sorrow allows women a unique ability to express themselves

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[185] Helga Kress, 'Taming the Shrew: the Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature' in *Cold Counsel: The Women of Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. by K. Swenson and S. M. Anderson (New York; London: Garland, 1999), pp. 81-92 (p. 91).

[186] Erin Goeres, 'Sounds of Silence: The Translation of Women's Voices from Marie de France to the Old Norse *Strengleikar*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113 (2014), 279-307 (p. 280).

directly, especially in the *Poetic Edda*, and to thus enhance the possibility of a sympathetic readerly judgement. The scenes of female grief are some of the most arresting and memorable in the texts, demonstrating a clear privileging of female emotional experience. Yet a display of extreme emotion can also have an Othering effect, as women become monstrous in their inability to control their emotions just as they sometimes do when they perpetrate extreme violence. The ways in which *Völsunga saga* removes extended descriptions of female sorrow, and converts motherhood into a universal female identity has the effect of circumscribing female experience, to some extent. Nevertheless, this chapter has established the ultimate multiplicity of female identity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, demonstrating the insufficiency of generalisations of femininity in terms of passivity, disruptive goading or monstrous violence; the chapter has illustrated both the important roles and the range of identities available to female characters.

Chapter 2: Male identity in the heroic *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*

This chapter shifts the focus of this thesis to male identity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. As has been discussed, however, a binary divide between male and female has not been recognised as the way in which gender was categorised in medieval Iceland. Nevertheless, there are clear differences in the gender expectations for male and female characters in these texts, and especially as binary gender is used in later versions of these narratives, it serves as a useful division. Yet there will still be overlaps; as has been established in the previous chapter, there are examples of female characters taking on male identities and vice versa. Whilst female characters are connected to the representation of events, male characters are often portrayed in a more obviously active role, whether that is in physical or verbal combat or performing the role of the ideal courtly man. Nevertheless, these male identities depend on the approbation or abjection of the community in general, and of female characters in particular; this is most clearly acknowledged by references for the need for enduring fame. This dependence of identity on the approval or recognition by others creates a potential vulnerability, which is expressed in the instability of male identity that is acknowledged by frequent depictions of shape-shifting. The chapter will begin, however, with an examination of the most overtly straightforward aspect of masculinity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* in an investigation of the portrayal of male violence.

1: Warriors and heroes

> It is all sad, and all about fighting and killing.[187]

[187] Introductory note to 'The Story of Sigurd' in *The Red Fairy Book* ed. Andrew Lang (New York: Dover Publications, 1966).

This first section is the longest of this chapter, attesting to the importance of this kind of male identity in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Indeed, the relationship between men and violence is something of a perennial problem, and contemporary examples are subject to much critical attention. These studies of modern behaviour are often carried out from a criminological or psychological perspective, as the purpose is to both understand and prevent violent behaviour. In this section, I do not want to provide a psychological reasoning for the male characters' decapitations or mutilations of each other, not least as this is likely to be an unproductive approach when dealing with fictional characters represented in literature. Instead, I will offer an explanation of the effects of this kind of representation on male identity.

This chapter uses Butler's concept of grievability to explore the different expressions of masculinity through violence. She argues that when certain lives are not mourned, their abjection as categories of humans is illustrated. Butler suggests that:

> We can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others – even if it means taking those latter lives. After the attacks of 9/11, we encountered in the media graphic pictures of those who died, along with their names, their stories, the reactions of their families. Public grieving was dedicated to making these images iconic for the nation, which meant of course that there was considerably less public grieving for non-US nationals, and none at all for illegal workers. The differential distribution of public grieving is a political issue of enormous significance. [188]

Butler explores media and public reactions to late twentieth-century warfare, but her concept can be extended to think about other ways in which only certain identities 'conform to certain culturally specific notions about what the culturally recognizable human is' (ibid. p. 42). These ideas open up ways of thinking about what kind of gender identities are acknowledged as liveable; Butler also refers to how public vigils during the AIDS crisis 'broke through the public shame' associated with certain sexualities to construct these victim's lives as grievable

[188] Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 38.

(ibid. p. 39). Her theories can also be extended beyond public and media responses to the recognitions of identity that occur within literary texts.[189] This consideration of the viability of identities therefore provides a useful way of thinking about the representation of different kinds of male identities in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, especially given the importance of grief in these texts which has been established in the previous chapter.

1.i: Combat and murder

From the outset of the heroic *Poetic Edda*, a warrior identity is important for men. Early in *HH.*, Helgi is described as having 'hvessir augu sem hildingar' (eyes as sharp as a war king's) (st. 6). This phrase indicates that a warrior identity is both aspirational, and a standard to measure up to. Triumph in battle is also linked to sexual success. Helgi's victory is closely followed by the beginning of his relationship with Sigrún, who specifically notes that she desires a strong warrior identity in a husband (st. 18). Of course, as Clark has argued, 'in conjunction with the distancing effect which has already been explored, it is arguable that the heroic ideal is not (and should not be) applicable to the present'; a warrior identity may not be something that the implied audience is expected to emulate.[190] Nevertheless, within the text, a warrior identity is an expression of masculinity that is subject to approbation.

Yet, Atli is a very different kind of warrior from characters like Helgi, Högni (in *Akv.* and *Am.*) and Gunnarr (in *Am.*) who are directly involved in the fighting.[191] In *Akv.*, while his men are prepared for battle, 'en þar drakk Atli vín í valhöllu' (Atli drank wine in the fine hall) (st. 14). Similarly, while in *Am.* we are told that Gunnarr, Högni, Guðrún and Atli's

[189] This aspect of Butler's work has not yet been well used by literary scholars, but this approach has been productively applied by Rachel Clements to contemporary drama; see 'Framing War, Staging Precarity: Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* and the Spectres of Vulnerability', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23 (2013), 357-367.
[190] *Gender* p. 20.
[191] Bandlien argues that 'what makes Atli inferior to the Gjukungs is his lack of heroism. He exploits the Gjukung's heroic boldness instead of either preserving the kinship alliance or challenging his rivals in an honourable way. The poem [*Akv.*] allows Guðrún to be happy with her husband before the betrayal, but she cannot live with him after his unheroic act'; see *Strategies of Passion*, p. 35.

brother take part in the battle, Atli is conspicuous by his absence. Atli verbally registers his anger (sts. 54-6) but there is no record of his physical action. Indeed, he orders Högni to be killed (st. 59) rather than doing it himself. This difference indicates that the presence of a Helgi-style warrior identity is something that is not necessarily innate to all men, but is an example of a virtue in some male characters. Nor is it exclusively male, as Guðrún also has this capability in *Am.*. Yet the emphasis on male heroism is different from the mythological *Poetic Edda*; *Hávamál*, for example, rates friendship and wisdom above battle ability (and indeed, concentrates on spells for success in battle rather than physical prowess), despite an admission that the culture is one where physical fighting is ever present (st. 38).[192] Helgi has a straightforward warrior identity, as his violence is approved of, even when it seems to disrupt socially approved codes of conduct (such as providing compensation for men killed [st. 12]). More interesting and ambivalent uses of violence in the *Poetic Edda* include the murder of Sigurðr.

Due to the lacuna in the Codex Regius manuscript, the murder of Sigurðr appears abruptly, despite Grípir's warning (*Grp.* st. 51) and *Sd.* ending on a similar prophecy of his death (st. 37). Yet the actual violent act appears outside of *Br.*, as we are only told that: 'soltinn varð Sigurðr sunnan Rínar' (Sigurðr died south of the Rhine) (st. 5). Högni then admits that: 'sundr höfom Sigurð sverði högginn' (we've cut Sigurðr apart with a sword) (st. 7). Indeed, as has been previously noted, the narrator-compiler's discussion of the different versions of Sigurðr's death in prose suggest that it is only the event of his death which matters. Although the murder is not directly depicted, the violence is still represented as questionable. This is emphasised more strongly in the surviving Codex Regius version; opening the poem with an enquiry about the rationale for the murder draws attention to the

[192] In other senses, there are similarities between *Hávamál* and the heroic *Poetic Edda*. These are explored by John McKinnell who argues that it is 'probable that the surviving version of *Sigrdrífumál* was composed with knowledge of *Hávamál*; see 'The Making of *Hávamál*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007), 75-115 (p. 93).

problematic motivation for the deed (st. 1). The few details that are given make the death seem particularly violent. Sigurðr is not just stabbed, but his body is cut apart. Brynhildr immediately celebrates the murder, but her bodily response of laughter seems extreme (st. 10).[193] The narrator also describes Gunnarr's involuntary and uncontrollable physical response to the murder: 'fót nam at hræra, fjölð nam at spjalla' (his foot began to move itself, he began to narrate many things) (st. 13). These uncanny bodily resonances of the murder create a disturbing atmosphere, which suggests that this kind of violence was a crime, rather than a praiseworthy exploit. Unruly bodies reveal the unsettling nature of this brutal act.

In *Sg.*, the violence is more graphic, with a detailed description of Guttormr's death:

> Hendr oc haufuð hné á annan veg,
> Enn fótahlutr fell aptr í stað. (st. 23)
> (Arms and head fell the other way and the legs' part fell back into the room.)

Furthermore, we are told that 'hon Freys vinar flaut í dreyra.' (she [Guðrún] floated in Freyr's friend's blood) (st. 24). Once more, we see an unruly bodily reaction to the murder in Guðrún's hand clapping:

> Svá sló hon svára sinni hendi,
> at qváðo við kálcar í vá
> oc gullo við gæss í túni. (st. 29)
> (She [Guðrún] struck her hands so heavily that the goblets shook in sorrow and the geese shrieked at this in the yard.)

The wide-ranging effects of Guðrún's actions suggest that this act of brutality will also have extensive consequences. It seems that women act as judges of aggression; they either provide approbation, such as Sigrún in *HH.* or condemnation, such as Brynhildr and Guðrún in these

[193] Miller has explored the representation of seemingly inappropriate laughter through an examination of Hallgerdr's reaction to her husband's death in *Njals saga*. He argues that her laughter has many potential interpretations: 'Hallgerdr's laughter is clearly a marker of emotion; it's just that we are unsure of the propriety of its motivation'; see 'Emotions', p. 91. Brynhildr's laugh is as difficult to interpret, and this confusion that it generates in the reader leads to a sense of disturbance, indicating that there is something not right about Sigurðr's murder. Miller argues that 'mirthful or polite laughter is inconsistent with the social situation of being obliged to take vengeance, but crazed malicious laughter is proper, as indeed are ominous grins' (p. 105) and would explain Brynhildr's reaction as standard, yet his distinction relies on the ability to easily categorise different forms of laughter, which is not an easy task with a limited description.

poems.[194] Of course, a single moment of violence against a specific, named character such as Sigurðr is more likely to be described in detail than a battle against a larger, mostly anonymous set of foes. But there is none of the detail of strange physical reactions to the death of Helgi in *HHv.* or *HH.II.* With Sigurðr's death, in both poems a corporeal sense of the effect of brutality is created. This act of violence produces disturbing bodily effects.

The same battle, between the Niblungs and Atli's men, is depicted in *Akv.* and *Am.*. In *Akv.*, not much of a fight actually occurs.[195] Dronke observes that it 'is not a poem of battles, but of individual audacity against the massive and featureless tyranny of the Huns'.[196] In this version, we are told that:

> Hló þá Högni, er til hiarta scáro
> qvicqvan kumblasmið, klecqva hann sízt hugði. (st. 24)
> (Högni laughed when they cut out his heart, the living wound-maker, crying was the least of his thoughts.)

This inappropriate laughter is reminiscent of Brynhildr's laughter in *Br.*. Högni is marked out as being different, but here it is in a praiseworthy way.[197] The graphic description of Högni's death offers him a final chance to display courage through his body; it seems that a warrior identity must be performed even during death. Nevertheless, this unusual physical reaction to a painful and gruesome death makes the violence unsettling.

In *Am.*, the battle is described for ten stanzas. The combat begins with a description of men who: 'scuto scarpliga oc scioldom hlífðuz' (shot sharply and sheltered themselves with shields) (st. 44). The attention here is focused on the weapons and objects of battle, rather than on the destruction or injury that the bows might cause. Guðrún participates in combat in

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[194] Bandlien argues that 'for men in the heroic world, therefore, the love of women like Brynhildr is very important. This love is not won by flirtation but by fulfilling heroic ideals such as courage and lust for battle. […] Heroic qualities are nevertheless the most obvious when viewed from a woman's perspective'; see *Strategies of Passion*, p. 38.

[195] Dronke notes that 'It is assumed by some editors that lines have been lost before the capture of Gunnarr (stanza 18), describing a fuller fight by both Gunnarr and Hogni'; see 'Attila', p. 6.

[196] Dronke, 'Attila', p. 6.

[197] Nordal would not concur. He argues that 'At times fearlessness in the face of death is exaggerated out of proportion in the younger poems and sagas […] in the heroic age, it was demanded that men should meet death with undaunted equanimity, neither more nor less'; see *Icelandic Culture*, p. 135.

this version of events. The depiction of her battle prowess is particularly notable given Jochen's assertion that, in Old Norse literature, 'the maiden [warrior]'s military performance is not impressive, except in a few special cases'.[198] Indeed, Guðrún's role in the conflict is contrasted with that of her husband. The battle scene is bookended by verbal insults; it is begun by Högni's inciting of Atli's men, and it finishes with Atli reprimanding Guðrún for causing the violence. This is Atli's only presence in the battle. As mentioned earlier, he does not have an active warrior identity. Atli's masculinity is performed in a different way, the orchestrator of violent acts; yet this still enables him to control others. The lack of praise for Atli's indirect involvement suggests that this role is less valued than actual presence in combat.

The final poems of the Codex Regius also present violence in the context of revenge. In both *Ghv.* and *Hm.*, Guðrún urges her sons to action in response to the murder of their sister, and she specifically questions her sons' masculinity in *Ghv.* (st. 3). Yet Hamðir argues that violence can have problematic consequences, causing rifts and weakening kin connections. The physical outcome of the battle is narrated, as men are described as lying in a pool of blood (st. 23), and the attack on Iörmunreccr is recounted in gruesome detail:

> Fotr sér þú þína, höndom sér þú þínom,
> Iörmunreccr, orpit í eld heitan. (st. 24)
> (You see your feet, you see your hands, Iörmunreccr, thrown into hot fire.)

It is by magic, rather than brute force, that the brothers are finally defeated, suggesting that bodily action can be futile; this further undermines physical brutality as a viable method of revenge. Before they die, Hamðir is able to console himself with the belief that their deeds will win them great fame (st. 30). Yet this assertion is made by Hamðir himself, and is not

[198] Jochens, *Images of Women*, pp. 103-4 and p. 142.

confirmed by the narrator.[199] The poem ends by flatly recounting the place of the brother's deaths, rather than affirming their courage or warrior identities.

The heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* offer several different insights into the relationship between masculinity, violence, and a warrior identity. In the Helgi poems, it appears that a warrior identity is a commendable masculine identity, and success in battle leads to success in sexual relationships with women. Violence is seen as something necessary to prove a man's courage and warrior identity. Yet other poems explore the more visceral aspects of violence, and present it as something more problematic. The warrior identities in the *Poetic Edda* initially appear to support Clover's categorisation of medieval Icelandic gender, with the physical ability to fight delineating the line between men and others. Yet characters such as Atli who choose not to become involved in combat complicate the borders of masculinity.

1.ii: Rules and equipment

An interest in violence is established from the outset of *Völsunga saga* as it begins with a deer hunt and a murder (p. 1). This produces an ambivalent attitude to brutality; there is acceptable violence, as it can be enjoyed as a sport, but a secretive murder is unacceptable. The given etymology of 'Breði's drift' (p. 1) demonstrates the longevity of stories about violence and that even negatively perceived brutality can lead to lasting fame. Despite the clear condemnation of Sigi's actions by the narrator, he is still supported in later battles by Óðinn, and is able to become a successful ruler.[200] The motivation for Sigi's murder is, like

[199] Nordal, however, seems convinced by this final statement. He asserts that 'here the essence of the heroic ideal is compressed into a very brief passage [… Hamðir and Sörli] do not emerge altogether empty-handed from the battle; for they have gained renown (*goðs tirar*) which will survive them'; see *Icelandic Culture*, p. 137.

[200] Óðinn may not be concerned by Sigi's actions, as they are similar to how he might behave. Quinn describes Sigi as 'envious, murderous, conniving and dishonest – traits not unlike those of his father, Óðinn, who in the mythological realm exploits them with considerable success. But in the realm of human society, some realignment of prowess with social values was necessary'; see 'The Realisation of Mythological Design: The Early Generations of the Völsung Dynasty', in *Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighed: studier i de*

Breði's, given as jealousy. The deaths of these two men appear to signify the endless cycle of violence that can be caused by a murder: a theme that is explored throughout the text. Revenge is also presented as problematic, with the narrator commenting that Rerir's actions are not approved of by society: 'óskapliga væri fyrir alls sakir' (it was considered unfitting by everyone) (p. 2). In James Phelan's terms, the discussion of the appropriateness of revenge acts as the 'launch' moment of the text, where the first 'global instability' in the narrative, establishing its direction, is created.[201] In *Völsunga saga* the tension is to do with vengeance. The Völsung line emerges from this background of deceit and problematic male violence.[202] Until the mention of Rerir's wife, the beginning of the text is an entirely male domain. Even when women enter the narrative, they are established purely in a spousal (Rerir's wife) or procreative (the valkyrie who aids fertility) role (pp. 2-3).[203] There is a firm link between men and violence at the outset of this text, just as in the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, but this time the connection is a negative one.

Violent revenge is also brought into question by the revelation that Signý's children have reported the presence of Sinfiötli and Sigmundr to Siggeirr. Sigmundr refuses to take any action, stating: 'eigi vil ek drepa börn þín, þótt þau hafi sagt til mín' (I will not kill your children, although they have revealed my location) (p. 12). His response demonstrates that violent revenge is not always an appropriate course of action. Sinfiötli, however, does not hesitate to kill the children immediately after Sigmundr rejects this as a course of action. He seems to have a more straightforward view of revenge. This is perhaps because he has been raised to kill the man he believes to be his father; the concept of avoiding violence against kin

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oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, ed. by Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen (København: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2008), pp. 123-143 (p. 129).

[201] *Experiencing Fiction* p. 32.

[202] It is also depicted as clearly arising from the mythological realm. Quinn argues that 'the attention of the saga to the first stages of the dynasty brings into focus the critical transition from divine progeny to socialised patriarch – from myths of the gods to social reality'; see 'Early Generations', p. 123.

[203] Quinn suggests that 'the valkyrie's function might also involve an initiation into manhood, both intellectual and sexual. That a valkyrie might choose life for a hero rather than death suggests the more complicated associations these figures had in Old Norse mythology'; see 'Early Generations', p. 141.

has not been established as a moral imperative.[204] The narrator comments on the murder of the children murder: ‘Sinfiötli lét sér ekki feilast’ (Sinfiötli did not let himself be timid) (p. 12). This statement indicates a negative judgement of Sigmundr, as lacking the courage to kill his sister’s children, thereby establishing the necessity of violent revenge.

Nevertheless, excessive violence can have unwanted consequences. The sadistic nature of Siggeirr is shown to be his downfall. After capturing Sigmundr and Sinfiötli, we are told that ‘nú hyggr konungr at fyrir sér, hvern dauða hann skal fá þeim, þann er kenndi lengst’ (the king now thought to himself, what kind of death he should give them, that was the longest he knew of) (p. 12). If he had chosen to execute them immediately, they would not have been able to escape and slay him. This is a different kind of killing: one which is designed to inflict the maximum amount of pain. This offers Siggeirr a different expression of masculinity through violence that is used as an extreme form of control over other men.[205] Events in the narrative appear to demonstrate that this kind of increased violence is neither practical nor praiseworthy. It appears that although violent revenge may be a necessary part of society, there are certain rules about the type of violence, and how it is administered, that need to be adhered to.

The first extended description of battle in *Völsunga saga* is between Sigmundr and Eylimi. Despite having significantly fewer men on his side, Sigmundr fights bravely:

> Tekst þar nú hörð orrosta, ok þótt Sigmundr væri gamall, þá barðist hann nú hart ok var jafnan fremstr sinna manna. [...] Margt spjót var þar á lopti ok örvar. En svá hlífðu honum hans spádísir, at hann varð ekki sárr, ok engi kunni töl, hversu margr maðr fell fyrir honum. Hann hafði báðar hendr blóðgar til axlar. (p. 20)
> (Now a hard battle began and although Sigmundr was old, he now fought hard and he was always the foremost of his men. [...] Many spears and arrows flew through the

[204] Quinn describes his actions as caused by his ‘hyper human kin loyalty, a trait encouraged by and exemplified by Signý’; see ‘Early Generations’, p. 125.

[205] Larrington discusses the ways in which, in the romances which influence *fornaldarsögur* authors, ‘evil knights [are] distinguished by their use of unchivalric customs such as fighting with unfair numbers, refusing to grant mercy to opponents, and publicly displaying their victims’ despoiled bodies’; see ‘A Viking in Shining Armour?: Vikings and chivalry in the *fornaldarsögur*’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008), 269-88 (p. 282). The courtly and chivalric conception of *Völsunga saga* will be explored in the next section, but suffice to say that this was an important influence and, therefore, it is likely that these revelations about Siggeirr’s character are intended by the narrator to create a negative conception of his identity.

> sky. But his prophets protected him, so that he was not injured, and no one knew the amount of how many men fell before him. He had both arms smeared with blood up to his shoulders.)

Sigmundr is not depicted in the *Poetic Edda* as taking part in combat. *Völsunga saga*, therefore, establishes a clearer heritage for Sigurðr's bravery and battle prowess. Just like the descriptions of Helgi in the *Poetic Edda*, it is not enough for a ruler merely to command his troops; to be a true warrior he must get involved in the fight. Yet, as with Helgi, Sigmundr is assisted by *spádísir*, female supernatural figures. The focus is on the apparatus of battle, but the final line reveals the gruesome reality of war.[206]

The visceral nature of combat is also emphasised in a similar scene with Sigurðr later in the text:

> Mátti þar á lopti sjá margt spjót ok örvar margar [...] hjálma skýfða, hausa klofna [...] hefir báðar hendr blóðgar til axlar [...] engi maðr þóttist fyrr sét hafa þvílíkan mann. (p. 29)
> (Many spears and arrows flew strongly through the sky, [...] helms were attacked, skulls split [... Sigurðr] had both arms smeared with blood up to his shoulders [...] no one thought that he had seen such a man before.)

Some details are repeated, such as being covered in blood to the shoulders, which emphasise the links between the two men. Again, the fighting is mostly described through its effects on the accoutrements of battle, although here there are slightly more graphic details; skulls are fragmented as well as helms. Yet this combat also sets Sigurðr apart from other warriors. There is no mention of him gaining assistance from supernatural beings, and it is made clear that his battle prowess is in excess of any other warrior.[207] Nevertheless, previous passages which emphasise the importance of his sword (pp. 26-7: its forging is much extended from the *Poetic Edda*) and the ships he is provided with (p. 28) demonstrate that the correct equipment, as well as brute force and courage are required to succeed in violence. The requirement for equipment and supernatural endorsement suggests that a warrior masculinity

[206] I concur with Finch, who argues against Wieselgren's assertion that gruesomeness from the *Poetic Edda* is reduced in *Völsunga saga*; see 'Treatment', pp. 334-5.
[207] Although Brynhildr still offers him runes to guide him to future battle success (pp. 35-9).

also intersects with status; it can only be fully exhibited by those who have the funds and support to succeed in combat.

Indeed, Fáfnir is killed by Sigurðr's forward planning and application of advice rather than his skill at warfare. The absence of a poetic representation of this fight in *Fm.* and in the *Poetic Edda* as a whole, suggests a lack of interest in the details of the defeat of Fáfnir (although the narrator-compiler introduces *Fm.* with a brief summary of the battle), perhaps because the violence is not valiant enough. In *Völsunga saga*, the emphasis is on Sigurðr following instructions, as the narrator states that: 'Sigurðr gerir grafar eptir því, sem fyrir var sagt' (Sigurðr digs the pits in accordance with what was said) (p. 30). Yet despite Sigurðr's rather unheroic position of crouching in a ditch to ambush a foe, the narrator places emphasis on his courage and his involvement in the battle:

> Eigi hræddist Sigurðr né óttast við þann gný. Ok er ormrinn skreið yfir gröfina, þá leggr Sigurðr sverðinu undir bægslit vinstra, svá at við hjöltum nam. Þá hleypr Sigurðr upp ór gröfinni ok kippir at sér sverðinu ok hefir allar hendr blóðgar upp til axlar. (p. 31)
> (Sigurðr was neither frightened nor terrified by the roaring. And when the dragon crawled over the pit, then Sigurðr stabbed him with a sword under the left shoulder, so that nothing but the end of the hilt was against his body. Then Sigurðr leapt up out of the pit and snatched out the sword, and he had all his arms bloody up to his shoulders.)

The nature of the dragon fight seems to be problematic to both texts.[208] The *Poetic Edda* deals with this issue by having the action take place outside of the poem, and providing a minimal description. In *Völsunga saga*, an attempt is made to make the fight sound like hard combat; the image of a bloody torso, repeated from earlier in the text, recalls Sigurðr's more heroic actions on the battlefield, and the references to the dragon's huge size and Sigurðr's lack of fear, along with the active description of the deed make the contest seem fiercer.[209]

[208] In his discussion of this dragon killing, Paul Acker admits that despite being portrayed as a formidable opponent, 'Fáfnir does not kill anyone that we know of'; see 'Death by Dragons', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 1-21 (p. 3).

[209] Finch similarly argues that 'there can be no doubt that in the Saga Fáfnir's terror inspiring qualities are emphasized more than in the lay'; see 'Treatment', p. 341. He does not, however, explore the implications of this differing presentation.

Völsunga saga more clearly establishes Sigurðr's warrior identity in this part of the narrative. Yet Sigurðr's courage here seems excessive; his complete lack of fear is emphasised. His performance of a warrior identity seems to go beyond that of a normal man.

The description of Sigurðr's shield, which does not occur in the *Poetic Edda*, demonstrates that the defeat of Fáfnir is an important part of his identity:[210]

> Því var dreki markaðr á hans vápnum öllum, at er hann er sénn, má vita, hverr þar ferr, af öllum þeim, er frétt hafa, at hann drap þann mikla dreka, er Væringar kalla Fáfni. Ok fyrir því eru vápn hans öll gulli búin ok brún at lit, at hann er langt umfram aðra menn at kurteisi ok allri hæversku ok náliga at öllum hlutum. (pp. 40-1)
> (For this reason was the dragon outlined on all his weapons: that when he could be seen completely, all people would know who went there, all who had heard the news that he killed that great dragon that the Væringar call Fáfnir. And for this reason are all his weapons made of gold and coloured brown: that he was by far above other men in courtesy and all good manners and in nearly all things.)

Sigurðr's identity is established firstly by his deeds and actions, but this is superseded by the presentation of his identity in material objects.[211] His excessive size, which is mentioned later in the same passage, should be indication enough that this is Sigurðr, but his identity is confirmed through his weapons. Battle equipment here takes on a different sense; it is an essential part of identity.[212] Indeed, other parts of Sigurðr's character than his martial prowess are signified by his weaponry, as the colours and materials also mark out his ability to behave socially in a commendable manner. Clothing and accessories support the performance of a warrior masculinity, and demonstrate the importance of appearance. By choosing this attire, Sigurðr is exhibiting a craving for recognition. Social acknowledgement of masculinity is important and desirable.

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[210] There is a possibility that this detail is mentioned in the lacuna, but as I established in the introduction, this thesis can only observe the differences between the texts as we actually have them. The passage in *Völsunga saga* is an interpolation from *Þidreks saga*; see Klaus von See, 'Die kulturideologische Stellung der *Völsunga* ok *Ragnars saga*' in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. by H. Uecker (Berlin and New York: W. De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 585-600 (pp. 591-2).

[211] Karen Lurkhur argues that 'when clothes become part of the body schema, they become as symbolically significant as actual parts of the body. Clothing is thus as important to our image of our body as the body itself' and extends this function to battle equipment; see 'Body and Identity in *Le Chevalier de la Charette*', *Viator* 45:2 (2014), 101-116 (p. 102).

[212] Anne Pedersen describes how shields were used to identify warriors in medieval Scandinavia; see 'Viking Weaponry' in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 204-11 (p. 207).

1.iii: Viable identities

> Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost.[213]

A community appraisal of masculinity is often provided by a female audience. Just as in *HH.*, female characters in *Völsunga saga* value a warrior identity in a man. At one point, Brynhildr and Guðrún discuss which man they think is the most important (p. 45). Despite the shift in *Völsunga saga* to a more courtly concept of identity, in this scene men are solely praised for deeds in battle and an ability to take revenge. Guðrún's brothers may meet the requirements for princely behaviour, but it seems that they are not recognised as worthy men unless they have success in combat. Women are able to reinforce or establish a warrior character, and reputation is a crucial part of this identity.

As the narrative in *Völsunga saga* is in continuous prose, the different arrangements of Sigurðr's death that appear in the *Poetic Edda* must be reconciled. The narrator selects the version where Sigurðr is murdered in his bed, but extends it. In *Sg.*, we are told that: 'dælt var at eggia óbilgiarnan' (it was easy to incite the uncowardly one [Guttormr]) (st. 21). Indeed, he seems to have no problem killing Sigurðr. This is not the case in *Völsunga saga* where Guttormr requires three attempts to kill Sigurðr, only succeeding when he is asleep (p. 58). This account increases a sense of Sigurðr as a daunting foe, and makes the attack seem even more cowardly. Guttormr's recognisability as masculine in a heroic manner is undermined. Once dead, Guttormr is erased from the text and his death is not grieved. In contrast, Sigurðr's death is immediately mourned by his wife Guðrún, and later also by the narrator, Brynhildr and other characters. Butler's exploration of grievability allows us to see that only Sigurðr is recognised as having a grievable life.[214] Similarly, Vingi is not able to express his masculinity through violence as there is no mention of him resisting his murder (p. 68). Like

[213] Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 15.
[214] Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 13-15.

Guttormr, his death is not mourned in the text; even Atli does not ask after him when the men arrive at his hall. The inability for a man to prove himself as a warrior, whether directly or indirectly, leads to a lack of recognition of him as a person.

The final battle portrayed in *Völsunga saga* has a non-triumphant atmosphere. In *Hm.*, the brothers insist that they have won great glory for themselves. Yet the final lines of *Völsunga saga* do not provide this consolation: 'þá flugu ór öllum áttum steinar at þeim, ok varð þeim þat at aldrlagi' (then stones flew at them from all sides, and their destiny came to pass) (p. 78). When discussing the different parts of a text's ending, James Phelan calls the 'concluding exchanges among implied author, narrator, and audiences' the 'farewell' of the narrative.[215] He argues that 'the final exchanges always have the potential to affect the audience's response to the whole narrative' (p. 21). The ending of *Völsunga saga* suggests the ultimate futility of violence; it is a method through which a warrior masculinity can be expressed, but the cycle of violence will always end in death. This reaffirms the stance indicated in the text's opening, and the absence of a direct address to the audience establishes the narrator's and implied author's trust in the audience's ability to deduce the significance of this ending.

Clark offers an analysis of the conclusion to *Hm.*, arguing that 'the poet may be seen here as foregrounding the loneliness of revenge at the end of his work, and thus implying the necessity of community bonds, rather than the 'wilderness' created by self-perpetuating acts of vengeance'.[216] Yet although the attitude to violence in this poem can be usefully outlined in this manner, *Hm.* cannot act as a summation of the representation of violence in the *Poetic Edda*. Clark is correct in asserting that 'the compiler's decision to present *Hamðismál* last is surely therefore purposive, throwing the final emphasis on the text and its themes' (p. 24) and he insightfully explores the ways in which *Hm.* appears to reinforce connections between the

[215] Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction*, p. 21.
[216] 'Kin-Slaying', p. 27.

motifs of kin slaying and Ragnarök which occur throughout the *Poetic Edda*. Yet *Hm.*'s farewell includes a direct address from the compiler-narrator reminding the audience of the text's title. This detracts from the ability of the audience to construct an overall interpretation of the text; they are reminded that this is just one poem among many, and that the *Poetic Edda*'s status as a compilation means that there is no conclusion about the function of violence as in *Völsunga saga*.

In *Völsunga saga*, brutality begets bloodshed, and courage is a family trait.[217] Valour can be innate, and genetically inherited, yet the need for physical proficiency to be supported by equipment and supernatural figures means that a warrior identity intersects with a man's status in other areas. Characters that express their masculinity through a warrior identity, especially if that involves impressive feats of bravery or great skill in battle are the subject of narratorial approbation, whereas male characters who do not involve themselves in violence, whether directly or indirectly, do not possess grievable lives. Just as in the *Poetic Edda*, women reinforce the importance of a warrior identity. In *Völsunga saga*, social endorsement of identity is even more important, and this is demonstrated through the reinforcement of heroism through clothing and accessories.

1.iv: Conclusion

Although a warrior identity is a commendable expression of masculinity in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, male identity can also be performed through negative forms of violence. Whilst killing others to avenge family disputes or to gain land or plunder is often portrayed as a reasonable use of violence, violence which is more graphic or seems excessive is only performed by male characters who are presented in a negative manner. It appears that an idea of honourable and dishonourable violence exists in the text, which accords in some

[217] The Völsung reputation for courage is referred to several times; see, for example the recommendation for Sinfiötli to drink if he has the courage of the Völsungs (p. 18) or Reginn questioning whether Sigurðr possesses Völsung bravery (p. 24).

respects with medieval Icelandic penal codes (for example, the concept of secret killings).[218] Nevertheless, attitudes towards violence are often ambivalent within these texts; in *Völsunga saga* it is unclear why Sigi still benefits from supernatural support and is shown to have success after committing a dishonourable murder. Male characters such as Atli are able to use violence to control others without getting directly involved in combat but this behaviour is not as praiseworthy as personal involvement in a fight. Despite some indication that the violent resolution of disputes is problematic, there is still an absence of alternative masculinities that can be a similar source of approval from the other characters, the narrator or implied audience judgments. A warrior identity is a clear form of hegemonic masculinity in both texts, although it is also interrogated as such.

A warrior identity is necessarily connected to physicality, but the bodily effects of violence are often avoided by the omission of pain.[219] It is the mental attributes such as courage which are shown to be the most desirable. This avoidance distances a warrior masculinity from the frailties of bodily reality. The absence of any description of suffering also accentuates masculinity, as literary depictions of pain often have a feminising effect.[220] Nevertheless, this separation of body and personality is destabilised by linguistic references; *hugr* is frequently used to refer to the courage of these characters.[221] Yet *hugr* can link to body parts as well as the mind as it can refer to the heart. Indeed, this link between courage and the heart is illustrated by the deaths of Hialli and Högni. In *Am.* and *Völsunga saga*,

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[218] Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins (trans. and eds.), *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás vol. 1* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), p. 154 and Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins (trans. and eds.), *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás vol. 2* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), pp. 348-9.
[219] For an exploration of how pain creates a forced embodiment, see Louise O. Fradenburg, 'Criticism, Anti-Semitism and *The Prioress' Tale*' in *Chaucer*, ed. by Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 193-231.
[220] See Martha Easton, 'Pain, Torture and Death in the Huntingdon Library Legenda Aurea' in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. by Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 49-64 (p. 53).
[221] Quinn describes the synonyms for *hugr* as 'sweeping in scope' but concludes that 'in English the range of meaning of *hugr* is nonetheless better encapsulated by the single notion of 'attitude' rather than 'thought': whenever poets sought to represent a man's *hugr*, whether he was a warrior or a poet or both, it seems clear they were attesting to his mettle'; see 'The "Wind of the Giantess"', p. 212.

Hialli cries out in terror at the prospect of his heart being removed, whereas Högni volunteers to lose his heart and laughs at this brutality (st. 65). In *Akv.*, it is through the heart itself that courage is measured, even after death; Gunnar is easily able to identify the vital organ of his brother (st. 23-5). This establishes the heart as a metonym for the warrior identity. Character is shown to be fixed and visible through the body as well as through behaviour. Yet in the final poem of the *Poetic Edda*, Sörli tells his brother: 'hug hefðir þú, Hamðir, ef þú hefðir hyggjandi' (you would have courage, Hamðir, if you had wisdom) (*Hm.* st. 27). The concept of warrior masculinity being written on the body is disrupted by the idea that physicality alone is not sufficient. Indeed, this idea is even more visible in *Völsunga saga*, where a warrior identity intersects with the requirements for male characters to act in a courtly manner.

2: Courtly identities

It has often been acknowledged by critics that *Völsunga saga* is more courtly than the *Poetic Edda*. Carolyne Larrington argues that this is due to its genre, suggesting that:

> The reinvention of Viking identity which takes place in *fornaldarsaga* tends to align individual heroes with the norms and conventions of European romance [...] in the process [some *fornaldarsögur*-authors] redefined the heroic Viking to conform – in part – to an imported model of heroic and noble masculinity which has little to do with historical memories of the Viking Age.[222]

In *Völsunga saga*, social roles are emphasised, as are the importance of marital alliances and courtly pursuits such as archery. This preoccupation with manners and new customs translates the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, some of which may have been composed as early as the tenth century, into the new culture of the thirteenth century.

From the moment of his birth, Sigurðr's extraordinary qualities are emphasised in *Völsunga saga*:

[222] Larrington, 'A Viking in Shining Armour?', p. 270.

> Var hann vatni ausinn með Sigurðar nafni. Frá honum segja allir eitt, at um atferð ok vöxt var engi hans maki. (p. 23)
> (He was sprinkled with water, and named Sigurðr. All people say the same thing about him, that in conduct and growth there was no match for him.)

The Sigurðr figures of the *Poetic Edda* are mostly described in terms of bravery and heroism, but in *Völsunga saga* the list of attributes is slightly different. The sprinkling with water refers to a pagan ceremony of naming, but it also suggests an anachronistic Christianity, and Christianity is perhaps also essential for a medieval courtly man.[223] The text also shows a new concern to place Sigurðr in a European context (*norðrálfu heimsins*) (p. 23), the origin of the courtly influence on medieval Iceland.[224] It appears that these changes are necessary to make Sigurðr recognisable as a masculine hero in this new context.[225]

Völsunga saga provides a clearer idea of Sigurðr's childhood than the *Poetic Edda*. Early in the text, we are told that Sigurðr was fostered by Reginn:

> Hann kenndi honum íþróttir, tafl ok rúnar ok tungur margar at mæla, sem þá var títt konungasonum, ok marga hluti aðra. (p. 23)
> (He taught him skills: chess, runes, and to speak many languages, as was then customary for kings' sons, and many other things.)

In the *Poetic Edda*, Reginn just makes Sigurðr a sword and urges him to kill Fáfnir. But in *Völsunga saga*, Reginn is responsible for raising Sigurðr which entails teaching him courtly attributes.[226] This education seems rather anachronistic, and reflects the noble upbringings of the period in which the text was created or recorded more than those of the text's temporal setting. In *Völsunga saga*, idealised masculinity becomes more complex than in the heroic

[223] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe addresses the Christianisation of Sigurðr; see 'Quid Sigvardus cum Christo? Moral Interpretations of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in Old Norse Literature', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), 167-200. She argues that 'it is quite clear from the textual examples that Sigurðr was presented as standing in some moral relationship to Christianity' (p.194).

[224] See Sverre Bagge, *Cross and Scepter: the Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 222-31.

[225] Linke comments on the effect of courtly society on women, arguing that their voices were 'muted' leading to an alteration of female identity; see 'Cultural Constructions of Gender', p. 287.

[226] Matthew Townend comments that this emphasis on the education of the hero is commonly found in *fornaldarsögur*; see *Language and History in Viking age England: Linguistic Relations Between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002), pp. 146-7. Ian McDougall provides a list of such examples; see 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages in Medieval Iceland', *Sagabook* 22 (1986-9), 180–233 (p. 212).

context of the *Poetic Edda*. It is no longer sufficient to gain a kingdom by brute force; a king must be able to negotiate and deal with foreign opponents. This scene also demonstrates how this kind of masculine identity is taught and created through a close relationship with another man. Unlike Sigurðr's warrior identity, which is represented as innate, a courtly identity needs to be learnt through mimicking the behaviour of a male role model.

Yet Sigurðr cannot learn to be a man just through imitating Reginn. While he can demonstrate the required courtly skills he is not able to express his masculinity through violence. In *Rm.*, Reginn is described in a prose introduction:

> Hann var vitr, grimmr ok fjölkunnigr. Reginn veitti Sigurði fóstr ok kenslu ok elskaði hann mjök.
> (He was wise, fierce and skilled in magic. Reginn undertook Sigurðr's fostering and teaching, and loved him greatly.)

The initial accounts of Reginn in both texts are superficially similar. But in the compiler's addition to *Rm.*, Reginn appears to have several praiseworthy qualities, and the description of him as *grimmr* suggests a warrior masculinity. Yet in *Völsunga saga*, there is no indication of Reginn's heroic abilities. Indeed, when he reveals his family history to Sigurðr he admits that he leaves instead of seeking vengeance for his father's death (p. 26). Furthermore, this depiction of Reginn in *Völsunga saga* does not end in an acknowledgement of his love for his foster-son, but instead:

> Eitt sinn spurði Reginn Sigurð, er þeir váru báðir saman, ef hann vissi, hversu mikit fé faðir hans hefði átt eða hverir þat varðveittu. (p. 23)
> (Once time, when they were both together, Reginn asked Sigurðr if he knew how much money his father had possessed and who the people were that preserved it.)

The inclusion of Reginn's fondness for Sigurðr has been replaced by an interest in his wealth, portraying Reginn as greedy.[227] Reginn can serve as a courtly role-model for Sigurðr, but

[227] Reginn, is not however, a completely abjected character; not only is he recognised for his courtly knowledge, but the narrator sometimes appears to side with him. See for example, the sword-forging incident when we are told that he 'þykkir Sigurðr framgjarn um smíðina' (thought that Sigurðr was very eager about smithying) (p. 27).

Sigurðr cannot imitate him completely if he wishes to have a male identity which is worthy of approbation.

After Sigurðr kills Fáfnir, *Völsunga saga* provides its most detailed description of this character. This scene is a central example of the more courtly nature of *Völsunga saga*, and has no parallel in the *Poetic Edda*.[228] Sigurðr's carefully decorated shield, and the gold detailing of his weapons and clothes firmly establish him as a courtly prince. His sword does not bear a motif marking him as a Völsung, as a family member, but as Sigurðr. As the description continues, Sigurðr's individuality is emphasised, especially in relation to courtly activities:

> Þá er taldir eru allir inir stærstu kappar ok inir ágæztu höfðingjar, þá mun hann jafnan fremstr taldr, ok hans nafn gengr í öllum tungum fyrir norðan Grikklands haf, ok svá mun vera, meðan veröldin stendr. [...] Vel kann hann sverði at beita ok spjóti at skjóta ok skapti at verpa ok skildi at halda, boga at spenna eða hesti at ríða ok margs konar kurteisi nam hann í æsku. [...] Hann var langtalaðr ok málsnjallr, svá at ekki tók hann þat erendi at mæla, at hann mundi fyrr hætta en svá synist öllum sem enga leið muni eiga at vera nema svá sem hann segir. [...] Eigi skorti hann hug, ok aldri varð hann hræddr. (p. 41)
> (When all the greatest heroes and the most excellent leaders are spoken of then he must always be spoken of as foremost and his name is in all the languages spoken north of the Greek ocean, and so must he be, while the world stands [...] he can well handle a sword, and shoot a spear and throw a missile and hold a shield, draw a bow and ride a horse and courtesy of many kinds he learnt in his youth [...] he was eloquent and could speak for a long time, so that if he recounted a speech that he would not leave off before all would see there was no way possible except the one he said. He did not lack courage and he was never afraid.)

He has social graces as well as heroic abilities, and excels in various chivalric accomplishments. Just as in the description of his upbringing, language is presented as equally as important as action. A prince must be able to perform linguistically as well as physically, and to persuade others with arguments as well as a sword. Indeed, here rhetorical ability is presented in quite aggressive terms, creating links with a warrior identity. As Larrington argues:

[228] As previously mentioned, this scene was interpolated from *Þiðreks saga*.

> Noble masculine identity for both knight and Viking hero is constructed by the pursuit of honour and reputation. [...] Identity and status are established in the first instance through lineage and then maintained by their word-of-mouth reputation in battle, almost always known by those whom they encounter.[229]

Yet although his fame is emphasised, it is with caveats as he is only known in certain countries and in specific languages. Fame is contingent; there is a problem with the translation of fame, as different cultures may show approbation for different characteristics. The absence of universality undermines both the chivalric and heroic codes.

Stephen Jaeger has explored the ways in which courtliness was criticised as encouraging effeminacy in medieval Europe.[230] He discusses the rejection of courtly values by Saxo Grammaticus as a distortion of masculine Danish values which, 'corrupt[ed] their ancient and traditional heroic ideals' (p. 186). Jaeger also suggests that 'there is a great deal that argues for an anti-courtly bias of the Nibelungen poet' (p. 192) although he acknowledges that 'the poet himself does not openly condemn the courtliness of the main characters' (p. 192). Yet *Völsunga saga* provides a very different conception of the relationship between courtliness and masculinity, depicting it as working in concert with a warrior masculinity. By demonstrating that recognisable masculinity operates differently in the context of the *Poetic Edda* and its rewriting, *Völsunga saga* shows that the norms of recognisability are not stable and, therefore, it can be said to offer a critique as well as a reinforcement of these standards. The alternative conception of an idealised masculinity demonstrates that gender identity is a product of each text, and is something that can be added to a narrative rather than being a reflection of a natural state.

[229] Larrington, 'A Viking in Shining Armour', p. 278.
[230] Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 176-94.

3: Insults

For every insult there is a culture.[231]

Louis Althusser argues that 'ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects'.[232] In *Excitable Speech*, Butler develops this concept to demonstrate that insults can similarly create identity: 'by being called a name one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility of social existence' (p. 2). Despite its offensive nature, such an address can provide agency as it creates a subject who can respond to the abuse. As Derrida argues, a performative utterance can always be cited in a different context, and so an insult's necessary iterability means that it can be recontexualised as a positive term.[233] The violence of an insult lies in its ability to create a reconfiguration of social reality.[234] Insults can 'expose the limits of the human and call for its reformation'.[235] Butler also explores how a state's legal circumscriptions 'produc(e) the domain of publically acceptable speech, demarcating the line between the domains of the speakable and the unspeakable'.[236] In medieval Iceland, *níð* had a similar function.[237] By circumscribing what utterances are acceptable, *níð* laws create a definition of

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[231] Henry Louis Gates, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010). Gates alludes to the ways in which communities can re-position insults as positive identities, although he rejects the simplicity of this claim.

[232] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* trans. By Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 179. Philip Anderson argues that identity is constructed through insults in *Lokasenna*. He states that Loki 'accuses the gods of unmanliness, or cowardice and sexual indecency, and he accuses the goddesses of unwomanliness, or the prized feminine virtues of constancy and chastity. The poet uses this limitation to delineate personality, for no two accusations are alike, and no two gods respond with the same words and phrases'; see 'Form and Content in *Lokasenna*: A Re-evaluation' in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 139 -158 (p. 145).

[233] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1-24 (pp. 17-18).

[234] The ways in which discourse can affect identity is illustrated by the difference between constructing someone as a freedom-fighter or terrorist. As Swenson argues, in a verbal contest 'the victor wins the power to define'; see 'Performing Definitions', p. 37.

[235] See Butler, 'Antigone's Claim'.

[236] Butler, *Excitable speech* p. 77.

[237] For a more detailed discussion of *nið*, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. by Joan Turville Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), pp. 28-32 or Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', pp. 373-7. Alison Finlay has explored the differences between the legal categories of *níð* and *ýki*; see 'Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of *ýki* in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*', *alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 21–44. She states that there is 'a distinction between accusations – those

the language and identities that are speakable. Passive participation in a homosexual act, for example, cannot be openly articulated.[238] The prohibition of certain descriptions of actions under the *níð* laws serves partly to promote their power; if an insult is categorised as unutterable, it becomes even more wounding when used. Insults establish some identities as unspeakable but also enable the creation of a multiplicity of identities.

In the first piece of dialogue in *HH.*, Högni's daughter describes Höðbroddr as being 'óneisan sem kattar son' (as valiant as a cat's kitten) (st. 18). The foregrounding of insults, and in particular one that refers to heroic masculinity, is fitting for a text which features several stanzas of flyting, a form of verbal contest that appears in many Old Norse texts.[239] The flyting in *HH.* begins in a traditional manner when Guðmundr asks Sinfiötli to identify himself and his men. Sinfiötli responds:

> Segðu þat í aptan, er svínom gefr [...]
> at sé Ylfingar austan komnir. (st. 34)
> (This evening, when you feed the swine [...] say that the Ylfingar have come from the east.)

He does not provide an individual classification for the Ylfingar. Instead, they are defined in contrast to Guðmundr, who is accused of performing the low status tasks of a slave; the insult creates identities for both the Ylfings and Guðmundr. Indeed, Sinfiötli continues with the comparison by describing Helgi as:

> Sá er opt hefir örnu sadda,
> meðan þú á qvernom kystir þýiar. (st. 35)
> (Often provide eagles' food; meanwhile you (Guðmundr) kiss the bondswomen at the millstone.)

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most strongly condemned by Grágás – which, whether literally intended or not, are physically possible, and those (*ýki*) which transgress the boundaries of human or masculine possibility – the accusation of being a woman, an animal, or some kind of monster, or of bearing a child' (pp. 25-6).

[238] Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, p. 26.

[239] Clover defines flyting as 'a stylized exchange between hostile speakers of traditional provocations – insults, boasts, threats and curses'; see '*Hárbardsljóð* as Generic Farce' in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 97-118 (pp. 97-8). Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos describes how a flyting involves the performance of conventions; see 'Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic: The Interactional Structure of the "*senna*" and the "*mannjafnaðr*" in *Hárbarðsljóð*', *Scandinavian Studies* 55:2 (1983), 149-74 (158).

This presents battle as a more honourable activity than romance, with class identity used once more to distinguish an admirable man.[240] In *Völsunga saga*, the sense that a relationship with a woman is in some way shameful is increased as Sinfiötli adds meeting one's wife (p. 16) to the list of dishonourable tasks that he accuses his opponent of doing. In *HH.*, Guðmundr responds by accusing Sinfiötli of sleeping in a 'hreysi' (heap of stones) (st. 36). This insult refers to Sinfiötli's residency in the woods and also attacks a commendable identity, but on the basis of animalistic tendencies rather than class. As explored in the thesis introduction, Kristeva describes how the self is formed by the abjection of certain parts of the body; in a similar manner, insults create an identity for the their deliverer through the criticism of the character of another person.[241] Yet as abjection always contains ambiguity, as boundaries between what is inside and outside the self are revealed to be permeable, identity created in this manner is particularly unstable.[242] Verbal contests are able to set the social boundaries for acceptable identities.

As the flyting in *HH.* continues, the insults are based more clearly on gender and sexuality.[243] Sinfiötli refers to Guðmundr as:

> Völva [...]
> skollvís kona [...]
> qvaztu engi mann eiga vilia,
> segg bryniaðan, nema Sinfjötla. (st. 37)
> (A sorceress [...] a woman wise in deceit [...] you said you did not wish to possess any warrior wearing armour except Sinfiötli.)

It is not enough to suggest that Guðmundr is not an active hero. To truly insult him, Sinfiötli has to describe him as feminine. The final suggestion, that Guðmundr was the passive partner

[240] Bax and Padmos explain that prowess with women could also be used as a boast of personal masculinity; see 'Verbal Duelling', p. 160. The varied function of romance demonstrates the unfixed nature of identity; the same behaviour can create opposite identities.

[241] Kristeva states that the establishment of borders designates identity through abjection. The subject 'constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject'; see *Powers of Horror*, p. 5.

[242] Indeed, the prevalence of violence in the *Poetic Edda* draws attention to the troubling of boundaries between the self and others. Butler comments that violence is 'an exploitation […] of that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another'; see *Precarious Life*, p. 27.

[243] As mentioned in the thesis introduction, Clark has produced an extensive analysis of the importance of sexuality and desire in the Helgi poems, using the work of Kosofsky Sedgwick which I shall not attempt to rework here; see *Gender*, pp. 46-66.

in a sexual encounter, is *níð* and the most serious allegation. Yet Sinfiötli's masculinity is not diminished; it is passivity and not a homosexual act per se that is shameful.[244] Folke Ström explains that these accusations are 'a symbolic presentation of the abstract concept of cowardice' through femaleness and a passive sexuality.[245] Indeed, Sinfiötli's extreme desirability to Guðmundr perhaps increases his own status; he is the most attractive warrior, whether to men or women.

As Clover characterises the flyting structure as 'claim – denial – counterclaim', it is informative to examine which assertions Guðmundr repudiates.[246] He rejects the class insults as 'ósönnu bregðr' (untruths) (st. 36). Yet he does not refute any of the accusations which construct him as female or sexually passive. It is difficult to tell whether this is because he accepts the charges or sees them as so ridiculous that they are not worth contradicting. In contrast, in *Völsunga saga*, Granmarr (who here takes Guðmundr's role in the flyting) clearly responds to Sinfiötli's insults with the counter-accusation that he is lying (p. 16). Insults which place the interlocutor in a category of non-manliness, whether as a woman, an animal, someone living outside of society or a passive homosexual are used in this flyting; this supports Clover's one-sex model where identity is categorised as either masculine or Other. The exchange of insults also implies that gender is determined by behaviour and, therefore, changeable. Nevertheless, the use of different masculinities as an insult indicates a discomfort with the acknowledgement of a range of gender possibilities.

Helgi's contribution to the debate on manliness in *HH.* is advice that flyting itself is not appropriate behaviour:

> Væri ycr, Sinfiötli, sœmra myclo
> gunni at heyia oc glaða örno,
> enn sé ónýtom orðom at bregðaz. (st. 45)
> (It would befit you more, Sinfiötli, to do battle and delight eagles, than to taunt with useless words.)

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[244] Sørensen discusses how only the passive homosexual role is insulting; see *Unmanly Man*, p. 57.
[245] Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: Viking Society, 1973), p. 18.
[246] Clover, 'Hárbardsljóð', p. 98.

Helgi suggests that physical combat is more admirable than verbal conflict; as Clark observes, ‘however vicious the flyting, it would seem the true test of heroic masculinity lies in martial prowess’.[247] It is perhaps the less active nature of words that Helgi criticises; just as passivity is criticised by way of comparison to women, a verbal duel is also passive even though a flyting often acts as a prelude to battle.[248] Yet the prominence of actions over speech does not only create irony when emphasised in a literary text. It is also not supported by the construction of *níð*, which was severely punished, in a similar way to an actual wound.[249] The attempt to diminish the importance of verbal insults suggests that the concept of gender being defined through behaviour is subversive and threatening. In *Völsunga saga*, Helgi does not refer to the flyting as useless words. Instead, he suggests that the men should fight rather than exchange shameful insults (p. 17). This text has more acknowledgement of the power of words to establish or confirm identity.

HHv. also criticises a dependence on speech. In this text it is a woman, Hrímgerðr, who explores masculinity through her insult to Atli’s sexuality:

> Gneggia myndir þú, Atli, ef þú geldr né værir.
> [...]
> aptarla hiarta hygg ec at þitt, Atli, sé,
> þótt þu hafir reina rödd. (st. 20)
> (You would neigh, Atli, if you were not gelded. […] Your heart is further back, I think, Atli, although you have a stallion’s voice.)

Here a castrated form of masculinity is clearly linked to other non-heroic and passive behaviour: a lack of courage and speech instead of action. Atli responds to this accusation directly:

> Reini mun þér ec þiccia, ef þú reyna knátt
> [...]
> öll muntu lemiaz. (st. 21)

247 Clark, *Gender*, p. 56.
248 See, for example, *HHv.* [st. 33].
249 For a discussion of *nið* in *Grágás*, see Clover, ‘Regardless’, pp. 373-4. The extent to which such legal constructions affect the significance of these insults in the *Poetic Edda* is not, however, clear.

> (I would be considered a stallion by you, if you could test me ... I will destroy you completely.)

His re-citing of Hrímgerðr's comparison of him to a horse is an attempt to reclaim the insult as a compliment. Yet Atli only presents himself as masculine in contrast to Hrímgerðr, and to be more manly than a woman is not an impressive feat.[250] Previous sections of this chapter have explored the female role of endorsing heroic masculinity, and here Hrímgerðr is established as the judge of Atli's gender and sexual identities. His response suggests that Hrímgerðr, despite her biological sex, could be more masculine than him, otherwise the accusation would not be worth refuting. Like *HH.I*, *HHv*. uses insults to indicate the mutability of gender. Atli's reclamation of the horse image also demonstrates the iterability of insults and the potential for a re-citation in a new context to alter meaning; insults are less intimidating in this text as they can be countered and negated. This scene is absent from *Völsunga saga*, suggesting again that in this text words have a more lasting effect. Masculinity can be performed in both words and actions, and verbal exchanges can also be an active demonstration of identity.

In *Sd.*, the eponymous protagonist offers a strong warning about the dangers of arguing with fools (sts. 24-5). Sigrdrífa provides her audience with an exploration of the correct ways for men to behave, and so establishes boundaries for acceptable masculinity. Once more, it is women who seem to be in control of which male identities are considered acceptable. Sigrdrífa's speech also alludes to the danger of flyting, which is equivalent to lethal violence: death is presented as an appropriate punishment for verbal abuse.[251] Here insults can be accidental, which demonstrates the power of language to exceed the speaker's intentions; this inability to control discourse suggests the ever-present possibility for identity to be read in different ways. Unlike in *HHv.*, the power of a re-citation of an address is not

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[250] Nevertheless, Atli does win this contest. As Clover notes, women do not succeed in these debates anywhere in Old Norse literature; see 'Regardless', p. 373.

[251] In *Rm.* it is the untruth of insults which is the reason for criticism [st. 4].

acknowledged, although Sigrdrífa discusses how to correctly respond to an insult. Physical violence is presented as the only possible reaction to abuse. Yet, as the operation of insults means that they are never truly original, identity cannot actually be altered by removing the source of the slur.[252] Butler disagrees with Althusser that the subject needs to recognise, or accept an address as the creation of identity can take place without the subject's knowledge; ignoring an insult cannot prevent its impact as 'the mark interpellation makes is not descriptive but inaugurative'.[253] A lack of response does not necessarily negate the interpellation of an identity.

Insults create identity through the abjection of an interlocutor. Although insults have the power to construct identity through language, their origin in discourse means that they can also be contested.[254] Butler comments that a subject has 'a vulnerability to being named' a multiplicity of names which can create a 'quandary for identity'.[255] This indicates the possibilities for a range of masculinities. Nevertheless, the desire to contain masculinity indicates that only certain masculinities are considered socially viable, and that others will be abjected.

4: Alterations of appearance

In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, appearance can be a clear sign of gender identity. Butler discusses the potential of drag to draw attention to the performativity inherent in all ways in which gender is outwardly expressed.[256] Yet she also confirms that not all instances of drag are subversive in this way, as some drag performances can merely reinforce existing structures of gender identity; merely to have a man appear in women's clothes, or vice versa,

[252] As Butler comments, 'only because we already know [an insult's] force from prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now'; see *Excitable Speech*, p. 80.
[253] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 31.
[254] For an exploration of the alternative readings made possible by language see Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), especially pp. 44-65.
[255] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 30.
[256] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, pp. 84-95.

is not sufficient.[257] Nevertheless, transvestism was seen as a serious threat to gender and sexuality in medieval Iceland; the law categorised it as a justification for divorce, suggesting that people who cross-dress place themselves outside of their original gender.[258] Icelandic laws forbidding cross-dressing envisage clothing as an important method of establishing status and categorising people.[259] Yet these laws not only regulate clothing but in doing so reveal the possibilities for expressing different gender identities; cross-dressing is a direct challenge to fixed notions of sexual difference.

In *HH.II*, the compiler-narrator's prose explains that Helgi dresses as a serving woman to escape the attentions of Hundingr's men. Yet Blindr suspects that something is amiss:

> Hvöss ero augo í Hagals þýio,
> era þat karls ætt, er á qvernom stendr. (st. 2)
> (The eyes of Hagall's bondswoman are piercing; that is not a peasant standing at the millstone.)

It is notable that Blindr detects Helgi's nobility but not his gender.[260] The body can unproblematically represent certain expressions of identity in this text.[261] Transvestism can demonstrate how sexual difference functions as a simulacrum: there is no original or true gender, only endless reproductions of masculinity or femininity.[262] Yet the presentation of nobility as innate suggests that not all aspects of identity are fluid in this text. Indeed, the lack of any unambiguous female to male transvestism in the *Poetic Edda* suggests that female

[257] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 85-6.
[258] The law allows for divorce where one of the couple have worn clothes of the opposite gender and for any reason if the Bishop is consulted; see *Grágás* Vol. 2, p. 63.
[259] The Icelandic clothing laws work in a similar way to which the sumptuary laws functioned throughout medieval Europe; for more information on medieval sumptuary laws, see Claire Sponsler, 'Narrating the Social Order: Medieval Clothing Laws', *CLIO* 21 (1992), 265-283.
[260] Piercing eyes are often seen as a sign of nobility, because of their link to Þórr; see Richard Perkins, 'The Gateway to Trondheim: Two Icelanders at Agdanes', *Saga-Book* 25:3 (2000), 179-213 (p. 187). Indeed, Þórr's eyes nearly reveal his identity in *Þrymskviða* [st. 27]. Eyes are also used as a clear sign of identity in *Sg.* [st. 36].
[261] Similarly, the identities of Hialli and Högni are clearly represented by their respective hearts in *Akv.* [st. 23-5].
[262] In contrast, Margaret Clunies Ross argues that in *Þrymskviða* Þórr remains masculine despite his bridal attire; see 'Reading *Þrymskviða*' in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Paul Leonard Acker, Carolyne Larrington (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 177- 194 (p. 189).

masculinity is more contentious, although even male to female transvestism is removed from *Völsunga saga*.[263]

4.i: Shape-shifting

In *Grp.*, identity can also be perceived from outward appearance. The prose introduction tells us that Sigurðr was 'auðkendr' (easily recognisable). Yet the poem also describes how, in the future, Sigurðr will:

> Lit hefir [...] Gunnars oc læti hans,
> mælsco þína oc meginhyggior. (st. 39)
> (Have the appearance of Gunnarr and his manner (but) your own eloquence and powerful thoughts.)

The identities of Gunnarr and Sigurðr will become mixed: the two will neither be entirely themselves, nor completely transformed into the form of the other. Zoe Borovsky examines the problematic nature of identities that are intermingled and argues that 'Brynhildr embodies the confused internal state' of the men so that the masculine heroic body can remain pure.[264] Yet the depiction of the shape-shifting, which does not occur elsewhere in the *Poetic Edda*, means that anxieties about identity are not entirely removed from male characters in *Grp.*: masculinity becomes multiple or unstable. Sigurðr immediately views the change of identity as problematic, declaring: 'verst hyggiom því' (most evil it seems) (st. 40). Not only does he foresee the problems that will emerge from his deceitful wooing of Brynhildr, but he is uncomfortable with the whole idea of bodily exchange.

Due to the much less detailed form of Grípir's prophecy which occurs in *Völsunga saga* (the full effect of these changes has been addressed in the first chapter), there is no mention of the shape-shifting at this point, but it is depicted directly later in this text:

[263] For a discussion of the abjection of female masculinity, see Judith Halberstam, 'The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly: Men, Women, and Masculinity' in *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. by Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 344–368 (p. 358).
[264] Zoe Borovsky, '"En hon er blandin mjök": Women and Insults in Old-Norse/Icelandic Literature', in *Cold Counsel: The Women of Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. by K. Swenson and S. M. Anderson (New York; London: Garland, 1999), pp. 1-14 (p. 9).

> Gunnarr má nú eigi ríða þenna eld; skipta nú litum, sem Grímhildr kenndi þeim Sigurði ok Gunnari. Síðan ríðr Sigurðr. (p. 48)
> (Gunnarr could not now ride through the fire; Sigurðr and Gunnarr now exchanged appearances as Grímhildr had taught them. Then Sigurðr rode.)

The alteration in appearance is described in matter of fact terms. During the time he appears as Gunnarr, Sigurðr is still referred to as Sigurðr by the narrator, indicating that the outward change has not brought his identity into question. The shape-shifting is presented in a much less troubling manner than in the *Poetic Edda*. Neither character objects to the idea, and it is introduced as a logical solution to the problem of Gunnarr's inability to ride through the fire. The text explicitly mentions that the men are able to change shapes because they have been trained to do so by Grímhildr. Shape-changing is not an innate male ability, but something that can be taught by a woman with supernatural knowledge.

Brynhildr's apparent recognition of Sigurðr-in-the-form-of-Gunnarr suggests that this substitution becomes even less straightforward. She tells her foster father that she thought it was Sigurðr rather than Gunnarr who rode through the fire (p. 50). Yet it is not so much that Brynhildr recognises Sigurðr, but rather that she cannot believe that any other man would be able to perform this feat. But later, Brynhildr reveals that 'ek undruðumst þann mann, er kom í minn sal, ok þóttumst ek kenna yður augu' (I wondered at the man who came into my hall, and I thought I knew your eyes) (p. 55). Sigurðr does not actually have the complete appearance of Gunnarr, but retains one of his own distinctive physical features. The boundaries between interior identity and exterior appearance, and the two men, are blurred by this revelation. Identity is represented as innate to some extent, as there is a possibility that Sigurðr still remains knowable even when in the form of another man.

The other incident of human shape-shifting that occurs in *Völsunga saga* is a bodily exchange between Signý and a sorceress (p. 9). Here it is made clear that no-one notices the identity exchange. It is unclear whether this is because Sigmundr and Siggeirr are less perceptive than Brynhildr, or that Signý and the sorceress are more interchangeable than

Sigurðr and Siggeirr. Signý's pregnancy has implications for the embodiment of identity; although it appears to be the sorceress' body which is impregnated by Sigmundr, it is Signý's body which carries the resulting child. The ability for Signý to conceive whilst in another form also indicates that there is a fixed concept of corporeal identity that is not affected by outward appearance, echoing the suggestion that Sigurðr is always identifiable. Nevertheless, shape-shifting destabilises the boundaries between the self and other. In both instances of shape-shifting the biological sex of the people swapping bodies is the same; it is perhaps too disturbing an idea for appearances to be exchanged between men and women. Human shape-shifting is portrayed as something men are able to do, but only under the guidance of women. Yet in the *Poetic Edda* and in *Völsunga saga* it is mostly men who are able to exchange their form with that of an animal.[265]

4.ii: Animal identities

If taking the form of another person is a threat to the stability of identity, then the ability to become an animal is even more subversive. In *Völsunga saga*, there is a renewed interest in animal transformations. When characters become wolves, dragons or fish they retain components of their anthropoid identity, blurring the boundaries between person and beast. To analyse the ways in which human, and in particular male, identities intersect with animal identities it is beneficial to read the text in conjunction with posthuman theory.[266] Haraway, for example, argues that:

> A great deal is at stake in such meetings [between human and animal], and outcomes are not guaranteed. There is no teleological warrant here, no assured happy or unhappy ending, socially, ecologically or scientifically. There is only the chance for getting on together with some grace. The Great Divides of animal/ human, nature/

[265] There are examples of female animal shape-shifting elsewhere in Old Norse literature; for example, the swan maidens in *Völundarkviða*, although the prevalence of berserker identities means that this is often a male domain. For an exploration of animal shape-shifting in Old Norse literature see Hilda Davidson, 'Shape-Changing in Old Norse Sagas' in *Animals in Folklore*, ed. by Joshua Porter and William Russell (Cambridge: Brewer; Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), pp. 126–42.

[266] For example, Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, Minn.; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

> culture, organic / technical and wild/ domestic flatten into mundane differences – the kinds that have consequences and demand respect and response – rather than rising to sublime and final ends.[267]

In order to explore the differences between humans and animals in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, I will first establish how animals are represented in these texts.[268] Animals are most frequently mentioned in relation to battle in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. The beasts of battle motif is present throughout Old Norse literature, and uses feeding wolves or ravens as a metaphor for combat.[269] The importance of animals in the heroic *Poetic Edda* can be seen from the first poem, *HH.*, which opens with shrieking eagles to mark the birth of the hero. Relations with animals have varying amounts of honour attached; although a man gains respect from feeding the beasts of battle by killing other men (see, for example, *HH.* sts. 6, 34, 44; *HH.II* sts. 7, 23, 25; *Fm.* st. 35), looking after animals such as pigs or goats is viewed as a lower class activity and therefore shameful (see, for example, *HH.* sts. 34, 43; *HH.II* sts. 22, 39). A hierarchy of animals is established. Birds, for example, are depicted as wise (*HHv.* st. 1; *Fm.* st. 32). Atli is able to understand the birds in *HHv.* immediately, but in *Fm.* Sigurðr is only able to interpret their language after ingesting dragon's blood.[270] This scene indicates that once the boundary between human and animal has been traversed, it is not re-established.

Indeed, animals are not always 'Othered' by these texts; a connection is established when animals are used to represent humans in dreams, as discussed in the first chapter (pp. 49-50). Close relationships between riders and their horses are portrayed, to the extent that

[267] *When Species Meet*, p. 15.
[268] As yet, there has been little critical attention paid to the representation of animals in Old Norse literature, although Kristina Jennbert has explored archaeological evidence relating to the links between animals and humans in medieval Scandinavia; see *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion*, trans. By Alan Crozier (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2011). Lena Rohrbach has examined the depiction of human-animal relationships in the sagas; see *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier-Relationen in der Sagaliteratur* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2009).
[269] Mark Griffith has extensively explored the use of this motif in Old English literature; see 'Convention and Originality in the Old English "Beasts of Battle" Typescene', *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993)m 179-99.
[270] Quinn links this to other representations of magical liquids which enhance knowledge, such as Sigrdrífa's provision of a memory drink; see 'Liquid Knowledge', p. 202.

Grani mourns Sigurðr's death (*Br.* st. 7; *Gðr.II* st. 5).[271] In *Völsunga saga*, this relationship is extended so that Grani appears to be incomplete without Sigurðr (p. 34) and he will not be ridden by anyone else (p. 48). *Akv.* suggests that caring for horses is a necessary masculine activity when Guðrún taunts her husband that after his sons' deaths, he will never again see them 'geira scepta / manar meita né mara keyra' (make shafts for spears, cut the mane of a horse nor drive a horse) (st. 38). Here a relationship to a horse appears to be an important component of a warrior identity; as Harriet Evans argues, 'horses in these episodes can be used to define heroic actions and character, distinguish heroic men from their peers, and contribute to the development and self-definition of the hero'.[272] Particularly ambivalent is the portrayal of humans who are said to have wolfish identities. This can be seen both as a positive (see, for example, *Rm.* st. 11; *Br.* st. 4; *Völsunga saga* pp. 11, 34, 58) and negative (see, for example, *HH.* st. 36, 41; *HH.II* sts. 1, 33; *Fm.* st. 35; *Sg.* st. 35; *Hm.* st. 29; *Völsunga saga* p. 7, 11, 16, 57, 65) attribute.[273] Sex with animals is also alluded to in flyting, and producing offspring with a wolf can be a demonstration of masculinity rather than something to be ashamed of (*HH.* st. 39). The boundaries between animals and humans are not established as absolute.[274]

4.iii: Animal shape-shifting

> The human is a continually contested and rearticulated term.[275]

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[271] Harriet Evans has explored the relationships between horses and humans, and that of Sigurðr and Grani in particular arguing that their close relationship means that 'the horse and the hero cannot be separated'; see 'The Horse and his Hero in Old Norse Literature' (unpublished MA thesis, University of York, 2013) p. 34. Sarah van der Hoek-Springer has also addressed this issue; see 'Horses in the Viking Imagination' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2000).

[272] 'Horse and his Hero' p. 70.

[273] The negative associations of wolves have been explored by Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen; see 'The Níðingr and the Wolf', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011)m 171-196 (pp. 185-6). Clark comments on negative wolf imagery in the *Poetic Edda*; see 'Kin-Slaying', pp. 27-9.

[274] Jason Stoessel argues that 'though the discourse of animality was often wielded as an instrument of social division or alienation of minorities, it also played an important creative role in shaping social and cultural identities in the middle ages through music, literature and art'; see 'Howling Like Wolves, Bleating Like Lambs: Singers and the Discourse of Animality in the Late Middle Ages', *Viator* 45:2 (2014)m 201–236 (p. 228).

[275] Butler, 'Antigone's Claim'.

The first incident where a human takes on an animal identity occurs near the beginning of *Völsunga saga*. After describing Sigmundr's escape from the wolf that has eaten his brothers, we are told that:

> En þat er sögn sumra manna, at sú in sama ylgr væri móðir Siggeirs konungs ok hafi hún brugðit á sik þessu líki fyrir tröllskapar sakir ok fjölkynngi. (p. 8)
> (It is said by some people that it seems that the wolf was King Siggeirr's mother and she had turned herself into that shape because of witchcraft and sorcery.)

This account is hesitant and uncertain. The inclusion of this additional occurrence of animal shape-shifting suggests that *Völsunga saga* has a particular interest in the boundaries of identity between humans and animals. In this extract, shape-shifting, if it does exist as a phenomenon, is linked to magic, and is a female activity. As Siggeirr's mother uses the disguise of a wolf to kill, it is also presented as something dangerous. Yet Sigmundr has to allow the wolf's tongue to penetrate his mouth in order to effectively fight it to free himself (p. 8). This moment where the boundaries between the bodies of Sigmundr and the wolf are blurred, where borders are transgressed, allows Sigmundr the strength to fight back against his attacker. Animal transformations are presented in negative terms, and yet the breaking of clear boundaries between animals and humans can be beneficial.

Sigmundr is also involved in the next incident of animalistic shape-shifting, when he and Sinfiötli come across some wolf skins:

> En þeir finna eitt hús ok tvá menn sofandi í húsinu með digrum gullhringum. Þeir höfðu orðit fyrir ósköpum, því at úlfahamir hengu í húsinu yfir þeim. It tíunda hvert dægr máttu þeir komast ór hömunum. Þeir váru konungasynir. Þeir Sigmundr fóru í hamina ok máttu eigi ór komast, ok fylgdi sú náttúra, sem áðr var, létu ok vargsröddu. Þeir skildu báðir röddina. (p. 11)
> (They find a house, and there were two men asleep in the house with large gold rings. They had become the victim of a spell, because there were wolf skins hanging over them in the house. Every ten days they could come out of the skins. They were sons of kings. They, Sigmundr [and Sinfiötli] got into the skins, and could not get out of them and yielded to their power, just as before, and they had a wolf's voice. They both understood this language.)

The introduction of the magical wolf skins is again uncertain. The narrator clearly suggests that an evil fate befell the princes because of the wolf skins; they are seen as dangerous and disruptive. It seems curious that the status of the men and their gold jewellery is worth mentioning. Perhaps because of earlier links between women, magic and shape-shifting, the narrator clarifies that this is also something that noble men can be involved in. It is notable that the previous shape-shifting was done by the mother of a king. Shape-shifting can be a noble activity, but this does not necessarily mean that it is endorsed by the text, as its narrative describes plenty of unpleasant behaviour carried out by kings, princes and queens.

The men are not in control of the shape-shifting. They become trapped in the skins, and cannot get out of them. Shape-shifting becomes an almost involuntary action, thereby increasing the magical nature of this transformation as the shape-shifting is achieved purely through the use of an enchanted object rather than through their own ability. There is a more thorough alteration of identity than in the previous extract. It no longer just concerns appearance, but through language Sigmundr's and Sinfiötli's whole conception of reality has been changed, evidenced by their later savagery. The men are no longer fully human, and yet they seem to retain a warrior identity. Shortly after the two men put on the wolf skins, we are told that they fight each other:

> Sigmundr bítr í barkann framan. Þann dag máttu þeir eigi komast ór úlfahömunum. (p. 11)
> (Sigmundr bites him in the throat. That day they could not come out of the wolf skins.)

This violence against kin which emerges once an animal transformation has occurred again suggests that this kind of shape-shifting is presented negatively in the text.[276] Yet Sigmundr

[276] This is reminiscent of portrayals of characters in *beserkr* form as out of control elsewhere in Old Norse literature, such as in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda* vol. 1 ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954-1959), pp. 1-105.

learns how to cure his son by observing the behaviour of a weasels in a similar situation.[277] Acting like animals can be beneficial. Indeed, although we are told that Sigmundr and Sinfiötli destroy the skins in fear of their power, the text continues to assert their benefits:

> Í þeim ósköpum unnu þeir mörg frægðarverk í ríki Siggeirs konungs. (pp. 11-2)
> (While under that spell they carried out many glorious exploits in King Siggeirr's kingdom.)

The shape-shifting may be undesirable, but it can result in impressive actions. There is a mixed attitude to shape-shifting, but the additions of these incidents to *Völsunga saga* indicates a continued interest in these kinds of identities. Jens Peter Schjødt argues that the wolf-skin experience is part of an initiation rite into a warrior identity, and explains the shape-shifting as a need to leave the natural world in order to gain knowledge and achieve a higher status.[278] Yet he does not fully explain why an animal transformation is necessary, nor its implications for masculinity.

The next extract narrates a partial transformation. Guttormr does not initially seem the best choice for an assassin, as he is too scared to attack Sigurðr. Yet the consumption of animal flesh appears to ease his nerves. We are told that after Guttormr is given the flesh of a snake and wolf:

> Við þessa fæðslu varð hann svá æfr ok ágjarn ok allt saman ok fortölur Grímhildar, at hann hét at gera þetta verk. (p. 58)
> (With the food and Grímhildr's persuasions all together he became so very eager that he promised that he would do this deed.)

Instead of taking on the outward appearance of an animal, Guttormr's experience is more subtle. A new identity is created through the changes that occur after he consumes the

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[277] This motif has origins in medieval French literature; see Clover, '*Völsunga saga* and the Missing Lai of Marie de France' in *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th birthday, 26th May 1986*, ed. by Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Wien: Böhlaus, 1986), pp. 79-84.

[278] 'The Warrior In Old Norse Religion' in *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*, ed. by Gro Steinsland, Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, Jan Erik Rekdal and Ian B. Beuermann (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 269-96 (p. 290).

magical feast.[279] This mixing of animal and human appears to be no more sinister than any other meal which includes meat. Nevertheless, it implies that animal characteristics can be transmitted through the body. This scene does occur in the *Poetic Edda*, in *Br.*. Yet in the earlier poem, the link between the consumption of the magical animal flesh and the alteration of Guttormr's identity is not made explicit, as in *Völsunga saga*. Although the concoction makes Guttormr braver, it allows the Gjúkungar to betray their blood-brother, Sigurðr. Animalistic behaviour is again connected to actions that do not agree with contemporary conventions of kinship and loyalty. In its representations of animal transformations, *Völsunga saga* appears to associate being beyond the law with being outside of a fully human identity.

As previously mentioned, *Rm.* mentions the animal shape-shifting of Otr, Andvari and Fáfnir. *Völsunga saga* expands on the details given in the *Poetic Edda*. In connection with Otr, we are told:

> Veiðiföngin færði hann feðr sínum, ok var honum þat mikill styrkr. Mjök hefir hann otrs líki á sér, kom síð heim ok át blundandi ok einn saman, því at hann mátti eigi sjá, at þyrri. (p. 25)
> (He brought his catch to his father, and this was a great help to him. He has many characteristics of an otter: he came home late, and ate alone and with his eyes shut, because he could not watch it decreasing.)

Völsunga saga suggests that this transformation has a more profound effect on his identity. He becomes a loner, and is no longer part of the social grouping of his family. He also becomes greedy, with a strange attitude towards his food. An animal identity is abjected in this part of the text. Yet Otr also fulfils the male role of providing for and protecting his family. Animal shape-shifting is not something that can be done at will, without any lasting effects; identity is permanently modified.

Reginn's other brother, Fáfnir, is described as having his identity permanently altered to that of an animal (p. 26). In *Rm.*, we are told about Fáfnir killing his father, and taking the

[279] Ármann Jakobsson has explored the ways in which food can determine identity in Old Norse literature; see 'Food and the North-Icelandic Identity in 13th century Iceland and Norway' in *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*, ed. by Sverrir Jakobsson (Amsterdam & New York: 2009), pp. 69–79.

treasure. Then, after several stanzas where Reginn encourages his foster-son, Sigurðr, to kill Fáfnir, Reginn reveals that Fáfnir is now a dragon. Yet in *Völsunga saga*, a link is more clearly established between Fáfnir's crimes, unpleasant temperament, and his transformation into a dragon (p. 26). Fáfnir remains in dragon form throughout the text, even when he is killed by Sigurðr. This transformation does not appear to be reversible; Fáfnir is confined in the body of the dragon to a much greater extent than Sigmundr or Sinfiötli are trapped in the wolf skins. Indeed, it is as if Fáfnir has been subject to an extreme outlawry, but instead of being prohibited from existing in a particular place, he is prevented from possessing a human identity.[280] Yet his animal identity allows him to express some resemblance of a warrior identity. What is most clearly missing is a relationship with other people, perhaps leading to his desire to converse with and advise Sigurðr. This chapter has repeatedly established the need for social recognition of masculinity. As Fáfnir stands outside of society, there is no one to endorse his performance of masculinity before Sigurðr attacks him. Reginn recommends that his brother is killed in order to gain the treasure – a reflection of Fáfnir's original crime. The difference between Fáfnir's murder of his father for wealth, and Reginn's desire for his brother to be killed can be most easily understood in Butler's terms; the father was recognisable as a man, and so his death is grievable, whereas a monster like Fáfnir is no longer mourned. The loss of a masculinity that is recognisable to the contemporary society leads to such characters becoming disposable.

4.iv: Conclusion

As we have seen, *Völsunga saga* adds and expands on incidents of animal shape-shifting. Although these transformations are often presented as frightening, horrific, and even

[280] Kathryn Hume contends that 'the author of *Völsunga saga* (and of course the author of *Fáfnismál*) towers over Norse contemporaries in the development of a dragon's artistic potential. Not only is the hoard meaningful, but so is Fáfnir as a character'; see 'From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature', *Studies in Philology* 77 (1980), 1-25 (p. 9). Yet despite the interest of Fáfnir as a character, he is clearly differentiated from men in the text.

as a punishment for misdeeds, the continued presentation of creatures who are part human and part animal remains a preoccupation for the author of *Völsunga saga*. It is surprising, then, that *Völsunga saga* removes one incident of animal transformation which occurs in the *Poetic Edda*. As previously discussed, in *Völsunga saga* Gunnarr is killed by an adder. In *Od.*, it is suggested that the snake is actually Atli's mother, who has transformed herself into a serpent in order to kill Gunnarr, just as King Siggeirr's mother was rumoured to take on the appearance of a wolf to kill the Völsungs. It is curious that despite the evident interest in this kind of shape-shifting throughout *Völsunga saga* this detail is excluded. Especially with the suggestion that Fáfnir's animal form is a punishment for misdeeds, *Völsunga saga* seems to present animal and human identities as a continuum. This conception of identity as radically fluid may ultimately have been unsuitable for a time when new forms of chivalric literature were constructing social boundaries. The exclusion of Atli's mother's shape-shifting is also revealing from a gender perspective. With the wolf identity of Siggeirr's mother in doubt, animal shape-shifting is almost an entirely male domain in *Völsunga saga*. This is perhaps surprising, as Jochens asserts that the female nature of *fylgja* suggest that 'at some point in the Nordic perceptual development, apparently, women and animals were grouped together'.[281]

The relationship between men and animals is complex. In the *Poetic Edda*, there are few instances of animal shape-shifting. Yet *Völsunga saga* repeatedly returns to this theme, as something that is difficult to resolve. There is a clearly established connection between animals and masculinity, in the popular motif that heroes create food for eagles and wolves. In this image, the man is acting as provider, and is in control of the animals. The ability to change one's shape into that of an animal may, therefore, also demonstrate mastery over animals. Yet the need to become an animal to better perform certain tasks, such as fishing,

[281] Jochens, *Images of Women*, p. 36.

destabilises the idea that men are superior to beasts. Indeed, the reading of animal transformation as a maturation ceremony indicates that to be fully male involves taking knowledge from the animal kingdom. This uncertain binary between men and animals opens up the boundaries of the human. By suggesting that this borderline can be easily transgressed, this also creates a space where the boundaries of gender identity can be undermined. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen contends that when male characters are accused of having an animal identity, 'the contrast which carries the allegation becomes "masculine+human" vs. "feminine+animal"'.[282] Yet the relationship between masculinity and animal identities is more complicated in *Völsunga saga*; associations with animals both reinforce and interrogate masculinity.

5: Conclusion

This chapter has argued that there are a variety of masculinities expressed in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Even a hegemonic warrior identity can contain some variation as it encompasses both direct violence and a commander role, although the latter is not depicted as praiseworthy in the same way as the former. Indeed, despite its hegemonic nature, the status of violence is questioned in both texts, with only certain acts of brutality ensuring the recognition of a character as masculine. In *Völsunga saga*, a warrior masculinity is complicated further by its intersection with new kinds of masculinity influenced by courtliness. The ways in which different kinds of masculinity can be abjected or approved of, demonstrating their viability or otherwise, can be observed through a consideration of the ways in which insults can construct identities. Masculinity is multiple in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* and this is most clearly illustrated by the motifs of shape-shifting and animality. Through close readings of the texts with a focus on portrayals of gender, the first two chapters of this thesis have provided a fuller picture of the ways in which female and

[282] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p. 16.

male identity is depicted in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. To further illuminate representations of gender in these texts, I will conclude this part of the thesis, which has explored Old Norse iterations of the Völsung legend, with a consideration of another medieval Icelandic version of this narrative: that of *Skáldskaparmál*.

6: Coda: Snorri and the supernatural

The relationship between humans and animals tests the limit of the human, as does the relationship between humans and supernatural characters. These figures are marked out as different in the text, and have special powers, but also live amongst humans. As Annette Lassen observes, the pre-Christian settings of texts such as the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* means that the supernatural can be incorporated in an unproblematic manner; discussing the *fornaldarsögur*, she argues that 'the genre freely allows the supernatural to interfere in the events of the saga'.[283] In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, male supernatural figures seem more set aside from others than female supernatural figures; the Odinic figures, which occur particularly in *Völsunga saga*, are always apart from the text, and Grípir does not communicate with anyone except Sigurðr. In contrast, valkyries are more readily integrated into the text, marrying human characters although the distinction between a wife and a valkyrie is illustrated, especially in *Völsunga saga*.[284] Yet some male figures come close to a supernatural identity in their status as heroes who far exceed the normal capabilities of a human man. This can be seen in all the key figures of the texts: Helgi, Sigmundr, Sinfiötli and Sigurðr. Indeed, many of these characters are specifically associated with supernatural abilities, such as Sigmundr and Sinfiötli not being harmed by ingesting or touching poison,

[283] Annette Lassen, "Óðinn in Old Norse Texts other than *The Elder Edda*, *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*", *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), 91-108 (p. 100).
[284] This is similar to the way in which giantesses marry into the Æsir in the mythological *Poetic Edda*.

respectively. There is a fine boundary between the representation of a hero and that of a monster, which is most clearly illustrated by Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga*.[285]

Sigurðr exceeds the stature and ability of a normal man in a manner that is almost grotesque. His excessive strength and size mark him out as different from other men (p. 41). Indeed, he is even mistaken for a god (p. 46). In the *Poetic Edda*, Sigurðr is merely the best warrior. But the clear description of Sigurðr's monstrous size in *Völsunga saga* suggests that he is other-worldly. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has explored medieval monstrosity, arguing that 'the production of the chivalric subject depends on this [...] little bit of the monster that settles deep inside the hero's body' (p. 94), and that the Middle English text *Gawain and the Green Knight* 'explores the lack of a firm boundary between manhood and monstrousness' (p. 159) as the giant is represented as an interior Other rather than a force to be overcome.[286] *Völsunga saga* may work in a similar manner to Cohen's analysis of *Gawain*. The signs of monstrosity present in the descriptions of Sigurðr also demonstrate that there is no clear boundary between monster and human, or heroic/ chivalric masculinities, and non-recognisable forms of masculinity. As Butler suggests, there 'is a limit internal to normative construction itself, a function of its iterability and heterogeneity, without which it cannot exercise its crafting power, and which limits the finality of any of its effects'.[287] *Völsunga saga* not only demonstrates the norms which produce recognisable masculinities, but also reveals the constructed nature of these categories.

The supernatural is an important element of the narrative in all its Old Norse forms. In the *Poetic Edda* the Völsung narrative follows a series of mythological poems, and the heroic poems contain magical drinks, prophecies and shape-shifting. As we have seen, *Völsunga saga* retains many of these elements, and also significantly increases the amount of

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[285] This idea of the monstrosity of heroes is famously emphasised in *Beowulf*.

[286] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1999).

[287] Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 4.

animalistic shape-shifting and adds in several cameos from Óðinn. In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, supernatural elements are connected to both genders, but there are significantly more female supernatural figures, or female characters with supernatural abilities. Yet, when Snorri Sturluson uses part of the narrative in his poets' instruction manual, *Skáldskaparmál*, he places significant emphasis on the links between masculinity and the supernatural. Indeed, Jochens observes that Snorri 'sharply curtails female roles [... and] he is noticeably silent about female accomplishments [...]. Most striking, perhaps, is Snorri's neglect of the ancient figure of the *völva*.'.[288] In his analysis of the *Prose Edda*, McTurk argues that it 'differs strikingly from the family sagas in its treatment of the supernatural'.[289] The representation of the supernatural does not only distinguish *Skáldskaparmál* from the *Íslendingasögur*, but also means that it offers a different portrayal of gender identity from the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*.

The Codex Regius manuscript of the *Poetic Edda* opens with *Völuspá*, and the heroic section begins with a description of the actions of the Norns, and of a group of valkyries, wearing helmets and grasping spears, their byrnies drenched in blood (*HH.* st. 15). At the outset of the heroic *Poetic Edda*, supernatural figures are feminine, and linked to prophecy and war. Indeed, this link between femininity in the supernatural is so well established that in the flyting between Guðmundr and Sinfiötli later in the same poem, when both men aim to verbally destroy their opponent's masculinity, they accuse each other of being sorceresses, witches or valkyries alongside accusations of passive homosexuality. This closer association of supernatural abilities with female characters also occurs in *Völsunga saga*, and many other Old Norse texts, as has been noted by several critics, such as Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir in her article about magic in the *Íslendingasögur*.[290]

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288 Jochens, *Images of Women*, p. 81
289 McTurk, 'Snorra Edda as Menippean Satire', p. 125.
290 Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons'.

In both the *Poetic Edda*, and *Völsunga saga*, seventy per cent of characters with supernatural identities or abilities are female.[291] Yet in Snorri's version of the narrative, this number falls to eight per cent. Even taking into account that his tale is shorter, Snorri reduces the number of supernatural characters and events significantly. Margaret Clunies Ross comments that 'Snorri's omission of sets of kennings and *heiti* for giants and other supernatural beings such as dwarves and elves is the most significant gap in his representation of the Old Norse kenning system'.[292] Clunies Ross attributes this to Snorri's desire for everything in *Skáldskaparmál* to be 'fitted into his general interpretation of the old religion of the Scandinavians as an anticipation of Christian thought' (pp. 167-8). Yet she does not address the uneven nature of this reduction; the only female supernatural character that remains is Brynhildr, a valkyrie, whereas there are twelve male characters with supernatural identities or abilities. This portion of *Skáldskaparmál* opens with three male Æsir, and then continues to describe a male shape-shifter. Hreiðmarr, a figure who also appears in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, is described as 'mikill fyrir sér ok mjök fjölkunnigr' (a man of much substance, and very skilled in magic) (p. 45).[293] This is the first version of the Völsung legend where Hreiðmarr's magical abilities are mentioned. His skills seem logical, considering that in the *Poetic Edda*, his son Reginn is *fjölkunnigr* (although this quality is not mentioned in *Völsunga saga*), and his sons Otr and Fáfnir both have the ability to transform into animals. Yet this explicit connection between Hreiðmarr and magic is something that Snorri adds to this text. Neil Price argues that:

[291] This figure is necessarily rough. I have counted the appearance of a character in each different text in the *Poetic Edda*, and have counted mentions of unspecified plural figures as two. Only characters with actual abilities have been counted, rather than those who make use of magical objects.
[292] Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and medieval theories of language* (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1987), p. 168.
[293] Jochens argues that although *fjölkunnigr* originally would have merely meant knowledge, 'in the narrative literature the composite *fjölkunnigr* was confined to magicians'; see *Images of Women*, p. 120.

> Men were certainly known to perform *seiðr*, though its practice brought with it a strange kind of dishonour and social rejection, combining cowardice and general 'unmanliness' with suggestions of homosexuality.[294]

Yet in *Skáldskaparmál*, these negative associations do not seem to be present. Snorri's narrative in the next few sentences include a dwarf, with the ability to create a magical curse, and another male shape-shifter, Fáfnir, who is able to turn himself into a dragon. From the outset, links with the supernatural are something that are clearly gendered as male, which results from the narrative starting at this point rather than following the order established in the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga*.

The gendering of the supernatural as masculine is also created by Snorri's removal of supernatural female figures. In the *Poetic Edda*, mention is made of five female giants (compared to two male giants) and two female (and no male) giants appear in *Völsunga saga*. There are no giants of any gender in the part of *Skáldskaparmál* which retells this narrative, and the female troll who appears in the *Poetic Edda* is similarly absent. More strikingly, the number of valkyrie characters mentioned falls from approximately fifty in the *Poetic Edda*, or about twelve in *Völsunga saga* to one in this part of *Skáldskaparmál*, and this text does not mention the Norns or *disír* at all, nor any female Æsir. Yet there is not a wholesale reduction of supernatural abilities in Snorri's text. It retains the ability of male characters to be unaffected by poison, and to shape-shift, whilst removing any mention of female shape-shifting. In fact it increases the occurrences of male-controlled transformation from *Völsunga saga*'s three to five as it does not attribute Sigurðr and Gunnarr's ability to swap likenesses to Grímhildr's spell. In *Skáldskaparmál*, the narrator states:

> Þá skiptu þeir litum, Sigurðr ok Gunnarr. (p. 47)
> (Sigurðr and Gunnarr then exchanged their shapes.)

The wording is very similar to that of *Völsunga saga*, apart from the absence of Grímhildr's involvement.

[294] 'Sorcery', 'Sorcery' in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 244-8 (p. 245).

In Snorri's text, wisdom and knowledge is attributed to male rather than female characters. In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, it could be argued that many of the most memorable events in the text stem from the machinations of Grímhildr to arrange marriages for her daughter Guðrún, by giving Sigurðr and her daughter magical drinks to erase their memories at different points in the text. These actions are removed from Snorri's version, and Grímhildr is never referred to as having magical abilities. Indeed, the betrothal of Sigurðr and Guðrún is described as follows:

> Þar dvalðist Sigurðr langa hríð. Þá fekk hann Guðrúnar Gjúkadóttur. (p. 47)
> (Sigurðr stayed there for a long time. Then he married Guðrún, Gjúki's daughter.)

This indicates that the marriage was Sigurðr's idea, and something that he actively pursued rather than being tricked into it by Grímhildr's actions. Similarly, Guðrún's second marriage is stated in these terms:

> Atli konungr Buðlason, bróðir Brynhildar, fekk þá Guðrúnar, er Sigurðr hafði átta. (p. 48)
> (King Atli, Budli's son, and brother of Brynhildr, then married Gudrún, whom Sigurðr had as his wife.)

Both descriptions of Guðrún's marriages position the husband in the active position as deciding to take Guðrún as their spouse. Marriage becomes something that is controlled by men, and Guðrún is not shown to have any opinion on the matter, just as Grímhildr does not have any influence on the identity of her daughter's suitor. This contrasts with the representation of female involvement in the engagement process in the other texts. Furthermore, in *Völsunga saga* it is Grímhildr's persuasive abilities (*fortölur*) that are the final incentive for Guttormr to agree to kill Sigurðr. Yet in Snorri's version, only Gunnarr and Högni urge their brother to commit the murder. Similarly, in *Völsunga saga* it is made clear that Guðrún enchants her sons' armour to ensure that they cannot be killed by swords, whereas in *Skáldskaparmál* Guðrún's creation of the magical armour is not mentioned. By

erasing female supernatural identities and abilities, Snorri also erases female agency in his text.

In Snorri's version of the Völsung legend, there are no characters who make prophecies or who are described as having the ability to see into the future. The absence of prophetic statements provides a more straightforward narrative timeline, and reduces the tragic inevitability of events. It also contributes to a reduction of female involvement in the narrative; with the exceptions of Brynhildr persuading Gunnarr and Högni to murder Sigurðr, and Guðrún murdering her children, women are reduced to appearing merely as wives rather than having important contributions, such as participating in and affecting the outcomes of battles, and offering wisdom and knowledge of the future. The supernatural is much more clearly gendered as male in *Skáldskaparmál* than in other Old Norse versions of this legend. Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir has argued that in the *Íslendingasögur* magic allows female characters to have agency.[295] This method is not available to the female characters in Snorri. Although Brynhildr is still identified as a valkyrie, this is all the information provided and her martial exploits are not described. Without the ability to influence events through supernatural means, the women in *Skáldskaparmál* become more passive. It could be argued that, given the problematic nature of some female supernatural abilities in the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga*, the removal of connections between femininity and the supernatural presents the female characters in a better light. Yet Snorri retains other significant moments of negative female behaviour, such as Brynhildr's insistence that Sigurðr be killed, or Guðrún's murder of her children: overall, women are not rehabilitated in this version of the legend.

The stronger links between male characters and the supernatural in Snorri's version of the legend are surprising given the association between magic and shame in the *Poetic Edda*,

[295] Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons'.

and, to a lesser extent, in *Völsunga saga*.[296] Yet in this part of *Skáldskaparmál*, magical abilities are useful attributes which are used to enhance the abilities of male characters: such as by making them stronger, and more able to resist harm. Furthermore, the high-status male supernatural characters such as the Æsir are retained, whereas lower-status characters such as giants are removed. An association with the supernatural is more desirable for male characters in Snorri's version of the legend, yet it does not detract from demonstrations of masculinity such as heroism or battle prowess. Stephen Mitchell suggests that 'the supernatural ultimately derives from a perception of the unbridled and unknowable power which in turn gives rise to an uncontrollable fear or sense of awe'.[297] The supernatural can represent a desire to exceed human capability. If the supernatural is viewed as a kind of wish fulfilment, it is curious that Snorri chooses to erase the possibility of women to inhabit this role. It appears that, with the exception of the token reference to Brynhildr as a valkyrie – she does not do anything that accords with this role in *Skáldskaparmál* – a connection between women and the supernatural has become unthinkable. In this text, the supernatural is used to enhance heroic masculinity, and the disruption of a connection between female characters and the supernatural is used to present a more passive version of femininity.

The supernatural also represents otherness, as it can be understood as an alternative or unconventional identity. In reducing the ability of characters to adopt or possess supernatural identities, this part of *Skáldskaparmál* appears to offer more stable versions of identity. Indeed, the problematic nature of the links between the supernatural and femininity for male characters with supernatural abilities, or identities, is resolved by the erasure of this link; in the *Poetic Edda*, or *Völsunga saga*, male supernatural characters, or male characters with supernatural abilities can have their masculinity called into question, but this is not an issue in

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[296] For example, this is revealed by the use of sorceress as an insult; see *HH.* st. 37.

[297] Stephen Mitchell, 'The Supernatural and the *fornaldarsögur*' in *Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighed: studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen (København: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2008), pp. 281-98 (p. 281).

Snorri's adaptation of the narrative. Yet, by both reducing the narrative, and reducing the supernatural elements in the narrative, Snorri does not just offer more coherent identities; he also offers alternative identities to those available in previous versions of the legend. Grímhildr does not just become a simpler individual when she is reduced to functioning merely as a wife and mother. She becomes a very different character to that of the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga*, where she is able to control events through magic and has a strong influence on her children. Through this rewriting of the narrative to provide different identities, Snorri's text in fact demonstrates the ways in which identity, including sexual difference, is not fixed but is instead, as Judith Butler argues, a performance constructed in discourse that always contains the potential to be reconfigured.[298] In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida uses the logic of the supernatural to explore liminality; for example, he explores the ways in which a ghost's relationship to presence and absence can demonstrate our reliance on binaries.[299] In medieval Icelandic literature, the concept of liminality is even more useful due to the different way in which the contemporary culture viewed the supernatural – as something that is less distinct from the human than we would see it today.

Clunies Ross has emphasised the significance of *Skáldskaparmál*, arguing that:

> Within Iceland, *Skáldskaparmál* was arguably the most important, most copied and most imitated part of Snorri's Edda in the late Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance.[300]

This statement indicates the resonance that this version of the Völsung narrative may have had throughout Iceland. It is, therefore, important to note the extent to which Snorri's version of this legend constructs different kinds of gender identities. As a handbook for poets or readers who may not have been familiar with other versions of these stories, *Skáldskaparmál* purports to be something of an official guide to the mythological and heroic narratives of

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[298] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 185-93.

[299] Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York; London: Routledge, 1994).

[300] Clunies Ross, *Poetry and Poetics*, p. 170

medieval Iceland. Yet he offers a very different version of the legend to that of either the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga*. In his alternative representation of gender identity, Snorri is ironically following the path of *Völsunga saga* by deviating from it. Gender seems to be a common focus of alterations made to the narrative. Even within the cultural context of a small island, in texts that were compiled or composed in a similar era, there are numerous possibilities for male and female identities.[301] Indeed, several of the *fornaldarsögur* which make use of characters and motifs from the Volsung legend offer yet more expressions of gender identity.[302] This thesis will now move into an even more dissimilar context, that of nineteenth-century Britain, to explore the representation of gender identity in a Victorian reimagining of this narrative.

[301] Anthony Faulkes suggests that *Skáldskaparmál* was composed during the first half of the thirteenth century; see 'Introduction' in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), pp. vii-lix (p. xi). As previously mentioned, the *Poetic Edda* is believed to have been compiled in the 1270s and *Völsunga saga* is considered to have been composed between c. 1200 and c. 1270.

[302] Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has examined 'the ways in which the figures and events of the Völsung legend have been used in this genre', although not in relation to gender; see '*Fornaldarsögur* and the Heroic Legends of the Edda' in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 202–218 (p. 202). I would like to thank Dr Ashman Rowe for sending me a pre-publication copy of this essay. Jochens discusses the afterlife of Guðrún; see *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 13-16.

Chapter 3: Female identity in *Sigurd the Volsung*

> A heroine who would live through so many centuries of literature must submit to various fortunes and strange transformations.[303]

> And all the host of the warriors, the women's silent woe.[304]

William Morris's first published volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), contains a dramatic monologue revealing the emotions and motivations of the Arthurian character, Guenevere, in which she exhibits a passionate sexuality, and argues for free love.[305] Morris's interest in the female experience of legendary narratives extended through several decades to the production of *Sigurd the Volsung*. This chapter will offer an exploration of the main female characters of the text: Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun.[306] Hartley Spatt argues that, in *Sigurd the Volsung*, the 'women are exalted to the status of heroes', and although I disagree with the detail of this notion, they are certainly given a central role in the narrative.[307] An analysis of these characters will reveal whether *Sigurd the Volsung* also acts in defence of its women. This section will also question the status of gender identity in the text, and will establish the ways in which the Völsung legend is altered to fit with a vision of femininity that is readable by a Victorian audience. In 1910, Winifred Turner and Helen Scott offered a new edited version of *Sigurd the Volsung*, where parts of the poem are either

[303] Gildersleeve, 'Brynhild', p. 343.
[304] *Sigurd the Volsung*, p. 271.
[305] Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, ed. by Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981).
[306] Jane Ennis makes a case for the 'central role' of Grimhild in *Sigurd the Volsung*; see 'The Role of Grimhild in *Sigurd the Volsung*', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 8.3 (1989) 13-23 (p. 14). Although Grimhild is important to the plot, I do not see her character as significant to the text in the way that Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun are.
The status of scholarly research on *Sigurd the Volsung* has not much improved since Mark Cumming's 1983 article, where he observes that the text 'has received neither the quantity nor the quality of attention that it deserves'; see 'The Structure of *Sigurd the Volsung*', *Victorian Poetry* 21 (1983), 403-14 (p. 403). In this thesis, I intend to build on the little critical material that there is to make some attempt to rectify this situation.
[307] Hartley Spatt, 'Morrissaga: *Sigurd the Volsung*', *ELH* 44:2 (1977), 355-375 (p. 123).

summarised in prose or removed altogether.[308] This chapter, and the following one, will also consider the parts of Morris' text that are redacted in this version, viewing Turner and Scott's edition as an alternate reading of *Sigurd the Volsung* which offers further insight into its representation of gender identity.

In the eighteen years between the publication of Morris's first collection of poems and *Sigurd the Volsung*, the 'woman question' was of paramount importance in Victorian culture. Many critics commenting on gender in this period discuss the ways in which femininity was linked to characteristics that accorded with the positions of wife, mother and daughter. The idea of the separation between men and women was continually reinforced. Several male writers, such as Tennyson, whose *Idylls of the King* tackled the same Arthurian legends that Morris re-worked in *The Defence of Guenevere*, were attacked for having a style that was too feminine, which, according to Christopher Parker, was defined as 'the writing of love and emotion and [...] romance between the sexes'.[309] These concerns were viewed as the domain of women, and for gender identities to be multiple or shared between people of different biological sex was shameful.

Nevertheless, the idea of Victorian gender ideology as solely constraining women is a generalisation which is not always confirmed by lived or literary experience. As Simon Dentith warns:

> There is a danger that even in explicating some general account of the notion of 'separate spheres', it acquires a solidity or reality beyond its existence in these actual or negotiated forms.[310]

Attention needs to be paid to the precise ways in which the notion of sexual difference led to a positioning of women in a private, domestic role. As Deborah Gorman describes, 'a cult of domesticity [...] is a major recurring image in Victorian literature, art and social

[308] William Morris, Winifred Turner and Helen Scott, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung Written In Verse By William Morris With Portions Condensed Into Prose* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1910).
[309] Christopher Parker, *Gender Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1995), p. 12.
[310] Simon Dentith, *Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 129.

commentary'.[311] This constructed a particular version of femininity, where women were not just confined to the home, but were also given the responsibility for protecting and maintaining its values.

This domestic ideal also affected mid-Victorian ideas about sexuality. As Lynda Nead observes, 'sexual disorder was partly signified in terms of domestic disorder'.[312] This connection between domesticity and sexuality led to the double standard regarding sexual behaviour; male adultery or sexual desire was condoned whilst extra-marital female sexuality was feared as a threat to the family and, in the views of some commentators, such as Henry Mayhew, equated with prostitution in its deviant nature.[313] Again, some caution is needed to prevent the characterisation of sexual behaviour as a clear binary in Victorian England. Jill Matus offers a corrective to this view by asserting that 'sex and sexuality were ambiguous and vexed categories in the biomedical writing of the period, and the nature and extent of the distinction between male and female was much debated and contested'.[314] This instability, and the view of both gender and sexuality as a 'dynamic and unstable process' demanded that 'culture and, as far as possible, environment ha[d] to be regulated and controlled'.[315] This supervision occurred through literary depictions of sexuality as well as the legal system.

The fear of an undisciplined sexual body can be seen in one response to women's increased independence during the 1850s and 1860s which was instigated by improved access to education and work: the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864-9 which aspired to regulate

[311] Deborah Gorman, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 2.
[312] Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Woman in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 34.
[313] See Nead, *Myths*, p. 52. The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 indicated that adultery should be accepted by the wife but not by the husband as to divorce, woman needed evidence of adultery in conjunction with aggravating circumstances, such as incest; see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 131.
[314] Jill Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 22.
[315] Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 25.

women's bodies and sexuality.[316] The problematic nature of female sexuality is also expressed in the sensation novels popular in the 1860s.[317] These texts focused on female characters, and were candid about female physicality and sexuality.[318] Nevertheless, Sally Mitchell observes that the sexual scandals that appeared in the novels were often conservatively depicted: 'motherhood, like inheritance, is a magic reward reserved for the virtuous [...] the good mother is still the standard image for the good woman'.[319] These discourses of female sexuality are, at least, an acknowledgement that it exists, rather than assuming the masculine nature of sexual desire in the manner of William Acton.[320] Yet Mitchell argues that the 'public recognition of immorality during the sixties was followed by a backlash in the seventies', citing the establishment of the National Society for the Promotion of Social Purity, for both men and women, in 1873.[321] The textual representation of sexuality in the 1860s is replaced by love in 1870s literature, and romantic love is idealised within marriage.[322]

If Morris's challenging of conceptions of gender and sexuality in *The Defence of Guenevere* accords with the context of the late 1850s, where increased opportunities for women led to questioning of a domestic conception of femininity, we might expect *Sigurd the Volsung* to reflect the discourses of the 1870s, where there was a reaction to previous ideas about comparative sexual freedom for women. Yet in *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris clearly advocates the doctrine of free love, and elevates feelings of sexual passion. His decision to re-write a medieval text, just like his later choice to produce narratives set in the

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[316] For a full exploration of the effect of and response to these laws, see Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 67-148.
[317] Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1981), p. 73.
[318] Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p. 87.
[319] Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p. 84.
[320] William Acton refuses to acknowledge the existence of female sexuality; see 'The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, In Adult Age, and In Advanced Life. Considered In Their Physiological, Social and Psychological Relations' (London: John Churchill 1857) in *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. by Josephine Guy(London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 474-85.
[321] Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel,* p. 126.
[322] Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p. 142.

future, would seem to allow him more scope for experimentation with gender values than a contemporary novel or poem would permit. Tucker has argued that *Sigurd the Volsung* is, of all Morris's work, the text 'least accommodated to contemporary interest'.[323] Yet, as Dennis Balch contends, *Sigurd the Volsung* 'demonstrate[s] [Morris's] continuing exploration of topics highly pertinent to his own age'; it seems that for all the emphasis on a medieval setting, the gender ideology of the text is very much affected by the historical context of the period of its composition.[324]

In *Experiencing Fiction*, Phelan discusses the function of a narrative's beginning. He argues that:

> Beginnings do more than initiate the action, as becomes apparent when we look more closely at readerly dynamics. Elements of exposition matter because they influence our understanding of the narrative world, which in turn influences our understanding of the meaning and consequences of the action. (p. 16)

With this in mind, the establishment of clear and different roles for men and women in the first few lines of *Sigurd the Volsung* constructs gender identity as an important aspect of this rewriting:

> Earls were the wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors;
> Earls' wives were the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors.
> And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
> The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.
> There dwelt men merry-hearted, and in hope exceeding great
> Met the good days and the evil as they went the way of fate.
> (p. 1)

Not only are jobs gender-specific but also the male role is established as more varied and important, requiring four lines of description to the women's one. Women are confined to a domestic setting, whereas men are able to travel and interact with others outside of the household. In beginning in this manner, Morris leaves out the first chapter and a half of

[323] Tucker, 'Macropoetics', p. 386.
[324] Balch, 'Three Chapters', p. 116.

Völsunga saga, which pays less overt attention to gender roles.[325] Instead, the opening of his text sets up a Victorian division of binary gender. Indeed, this is not the only binary that the text appears to insist upon. Ashurst argues that 'making good and evil indistinguishable, furthermore, is presented in the *Sigurd* poem as the worst of actions'; he reads the text as representing the desire for unequivocal boundaries.[326] Yet the clear narratorial declarations of the fictionality of the text, which is emphasised throughout *Sigurd the Volsung*, detracts from strict boundaries of sexual difference. Ashurst also suggests that 'we find Morris putting forward, on his own terms, the Aesthetes's idea that the world exists for art, and perhaps anticipating the modern idea that its essential nature is that of a linguistic construct - the world as narrative'; if all the world is an artificial tale, then the gendered separation of spheres of existence is also denaturalised.[327] By paying close attention to the ways in which female characters are presented, I hope to further illuminate the portrayal of gender in this text.

1: Community

> Still shall she bide [...]
> And speak soft as the other women.[328]

A woman's position within her community was a central part of the debates about gender in the 1870s. An exploration of the female characters in *Sigurd the Volsung* and their relationship to other members of their society will, therefore, reveal some of the ways in which femininity is constructed. The reader is introduced to Signy, the first woman mentioned in the text, in the words of Siggeir's messenger, as 'the crown of womanhood [...]

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[325] George Tremain McDowell asserts that 'oneness of impression demanded that Morris omit Sigi and Rerir', the characters in the opening of *Völsunga saga*, from the text but does not explain this statement further; see 'The Treatment of the *Volsunga Saga* by William Morris', *Scandinavian Studies* 7 (1922-3), 151-68 (p. 154).
[326] Ashurst, 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 57.
[327] Ashurst, 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 59.
[328] *Sigurd the Volsung*, p. 163.

Signy the fairer than fair, Signy the wiser than wise' (p. 2). Given the limited information, it appears that Signy is constructed as an emblem of femininity because she has two attributes: beauty and wisdom. *Sigurd the Volsung* reveals a male construction of femininity connected to physical perfection and intellectual power, as well as sexual purity. Yet Signy is not able to use her wisdom to influence the narrative. Although she predicts that events of 'weird and woe' (p. 2) will result from the suggested marriage, she is not able to reject her suitor, and is silent throughout her wedding where she 'neither laughed nor spake' (p. 4). Her desires are subordinated to those of her male relatives.[329] Indeed, her prophetic skill, where she 'wotted of the deeds that were coming after' (p. 10), isolates her from the rest of her family who do not know their fate. Signy's knowledge of the future is both alienating and disturbing, as it alludes to the threatening authority that female prophecy may offer women, as explored in the first chapter of this thesis. A denial of her expertise, through the male characters' refusal to alter their actions, repositions Signy as powerless. Signy's prophetic ability is one aspect that is erased entirely in Turner and Scott's edition, depicting her as having even less influence. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, femininity is both constructed by male desire, and controlled by male reactions. The qualities of beauty and wisdom are admirable but are of little practical value given the social restrictions Signy faces.

Signy is not integrated into the male world of her family. It is not just her ability to foretell the future which distinguishes her, but also the lack of insight into her motivations as a character. Speaking rarely, and usually depicted as detached from the other characters, Signy only lets her inner thoughts show at rare moments of emotion, such as when her father refuses to believe her vision of the future (p. 11).[330] Indeed, at one point the narrator declares her speech to be unnarratable:

And sure she whispered him somewhat ere she passed forth to the deck,

[329] Tucker observes that, like other characters, she is conscious of her role as a 'plot functionar[y]' and so her own desires are also openly subordinated to that of the plot; see 'Macropoetics', p.376-7.
[330] Signý does not weep in *Völsunga saga* at this point (pp. 5-6).

Though nought I know to tell it.
(pp. 11-12)

Through Signy, the only female character in the text at this point, women are depicted as mysterious. There is also something ominous about the narrator's declaration that her speech is unknowable, suggesting the menacing ability of women to deliberately conceal their thoughts. The extent to which Signy is presented as emotionally distant from both the implied reader and the other characters of the text is emphasised by her reaction to the capture of her brothers. Signy is described as 'wan' (p. 17) but as not shedding a tear. This foreshadows Gudrun, who will be unable to cry at Sigurd's death. Yet in contrast to Gudrun, the narrator does not dwell on Signy's refusal to weep, so her motivations remain hidden from the reader.

Accordingly, Signy's feelings are rarely depicted in lengthy monologues or conversations with other characters, unlike the women in the *Poetic Edda*. Her longest speech occurs after finding her brother, Sigmund, still alive in the woods. But here the reader is not informed about Signy's feelings, just that she has confidence that Siggeir will be avenged and that Sigmund will live on in tales of his glory. When she re-visits him, we are told that 'men say Signy wept' (p. 24) but are not directly shown her emotions. Signy's instructions for Sigmund regarding the rearing of the child she sends him to foster are spoken by her maid, who says that she 'bear[s] a word of Signy's' (p. 25) – her voice is not completely erased here, but its impact is reduced by appearing only through reported speech. Her direct instruction to Sigmundr in *Völsunga saga* to kill the child if he does not measure up is couched in gentler terms; the maid reports that the child should be left to 'wend the ways of his fate' (p. 25).[331] This, of course, along with the later erasure of her own test of her children's courage by sewing their clothes directly onto their skin, which appears in *Völsunga saga*, makes Signy a slightly more acceptable mother figure, although still far from the mid-

[331] Indeed, in Turner and Scott's version Signy has nothing to do with Sigmund's decision to, upon finding his first foster-son wanting, 'thrust him out from the woods to return to his father's hall'.

Victorian ideal which recommended that a mother should care for her children herself.[332] Yet it also allows her to be silenced by the re-telling of the narrative, and to continue to be isolated from the other characters. Signy is not shown as interacting with her husband, and her dialogues with her brother are much reduced. She is constructed as someone who is detached from relationships with the people around her.

If Signy is represented as disconnected from family relationships, and contained within the domestic realm, Brynhild's character seems to be formed in opposition to this. Brynhild is introduced in the second book, which is an entirely male realm until her appearance, so it is perhaps not surprising that Sigurd's inability to determine her gender is retained from *Völsunga saga*:[333]

> Now over the body he standeth, and seeth it shapen fair,
> And clad from head to foot-sole in pale grey-glittering gear,
> In a hauberk wrought as straitly as though to the flesh it were grown:
> But a great helm hideth the head and is girt with a glittering crown.
> (p. 122)

It is telling that Brynhild is assumed to be male because she is enclosed in the apparel of a powerful, military figure. Yet this scene of mistaken gender identity does not challenge the idea of a binary, easily discernible sexual difference. As this section is entitled 'How Sigurd Awoke Brynhild Upon Hindfell', the reader is under no confusion about the gender of the figure, even if Sigurd is temporarily, especially a Victorian reader who had read any of the contemporary reviews that retell the whole plot.[334] Her physical appearance, not depicted in *Völsunga saga*, immediately betrays her femininity:

> So he draweth the helm from the head, and, lo, the brow snow-white,
> And the smooth unfurrowed cheeks, and the wise lips breathing light;
> And the face of a woman it is, and the fairest that ever was born,
> [...]
> But he looketh, and loveth her sore, and he longeth her spirit to move.
> (p. 122)

[332] Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 158.
[333] The narrator-compiler also includes this gender misinterpretation in *Sd.*.
[334] See Peter Faulkner (ed.), *William Morris: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. 230-67.

Sigurd’s love for Brynhild is an instantaneous physical attraction. Once she has been revealed as female, Brynhild is depicted in a romantic manner, and her role as Sigurd’s lover eclipses her previous association with war. As is the case with Signy, Brynhild’s femininity is closely connected to her physical appearance, and to her desirability to men.

Brynhild provides advice to her suitor but, in contrast to medieval depictions of Brynhildr in this scene, the counsel is described as follows:

> And they sat on the side of Hindfell, and their fain eyes looked and loved,
> As she told of the hidden matters whereby the world is moved:
> And she told of the framing of all things, and the houses of the heaven;
> And she told of the star-worlds’ courses, and how the winds be driven.
> (p. 128)

The didactic speech of the Old Norse texts, which often seems irrelevant to Sigurðr’s actual situation, becomes a private act that re-emphasises the bond between the two lovers. The reader is not able to access Brynhild’s actual communication; only the two characters involved in the conversation know the precise content of her wisdom. The speech also alludes to the connection between these characters and the world of Old Norse myth; the language here is reminiscent of eddic representations of the sibyls. The portrayal of Brynhild alludes to her status as an important figure, in contrast to the representation of Signy as a powerless figure. Brynhild also represents a version of femininity which is able to share a relationship of equality with a member of the opposite sex. She has been rejected by the martial community after disobeying the instructions of Odin, but in the presence of her lover no longer appears to feel this loss.

The parity of Brynhild’s relationship acts as a counter to other loveless marriages, such as Signy’s. But the relationship is fleeting, and both are later married to other characters. Despite these new associations, the connection between Brynhild and Sigurd remains. When Sigurd is able to remember their relationship, he instantly falls back in love with her. Yet Brynhild has ‘grown stern and strange’ (p. 201) and does not allow herself to reciprocate. Of

course, her refusal to acknowledge an extra-marital sexual desire could be seen as commendable, according to Victorian sexual morals. The control of her feelings, and ability to act as if she no longer cares for her previous lover, is not something that Sigurd can manage; Brynhild represents the idea of female moral control of male sexuality.[335] Yet the tragedy of the denial of her desire is also depicted:

> And no man knoweth her sorrow;
> [...] and she deemeth it good to lie
> In the trench of the windy mountains, and the track of the wandering sheep,
> [...]
> But her crying none shall hearken, and her sorrow nought shall know,
> Save the heart of the golden Sigurd, and the man fast bound in woe.
> (p. 203)

Brynhild is both physically and emotionally isolated from the other characters of the text.[336] Although Sigurd may 'know' her sorrow, in that he is suffering from similar emotions, he is not actually aware of her grief. Indeed, during her confrontation with her husband, her feelings are not revealed by the narrator, although we are told about Gunnar's anger. Her interior life has become unnarratable. Brynhild initially appeared to offer another way for a female character to form personal relationships. Yet the trauma of the loss of Sigurd places Brynhild in a similar position to Signy. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, the silent, remote woman who conceals her feelings is an important motif of the text.

Sigurd the Volsung also examines the idea of a woman's place in a gendered community, through the depiction of female bonding. Gudrun initially appears as part of her family and the court, but this image is quickly juxtaposed with her amongst a 'bower of women, and her damsels' (p. 132). For the first time in the text, we are shown an exclusively female setting, which is idyllic. Similarly, the relationship between Gudrun and Brynhild is initially depicted as harmonious, as 'lovely they were together' (p. 135).[337] This contrasts with frequent mid-Victorian representations of the dangers of close female friendships,

[335] Mitchell, *Fallen Angels*, p. 142.
[336] Morris introduces these images of seclusion into the narrative.
[337] This initial scene between Gudrun and Brynhild is erased from Turner and Scott's text.

especially amongst younger women.[338] Yet Gudrun's portent of forthcoming events creates discord, and disrupts the representation of the two women who have previously been described as 'sister[s]' (p. 135) and on equal terms. Female foresight is once again depicted as negative, demonstrating the threatening nature of women with knowledge of the future. Once Gudrun mentions her prophetic dream, she is depicted as juvenile and fearful, in contrast to Brynhild's intelligence:

> Young in the world am I waxen, and the scorn of folk I fear
> When I speak to the ears of the wise, and a maiden's dream they hear.
> (p. 136)

At this point the dissimilarity of the two women is made clear. The women then 'stand apart' (p. 139) and Brynhild refers to Gudrun as a 'child' (p. 139) rather than a sibling. The differences between the women indicate that vulnerability is not an essential part of femininity, and is associated with youth as much as a particular gender. There are a wide range of possibilities for femininity, and the text appears to reject the idea of an essential nature of a woman.

Yet Gudrun bears many close similarities to Signy.[339] She is frequently described as silent, and as separate from other characters. Nevertheless, Gudrun's emotions are made clearer to the reader; she is not detached from the narrator, and her heart is described as being 'unbeguiled' (p. 162). Gudrun is initially represented as someone who cannot dissemble as Signy has in the revenge against her husband. Her emotions are made clear by her blushes as she interacts with Sigurd and by narratorial descriptions of her feelings. Yet, when Sigurd dies, her grief cannot be uttered in language:

> The house of the Niblungs by another cry was rent,
> The wakening wail of Gudrun.
> (p. 230)

[338] Gorman, *Victorian Girl*, p. 113.
[339] Cumming observes the structural similarities of Signy and Gudrun's roles in the text; see 'Structure', p. 406. He also acknowledges the importance of Gudrun's isolation (p. 411).

Her disruptive shriek, which tears apart the domestic setting, is something of a turning point for Gudrun, as it marks the development of her character from vulnerable and open, to hardened and deceptive. Yet her howl is also a moment where the details of her emotions become unnarratable. Of course, Guðrún shrieks in a similar manner in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, yet this inability to articulate emotion is something that is greatly extended in *Sigurd the Volsung*. Trauma seems to force all the major female characters to conceal their feelings, and isolate themselves from their family and communities.

Fittingly, unlike *Völsunga saga*, *Sigurd the Volsung* retains the scenes where Gudrun is initially unable to express her anguish to others:

> But no tears and no lamenting in Gudrun's heart would strive
> With the deadly chill of sorrow that none may bear and live.
> (p. 233)[340]

Gudrun is silenced by the tragedy. She is no longer able to articulate her emotions. It is only when her misery is echoed in the voice of another woman that she can communicate it verbally:

> Till she heard a wail anigh her and how Gullrond wept beside,
> Then she knew the voice of her pity, and rose upright and cried.
> (p. 235)

Gudrun is again depicted as finding strength in the company of other women. This is reinforced through her habitation with Thora, which appears secure and tranquil until it is interrupted by the prospect of another marriage. It seems that a female community can provide an escape from the tragedy associated with the wider world, but this solace can only be temporary.

Sigurd the Volsung develops the roles of all three major female characters. Indeed, Signy is the only female protagonist who does not have a book named for her.[341] Yet these

[340] The depiction of Gudrun as unable to express her sorrow through tears is absent from Turner and Scott's text. In fact, her portrayal of Gudrun's mourning is quite the opposite of Morris's: 'but as for the grief of Gudrun over Sigurd no man may tell it. Long she lay on his body and spent herself in weeping, but at last she arose and cursed Brynhild and Gunnar and all the Niblung house'. Nevertheless, despite her easy tears, she is still presented as unknowable by Turner and Scott.

women do not seem to have such a central position in their families or communities. Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun all end their narratives as solitary and inaccessible. Their emotions become unknowable and so the sympathy of the implied reader is somewhat detached from their plight, despite the narrator demonstrating the forces which have led to their disconnection from society, and the repetitive nature of the suffering of the three women that suggests the inevitability of this isolation. *Sigurd the Volsung* cannot integrate its female characters fully into the community of the text. The medievalism of the setting allows an exploration of gender values that need not accord with the norms of 1870s Britain, and the distancing of women from the domestic setting can be read as a critique of this Victorian ideal. The next section will examine the construction of female sexuality in the text, and whether this also contests Victorian values.

2: Sexuality

If love has replaced the discussion of female sexuality in texts of the 1870s, it is perhaps surprising that *Sigurd the Volsung* retains clear expressions of female sexual desire, and does not shy away from the exploration of controversial forms of sexuality, such as the retention of the incestuous relationship which occurs in *Völsunga saga*. For many Victorians, marriages between family relations such as cousins were valued. As Claudia Nelson explains, 'cousin marriage was a way of safeguarding the domestic circle against change'.[342] Nevertheless, the idea of sexual relations between closer family members was abhorred. Even the legal permission for a man to marry his sister-in-law after the death of his wife was vehemently objected to.[343] Anthony Wohl observes the reluctance to even directly discuss incest, or refer

[341] Ennis would re-title Book IV as 'Grimhild', but her article does not offer a convincing justification for this; see 'Grimhild', p. 21.
[342] Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2007), p. 137.
[343] Nelson, *Family Ties*, p. 120.

to it as such, with social commentators preferring to use euphemisms.[344] The exposure of incest amongst the working class was treated with horror and revulsion.[345] Indeed, as Nelson argues, the absence of a law against incest suggests a refusal to even contemplate sexual relationships between siblings.[346]

Yet Signy's role in the conception of Sinfiotli is greatly expanded in *Sigurd the Volsung*. In *Völsunga saga*, it is Sigmundr who instigates the sexual relationship. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, Signy accepts all responsibility for the incest. At this point, she becomes more knowable to the audience:

> Fierce then in the heart of Signy a sudden flame 'gan burn,
> And the eyes of her soul saw all things, like the blind, whom the world's last fire
> Hath healed in one passing moment 'twixt his death and his desire.
> And she thought: "Alone I will bear it; alone I will take the crime;
> On me alone be the shaming, and the cry of the coming time.
> Yea, and he for the life is fated and the help of many a folk,
> And I for the death and the rest, and deliverance from the yoke."
> (p. 27)

The reader is now offered direct access to Signy's thoughts. The idea of conceiving a child through an incestuous sexual act with her brother is represented as a moment of clarity and wisdom. Furthermore, despite the acknowledgement of the disgrace of incest, this course of action is described as fated. The incestuous creation of a Volsung heir is a necessary act, but one for which Signy will suffer 'death and the rest'. This constructs Signy not just as a woman with an unconventional sexuality, but also as someone who is prepared to sacrifice her life for a child, and for the sake of her family; she is a figure likely to receive general approbation in 1870s England.[347] Yet just as her relationship with her son from Siggeir undermines this representation of Signy as a conventional maternal figure (as she gladly

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[344] Anthony Wohl, *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p .197.
[345] Wohl, *Structure and Stresses*, p. 203.
[346] Nelson, *Family Ties*, p. 120.
[347] Barbara Z. Thaden comments that 'while nineteenth-century mothers were expected to make a great emotional investment in every child, social and legal conventions made it very unlikely that they themselves would gain any *return* on their investment'; see *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction: Rewriting the Patriarchal Family* (New York; London: Garland, 1997), p. 8, original emphasis. The ability of Sinfiotli to avenge his family on Signy's behalf means that she will greatly benefit from her investment, despite delegating most of the child-rearing responsibilities to her brother.

sends him away to Sigmund and is unhappy to see him return), the juxtaposition of motherly concern and an incestuous conception also problematises Signy in this role. It is likely to be for this reason, therefore, that Turner and Scott completely erase all mention of the incest, save an oblique reference to Sinfiotli who 'loved Sigmund as his father'.[348]

Nevertheless, it is an occasion where Signy is presented as able to control the narrative, rather than react to the decisions of others. Yet, to seduce Sigmund, she requires the assistance of the sorcerer. This is chiefly a financial transaction with Signy paying 'a pound of silver and [...] rings of the ruddy gold' (p. 28) for the temporary exchange of bodies. The transformation of Signy is depicted as one of a grieving, grey woman who instantly becomes more animated in her new physical state: she has 'laughing lips' (p. 28), eyes which become 'beckoning lamps' (p. 28) and feet which are 'ready for the dance' (p. 28). Signy has not just exchanged an exterior form with the sorcerer, but also a personality. She is now a stereotypical depiction of a sexually promiscuous woman. This alteration in her character is not complete; although her behaviour has changed, she retains enough of her original identity to be repulsed and 'sickened' (p. 28) by the transformation. This is the first and only time that Signy expresses her sexuality in the text. The connection between female sexuality and promiscuous behaviour and the exchange of money seem to exhibit the kinds of fears that were present in mid-Victorian culture.[349] Indeed, as Amanda Anderson argues that the Victorian prostitute was 'closely identified with representation' and 'expresses anxieties about what constitutes human agency and selfhood', it is revealing that Signy's controversial sexual relationship occurs when she has taken the physical form of another woman.[350]

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[348] A review of Turner and Scott's text states that 'the management of Sinfioth's parentage has been adroit' and suggests that this censorship is necessary due to the likelihood of the text being used in schools; see Dye, '*The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*', p. 136.
[349] See Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 95.
[350] Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Fainted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 166, 198.

Ashurst comments that the 'scene of casual sex between Sigmund and his sister [...] [is] thoroughly impressive though by no means sensationalist'.[351] Signy is clearly depicted as taking the initiative in the sexual relationship:

> And soft was her voice, and she sung him sweet tales of yore agone,
> Till all his heart was softened; and the man was all alone,
> And in many wise she wooed him; so they parted not that night,
> Nor slept till the morrow morning, when the woods were waxen bright.
> (p. 29)

She acknowledges her responsibility for the incestuous act several lines before, and the narrator accepts her culpability. Unlike in *Völsunga saga*, where Sigmundr persuades his visitor to have sex with him, Sigmund is seen as the victim of female sexuality. His assertion of the asexual nature of their relationship is ironic, as he tells her that 'though this house be the terror of men-folk, thou shalt find it as safe a place/ as though I were nought but thy brother' (p. 29). This reassurance emphasises the unnatural nature of their later union. But Sigmund is constructed as completely innocent in this; it is only female sexuality that is shown to deliberately transgress the bounds of a normative sexuality.

Signy is also depicted as a performer, both in the songs that she sings to entice her brother, and by acting out a different identity. Signy now has an personality that is doubled, indicating the inability for women to retain a consistent character. This partially distances her from full culpability, as it is not quite Signy who has an incestuous relationship with her brother – it is a version of Signy with a different personality and physical features (although it is Signy enough that the union results in her giving birth to a son). Like other Victorian fallen women described by Anderson, Signy becomes a 'negative version of the masculine self conceived in terms of [...] self consistency'.[352] An expression of sexuality in unconventional terms leads to a radically different identity, albeit a temporary one. Signy appears in control of her sexuality, but is seducing Sigmund for reasons of practicality, rather than passion.

[351] Ashurst, 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 54.
[352] Anderson, *Tainted Souls,* p. 42.

Despite the defence that her actions are fated, and are the only means by which vengeance can be achieved, Signy's decision to have sex with her brother connects female sexuality to forms of sexual degeneracy. Sexuality is also depicted as something necessarily feminine; it is only Signy who can take the initiative in the creation of a son of doubled Volsung heritage. The inclusion of an incestuous relationship is clearly problematic, and the distancing of the setting of the text and its status as a rewriting allows an exploration of this controversial form of sexuality. The association of an assertive female sexuality and incest demonstrates the potential threat of female sexuality, and the emphasis on acting and performance suggests its unnaturalness.

In contrast, the relationship between Brynhild and Sigurd is constructed in sexual terms from the outset, but is represented in a much less contentious manner. Once freed from her armour, Brynhild is described as flushed and breathless, with a heaving breast (p. 123). This is clear sexual imagery which is not present in the Old Norse texts. The description of her emotion is slightly less reliable, as the narrator declares that Sigurd believes 'he knew of her heart that she loved' (p. 124) rather than directly reporting her sentiments; again, women are depicted as ominously unknowable. Nevertheless, the reciprocity of feelings, after the minimum of introductions, soon leads to a passionate embrace:

> Then they turned and were knit together; and oft and o'er again
> They craved, and kissed rejoicing, and their hearts were full and fain.
> (p. 124)[353]

In contrast to Signy, who is often described as isolated from the other characters, Brynhild and Sigurd act in concord from the beginning of their meeting; their intimacy is emphasised through the use of pronouns which include both characters. Female sexuality is here something that is reciprocated and unthreatening, despite it occurring outside of a marital relationship.

[353] This line is repeated later in the text, as 'they crave and kiss rejoicing, and their hearts are full and fain' to describe the behaviour of Gudrun and Sigurd. The reiteration contrasts the two relationships, but also depicts the two women as interchangeable.

Brynhild and Sigurd's relationship is portrayed as sexualised from their first meeting. When Sigurd visits her at Lymdale:

> Then forth she stepped from the high-seat, and forth from the threshold he came,
> Till both their bodies mingling seemed one glory and the same,
> [...]
> And fresh from the deeps of the summer the breeze across them blew,
> But nought of the earth's desire, or the lapse of time they knew.
> (p. 147)[354]

At this point, the two are not only described by shared pronouns, but almost as one person. Their relationship is so consuming that they are unable to sense anything outside of it. Indeed, when the couple begin speaking to each other, they repeat each other's words. These echoes in the dialogue enhance the impression of a close connection between the two. Unlike in *Völsunga saga*, mention of Gudrun is entirely erased from this scene, which increases the emphasis on a relationship between Sigurd and Brynhild.

The prominence of the sexual passion between Sigurd and Brynhild accentuates the tragedy when the narrative unequivocally reveals that they will be separated. When Brynhild is wooed by Gunnar, even though it is actually Sigurd in the form of Gunnar, her reaction to the proposal is presented as unenthusiastic:

> And they sat a while in the high-seat when the wedding-troth was done,
> But no while looked each on the other, and hand fell down from hand,
> And no speech there was betwixt them that their hearts might understand.
> (p. 192)

The couple cannot even bear to touch or speak to each other. They retire to the same bed, but the possibility of a sexual relationship is entirely absent:

> With folded hands she lay there, and let the night go by:
> And as still lay that Image of Gunnar as the dead of life forlorn,
> And hand on hand he folded as he waited for the morn.
> [...]
> Thus they lay as brother by sister.
> (p. 193)[355]

[354] This scene is absent from Turner and Scott's version of the narrative; Sigurd arrives at the Niblung's house after his first meeting with Brynhild, thus reducing their relationship.
[355] In Turner and Scott's text, the couple do not spend the night together.

Although the couple's body language echoes each other, this does not connote intimacy but instead the oddity of a relationship without physical contact. The reference to their connection as being like siblings adds irony to the situation; even a brother and sister have had a sexual relationship earlier in the text. The contrast between Brynhild's relationships with Sigurd (as himself) and the form of Gunnar is clear. At the same time, the distinction between Brynhild and the other female characters in the text lessens. Ultimately, it appears that the female characters exhibit similar kinds of behaviour. When Sigurd/ Gunnar leaves, Brynhild 'lay silent' (p. 194). Her lack of speech indicates the alteration of her character. This is reiterated in the scene where she enters the Niblung residence, and is presented as unmoved, unsmiling, and acting a role – in a way clearly analogous to Signy. This modification of Brynhild draws attention to the initial relationship between her and Sigurd as an idealised representation of female sexuality, which is more commonly repressed.

Unlike Brynhild's expressive sexuality, Gudrun's desire is presented in a timid manner. The description of her blushing reaction to him is fleeting, and she is careful to conceal her sentiment at his 'longing' (p. 163) for another woman. Gudrun's hidden desire for Sigurd suggests that the revelation of female sexuality is improper. Yet the happiness of Brynhild and Sigurd's relationship contrasts with Gudrun's tragic yearning for the object of her affections; the benefits of a containment of female sexuality are not clear. Once they have admitted their feelings to each other, the description of Gudrun's and Sigurd's vows establishes the physical nature of their desire:

> Then he taketh the cup and her hands, and she boweth meekly adown,
> Till she feels the arms of Sigurd round her trembling body thrown:
> A little while she doubteth in the mighty slayer's arms
> As Sigurd's love unhoped-for her barren bosom warms;
> [...]
> Then the fierce love overwhelms her, and as wax in the fervent fire.
> (p. 173)[356]

[356] A notion of the couple's sexual desire for one another is not present in Turner and Scott's text.

This part of the scene is entirely focalised on Gudrun. She does not take the initiative in the physical contact, and still considers herself somewhat unworthy of Sigurd's affections, due to his heroic reputation. Gudrun's clear sexual desire is countered by a sense of inequality in the relationship; her physical longing for her lover occurs simultaneously with doubts about its reciprocation. The impression created is very different from that of Brynhild and Sigurd. Gudrun is less able to act in response to her own desire.

Even when married, Gudrun still feels unequal to her husband. She looks at him 'in awe and utter wonder' (p. 180) and refers to him as a god rather than a man. The wedding night only becomes pleasurable when Gudrun gives in to physical desire completely:

> And in love her whole heart melted, and all thought passed away,
> Save the thought of joy's fulfilment and the hours before the day;
> She murmured words of loving as his kind lips cherished her breast,
> And the world waxed nought but lovely and a place of infinite rest.
> (p. 181)

Here, the sexual relationship is able to provide a moment where the future is not feared. It is perhaps no coincidence that the replacement of a desire tinged with foreboding with a more satisfying physical closeness occurs after marriage. A more positive representation of physical desire occurs when it accords with Victorian norms of sexuality. The repetition of the phrase 'infinite rest' recalls the verse at the end of the previous section, where the couple embraced in less happy terms. The contrast evoked by this linguistic echo emphasises the security that marriage provides Gudrun.

The representation of female sexuality in *Sigurd the Volsung* is varied, and does not solely categorise it as potentially dangerous. Signy's sexuality in the incest scene is the most controversial, and is where the text comes closest to equating female sexuality with monstrosity. Yet the example of Brynhild demonstrates that female sexuality can be a positive part of an equal relationship between the sexes. This is undermined somewhat by Gudrun's sexuality, which is closely connected to fear and destruction. Female sexuality can

be expressed in different ways; as Isobel Armstrong has argued in relation to *The Defence of Guenevere*, ‘the position of women [...] is contradictory and paradoxical’.[357] Gudrun’s desire for the containment of sexuality within marriage contrasts with Brynhild’s less constrained passion. Although varied, it appears that sexual desire is a specifically female emotion; Sigurd is depicted as pitying and loving Gudrun, but there is little mention of him feeling a physical desire for her, or Brynhild. The final section of this chapter examines the construction of femininity within the suicides of Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun, to discover whether a similar tension between passivity and agency is present within their death scenes.

3: Suicide

> Thou knowest the tale of women, how oft it haps on a day
> That of such gifts men repent them, and their lives are cast away.[358]

In her exploration of death in Victorian culture, Patricia Jalland describes how, despite the repeal of laws about profane burial and the forfeiture of property, suicide ‘continued to be regarded with fear and aversion’ in the mid-Victorian period.[359] The correct conception of suicide, whether ‘in traditional moral terms as a sin against God, or by broader socio-economic forces, or by mental depression’ was a subject of much debate from the 1870s until the end of the Victorian period.[360] Of course, the characters in the historical setting of *Sigurd the Volsung* are not Christian, and so the associations of sin with suicide are not relevant within the story-world, although these attitudes would shape the reactions of the implied reader. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, the suicides of Signy and Brynhild are retained from *Völsunga saga*. Morris’s major alteration in this area is to use this device as an ending for both his other central female character, Gudrun, and the text as a whole. Given the construction of these

[357] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 242.
[358] *Sigurd the Volsung*, p. 147.
[359] Patricia Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 59.
[360] Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 71.

female characters as detached from their communities, families and even husbands, it is perhaps not surprising that suicide is a chosen option. Victor Bailey, in his study of Victorian suicide, concludes that 'social isolation remains an essential explanatory concept for the interpretation of the incidence of suicide'.[361] Yet suicide appears to offer the characters of *Sigurd the Volsung* a moment of agency, as well as relief from suffering.

Unlike Sigmund and Sinfiotli, who triumphantly defeat Siggeir and escape, Signy dies with her husband. This is her own choice, which seems surprising given her efforts to destroy him. The unexpected nature of this decision perhaps results in the re-ordering of her final speeches; in *Völsunga saga*, she ends with her unanticipated statement that she wishes to die with the clan she has married into whereas in *Sigurd the Volsung* the final part of her speech reveals the incestuous origin of Sinfiotli:

> And there shall all ye remember how I loved the Volsung name,
> Nor spared to spend for its blooming my joy, and my life, and my fame.
> For hear thou: that Sinfiotli, who hath wrought out our desire.
> (p. 40)

Despite choosing to perish in the fire with Siggeir, Signy's ultimate desire is to be honoured as a true Volsung who was prepared to sacrifice her own life and contentment for the success of this family. Her concern is to be acknowledged for her importance in the plot against Siggeir, perhaps fearing that the brute heroism of her brother and their son would outshine her status as creator. By expanding Signy's role, the text has ensured that this will not be the case.

Yet even in this version of the narrative, Signy is not permitted to have her final words commemorate her as a saviour of her tribe. The last lines she speaks are:

> Farewell, my brother, for the earls my candles light,
> And I must wend me bedward lest I lose the flower of night.
> (p. 40)

[361] Victor Bailey, *This Rash Act: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 266.

This immediately moves Signy from a position as protector of the family, who is prepared to do whatever it takes for the Volsung identity to succeed, into a domestic position.[362] Her return into the flaming house is not described in terms of a heroic sacrifice, but rather in the possibly sexualised terms of 'wend[ing] bedward'.[363] In *Völsunga saga*, Signy's last statements indicate that now that the revenge has been carried out, there is no reason for her to continue living. In contrast, in *Sigurd the Volsung*, Signy seeks death as a solace after such a tragic life. Tucker suggests that 'Signy's last words brim with exhilaration', but if this is the case, it is only the excitement for an end to her suffering.[364] Spatt argues that she decides to die with Siggeir 'to hide her all-too-Victorian shame' but this does not accord with her pride in the necessary creation of Sinfiotli.[365] In the revelation of Signy's consciousness, and the expansion of her character, *Sigurd the Volsung* constructs a character for whom death is a relief rather than a positive choice. Although the male characters can move on from the scene of destruction and create new families and roles for themselves, Signy sees suicide as her only option.

Signy is 'beheld of the eyes of men' (p. 40) as she returns to the burning building. In a similar manner, Brynhild also chooses a death that includes a public farewell and becomes a clear spectacle. Her long speech and gathering of her associates is reminiscent of many Victorian death-bed scenes, which as Jalland observes, are 'usually melodramatic occasions of moral judgement and emotional farewell'.[366] Yet rather than a death scene where she asks for forgiveness for her misdeeds, or expresses her love for her family, Brynhild's final

[362] Bailey comments that most Victorian suicides took place 'in the privacy of the home'; see *This Rash Act*, p. 1. These Victorian domestic suicides, however, were unlikely to have consisted of returning to a burning building.
[363] John Hollow observes the eroticised nature of Signy's farewell when discussing the suicidal moments of the text; see 'An Introduction: Sinfiotli' in *After Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung* (Shiremanstown, Pennsylvania: William Morris Society in the United States, 1977), pp. 1-13 (p .7).
[364] Tucker, 'Macropoetics', p.378.
[365] Spatt, 'Morrissaga', p.355.
[366] Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* p. 24.

moments centre on her triumphant recitation of the tragedy that will befall the other characters. Before killing herself in front of her serving women, she instructs them to:

> Draw forth queenly raiment of the loveliest and the best,
> Red rings that the Dwarf-lords fashioned, fair cloths that queens have sewed,
> To array the bride for the mighty, and the traveller for the road.
> (p. 241)

Brynhild is not so distraught that she wishes to die as quickly as possible. Instead, she is concerned about her appearance during and after her death. Like any role, her death requires appropriate props and attire, and these theatrical rituals appear to enhance emotion. Considering the construction of the female figures, including Brynhild towards the end of the text, as isolated from the other characters it is perhaps surprising that she desires an audience for her suicide. Her choice of company for her final moments indicates dissatisfaction with her position as an outsider. The theatrical elements of her death allow her to play a different role.

The detailed description of the events of Brynhild's suicide emphasises its dramatic aspects. Unlike Signy, who leaves the narrative when she re-enters the fire, Brynhild's final moments are fully narrated:

> Then upright by the bed of the Niblungs for a moment doth she stand,
> And the blade flasheth bright in the chamber [...]
> And the sigh of her heart is hearkened mid the hush of the maidens' wail.
> (p. 242)

Brynhild's death is described as a stage performance, complete with a theatrical sigh at the crucial moment and an echoing chorus of her servants who reflect and increase the grief felt by Brynhild. Yet, although Brynhild's grief is emphasised by this performance, it is also undermined. Her emotions become just a clichéd example of death, rather than a particular expression of her own feelings. Indeed, her request for her body to be burnt next to Sigurd on his funeral pyre further emphasises the unreality of her situation, rather than being a moment

of 'resolution', as Cumming argues.[367] It was Gudrun rather than Brynhild who was Sigurd's wife. The image of the two lovers on the funeral pyre, retained from *Völsunga saga*, may be theatrical but it is also artificial. Brynhild is depicted sympathetically, as she is no longer concealing her emotions, but the exaggerated form of her final moments reinforce a connection between femininity and an incoherent identity.[368]

Gudrun demonstrates a similar ability to dissemble when forced into an unhappy marriage. She hides her real feelings, not just about her husband Atli, but also to the extent that she is depicted as completely emotionless in the scenes of battle between her husband and her brothers.[369] It appears that she has been so traumatised by her first marriage that she has shut down completely. This is different from Signy, who ignores her emotions. Indeed, unlike Signy who chooses to die with her husband, Gudrun leaves the burning house in a triumphant manner:

> But she towered aloft before him, and cried in Atli's home:
> "Lo, lo, the day-light, Atli, and the last foe overcome!"
> And with all the might of the Niblungs she thrust him through and fled.
> (p. 306)

Whilst Signy's death was one of resignation, Gudrun's participation in Atli's death is far more active. She does not abandon him to die in the fire, but 'thrust[s] him through' and leaves behind her the scene of destruction. This appears to re-write the previous suicides of Signy and Brynhild, as Gudrun is depicted in a heroic manner with direct control over the life of another, rather than just her own. Despite this moment of clear agency, however, Gudrun is not offered the consolation of a happy ending. Neither does *Sigurd the Volsung* include the

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[367] Cumming, 'Structure' p. 411.

[368] The importance of this moment is heightened by Turner and Scott's text, which ends with the funeral pyre of Brynhildr and Sigurd.

[369] Spatt acknowledges this but sees the description of Gudrun as 'silent as the ancient sharpen stone' as part of the 'symbols of frustrate nature'; see 'Morrissaga', p. 138. McDowell, in contrast, declares her behaviour 'melodramatic' and 'primitive'; see 'Treatment', p. 163. Dentith comes closest to acknowledging her unreadability in this scene, arguing that 'in the saga her role is scarcely ambivalent: she is on the side of her brothers, to the extent of arming herself and actually fighting with them against Atli's warriors. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, however, her motivation is far more ambivalent: she continues to harbour massive resentment against her brothers for the slaying of Sigurd, and presides stony-faced over the battle with, and eventual massacre of, the Niblungs'; see *Empire*, p. 81.

ending of *Völsunga saga* where Guðrún is married again and bears more children: albeit only to see them all perish and her attempts at vengeance fail.[370]

Instead, Gudrun journeys to the coast, where, in contrast to both Signy and Brynhild, she is completely alone. This scene offers some respite from the tragedy that has occurred in the text. The waves are 'little and fair' (p. 306), and 'gave back no sign of the burning' (p. 306) in Atli's halls. The mention of a 'merry morning' (p. 306) and 'havens' (p. 306) create an atmosphere of calm, and indicate that Gudrun may have finally found a place to escape her tragic fate. Yet she is not comforted by the sea, and instead requests that it end her life. Once more, she is echoing Signy, and Brynhild, for whom suicide was the only possible ending. All three are connected by their ultimate hopelessness, although their deaths are also a moment of agency. As Tucker suggests, 'her final plight [is] a choice that is simultaneously free and entailed by indomitable narrative logic'.[371] Gudrun in particular has carefully chosen the way she will depart. Complete closure is not provided at the end of the text, however, despite Cumming's argument that 'Morris ends his closing book with a note of finality'.[372] The final lines detract from any certainty that Gudrun has perished in the ocean:

> Who knoweth the deeps of the sea,
> And the wealth of the bed of Gudrun, and the days that yet shall be?
> (p. 306)

This open ending is similar to the effect of the *Poetic Edda*, which in its representations of Guðrún through multiple poems, offers a range of conclusions to her stories. Through *Sigurd the Volsung*, Gudrun's character develops from that of a naive, love-struck child, to a determined woman who is able to take an active part in the vengeance against the husband

[370] Anthony Ugolnik observes that *Das Nibelungenlied* finishes with the death of Kriemhild, the counterpart of Gudrun in this part of the narrative, and so Morris 'adopted the ending of *Das Nibelungenlied*'; see 'The Victorian Skald: Old Icelandic and the Evolution of William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*' in *After Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung* (Shiremanstown, Pennsylvania: William Morris Society in the United States, 1977), pp. 39-67 (p.56). I disagree with this assertion; Kriemhild does not commit suicide, so the endings are very different. McDowell suggests that the final incidents of *Völsunga saga* are erased for 'dramatic effect' and that 'the omission of the details of Gudrun's third marriage [...] leaves the reader more favourably impressed as to the strength of her character'; see 'Treatment', p. 154 and p. 163.
[371] Tucker, 'Macropoetics', p. 388.
[372] Cumming,'Structure', p. 412.

who has killed her kin.[373] In doing so, she has become less knowable by the text; her emotions are withheld from the reader, and even her death is ambiguous. Gudrun, and her trauma, remains as something that cannot be mastered by either the narrator or the reader.

These questions about the whereabouts of Gudrun do not, however, constitute the 'farewell' of the text, to use Phelan's term.[374] The focus shifts from the unknowable nature of Gudrun, and her future, to a summary of the events of the text:

> Ye have heard of Sigurd aforetime, how the foes of God he slew;
> How forth from the darksome desert the Gold of the Waters he drew;
> How he wakened Love on the Mountain, and wakened Brynhild the Bright,
> And dwelt upon Earth for a season, and shone in all men's sight.
> Ye have heard of the Cloudy People, and the dimming of the day,
> And the latter world's confusion, and Sigurd gone away;
> Now ye know of the Need of the Niblungs and the end of broken troth,
> All the death of kings and of kindreds and the sorrow of Odin the Goth.
> (p. 306)

This farewell is one of the few times in which a direct address to the reader is made.[375] The narrator's desire to recap the story establishes a lack of trust in an audience's ability to interpret the ending of the text for themselves, and a desire for control over the ultimate meaning of the text. These lines are likely, therefore, to create a separation between the reader and the audience. The narrator summarises the text as a narrative of Sigurd's brilliance and great deeds, and indicates that the tragic moments of the text stem from his murder and the violation of oaths, resulting in ultimate destruction and the tragedy of the gods. This summary has an almost exclusively male focus, with the exception of the mention of Brynhild being passively woken. It constructs the narrative as a tragic tale about the tragedy that can arise from the breakdown of male homosocial relationships. The farewell is likely, therefore, to fail in its attempt to establish the narrative as providing an ultimate comment on male identity; its didactic tone, in telling the audience what they have read, is likely to

[373] McDowell declares Gudrun 'sentimentalized throughout' and so appears to misread the development of her character; see 'Treatment', p. 163.
[374] Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* p. 21.
[375] The others appear at the beginning of the text (p. 2), when Sigurd rides to Heimir's hall (p. 149) and after Sigurd has betrothed Gunnar to Brynhild (p. 195).

engender a response of objection to this focus on male characters, and to leave with the impression that *Sigurd the Volsung*'s most interesting moments come from its portrayal of its female characters.[376]

4: Conclusion

In *Sigurd the Volsung*, female identity is complex and varied. The patterning of the lives of Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun is used to depict different versions of femininity. Yet ultimately, the tripartite structure also emphasises similarities between the three characters, to the extent that in the redacted version of the text, Gudrun's suicide is erased and some of the lines following her death are quoted after Brynhild's demise, suggesting the interchangeability of the women's deaths and the characters themselves. In Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*, the Old Norse narratives are altered so all three commit suicide as there appears to be no potential for a fresh start. In the process of choosing their own deaths, they all act in a way that seems incongruous with the character that has been established for them: Signy in deciding to die with Siggeir, Brynhild in her desire for company, and Gudrun in her deviation from previous narratives. Female identity is fractured; the text indicates that gender identity is multiple, as female characters can be strong and vulnerable, active and passive, and participate in sexual relationships that are equal, respectable or deviant at different moments in their lives. Yet this particularly female concept of the instability of identity is also threatening, as an incoherent identity produces an inability to understand or manage the women of the text. At the end, Gudrun is a liminal figure on the borderlines between death and life. This final moment of aporia demonstrates the ultimate problem of female representation that is expressed throughout *Sigurd the Volsung*.

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[376] Indeed, Conrad Hjalmar Nordby argues that 'in blood and fire the story comes to an end with Gudrun, "the white and silent woman above the slaughter set". As we turn from the scene and the book, that figure fades not away'; see *The Influence of Old Norse Literature on English Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1901), pp. 57-8.

When discussing Morris's depiction of female characters in *The Defence of Guenevere*, Boos concludes that he 'portrayed forms of psychological and physical confinement of women which other male poets often ignored [...] the suffering of [his] women is more vivid, and more urgently demands redress'.[377] This also seems a fitting summary of Morris's treatment of gender in his later text. His major alteration to the Old Norse narratives was to portray the consciousness of the characters, and this allows him to depict the tragic circumstances that result in the often brutal actions of the female characters, and so provide a defence of their behaviour in light of an appreciation of their traumatic experiences. Yet in *Sigurd the Volsung*, the construction of femininity is also dependent on the moments where the text does not present the 'psychological intensity and depth of female experience', where the female characters' emotions and motivations are inaccessible to the narrator and reader.[378] In this text, the 'deeper forms of human alienation' are most clearly expressed in the ways in which the women appear isolated from their communities, and determined to conceal their feelings; Morris draws attention to the ways in which their trauma is beyond representation.[379]

As Boos also argues, *Sigurd the Volsung*'s 'most important women determine much of its action, and all but Grimhild are admirable and/ or courageous in their culture's terms'.[380] Nevertheless, they are consistently depicted as outsiders, able to influence the plot but not participate in it fully. Gildersleeve refers to Morris's portrayal as one where 'a general softening of [Brynhild's] character in accordance with nineteenth-century ideals is especially

[377] Boos, 'Polarities', p. 199.
[378] Boos, 'Polarities', p. 199.
[379] Boos, 'Polarities', p. 199.
Ann Whitehead defines trauma as an 'event or experience that overwhelms the individual and resists language and representation'; see *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 3.
David Ashurst suggests that the changes that are made to Gudrun's part of the narrative, namely her incitement of Atli to attack her brothers, 'completes his picture of a woman who is led by emotion'; see 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 54. I would argue, however, that the overall impression is of a character whose emotions are concealed rather than revealed.
[380] Boos, 'Fin de Millénaire', p. 289.

noticeable. She is no longer a grim and terrible figure'.[381] Indeed, this could be equally applied to the other female characters, who are depicted as having less agency and fewer abilities to act than in the Old Norse sources. In her analysis, Gildersleeve comments that 'the most striking of Brynhild's traits is her dignified and wise self-restraint. She controls her sorrows and her passions, and moves through life with outward calm' (p. 367). The language used indicates that Gildersleeve sees these as positive attributes; she does not appear to acknowledge the full implications of this restrained portrayal of *Sigurd the Volsung*'s female characters, although she does later admit that she prefers Wagner's Brünnhilde who is 'more passionate and unrestrained' (p. 374). Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun all certainly exhibit courage in the face of adversity, but they are often feared rather than admired by the narrator and the other characters. Although the text offers some insight into the behaviour of its female protagonists, the ultimate separation of the women from their families and communities and their depiction as unknowable reduces the identification which may be expected from the implied reader and softens the effect of an attempt at a rehabilitation of femininity. This indecipherable nature of the female characters is accompanied by the horror of not being able to categorise or control them, which perhaps results in the foregrounding of suicides for Signy, Brynhild and Gudrun.

Dentith also discusses *The Defence of Guenevere* and he concludes that its medievalism does not mean that 'gender contradictions of the nineteenth century can be resolved in the simplifications of an imagined chivalric world'.[382] *Sigurd the Volsung* is also set in a medieval world, far removed from the culture of the time of its publication. The next chapter will ascertain the extent to which the construction of male identity in *Sigurd the Volsung* is a continuation of that of the *Poetic Edda* or of *Völsunga saga*, and how it differs from its predecessors to offer a particularly Victorian version of masculinity.

[381] Gildersleeve, 'Brynhild', p. 366.
[382] Dentith, *Cultural Forms*, p. 142.

Chapter 4: Male identity in *Sigurd the Volsung*

> The least and the worst of them all was a mighty man of war.[383]

> Why should a man desire in any way
> To vary from the kindly race of men?[384]

The previous chapter explored the effects of Morris's alterations to the Völsung narrative on the representation of female identity. This chapter will examine the changes in the context of male characters and masculinity. In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, the most important male identity was a warrior identity, as the second chapter established. This formed a hegemonic masculinity within the texts, despite a questioning of the beneficial nature of violence. Indeed, although battle or individual instances of brutality were sometimes depicted as problematic, there was still a representation of the need for men to be able to excel in combat. Martin Weiner argues that in Victorian England, this interrogation of warrior masculinity was even more profound, and was linked to a reduction of male violence in this period.[385] He states that:

> Not only was male violence coming more and more to be denounced as a relic of benighted ages and a race of barbaric peoples, but more generally the elevation of the family values ever more associated with women's natures (such as religiosity, nurturing, sensitivity to the feelings of others and of course sexual self-denial) fed a questioning (even in the face of a surge of imperial enthusiasm in the late decades of the century) of the values of bravery, self-assertion, physical dominance and others traditionally associated with masculinity. The ideal of the "man of honor" was giving way to the "man of dignity" which required in place of a determination to avenge slights whatever the danger involved the qualities of reasonableness, forethought, prudence and command over oneself. (p. 6)

The imperatives of the narrative mean that it would be impossible for Morris to remove all traces of violence from *Sigurd the Volsung*. Nevertheless, the construction of idealised masculinity in this text is very different from its Old Norse sources.

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[383] *Sigurd the Volsung*, p. 6.

[384] Tennyson, 'Tithonus', ll. 28-9 in *Tennyson: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 137-9.

[385] Martin Weiner, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 2.

There was an interest in Old Norse conceptions of masculinity in the Victorian period. In 1841, a collection of six lectures by Thomas Carlyle was published.[386] The first lecture specifically examined Old Norse mythology and its constructions of manliness. Carlyle suggests that ‘a kind of vacant hugeness [...] characterises that Norse system; enormous force, as yet altogether untutored’ (p. 19). He also argues that, in the *Eddas*, ‘the one needful thing for a man was *to be brave*’ (p. 28, original emphasis). After rhapsodising about the importance of courage, he imagines the admirable qualities of these kinds of heroes: ‘silent, with closed lips, as I fancy them, unconscious that they were specially brave’ (p. 29). Yet this kind of quiet, stoical behaviour, which is valorised throughout Carlyle’s lectures, is more associated with female figures in *Sigurd the Volsung* than with male characters. Indeed, David Rosen has explored the ways in which Carlyle’s concept of manliness is presented as something innate and unchangeable. He argues that ‘Carlyle creates a category of “manliness” that one cannot enter simply by behaving in a “manly” fashion, positing the notion of a “deeper” manliness – already implicit in Rousseau’s idea – a notion of manliness that detaches itself from surface behaviour’.[387] This is not the kind of gender identity that is established in *Sigurd the Volsung*, nor is it one that is established in the culture of mid- to late-Victorian Britain. Despite the clear existence of a hegemonic Victorian masculinity, many critics have illustrated that gender was not a rigid identity in this period.[388] For example, John Tosh has argued against the idea that it is only femininity that was associated with domesticity in Victorian Britain, asserting that ‘never before or since has domesticity been held to be so central to masculinity’.[389]

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[386] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. by Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[387] David Rosen, ‘The Volcano and the Cathedral: Muscular Christianity and the Origins of Primal Manliness’ in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. by Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17-44 (pp. 21-2).
[388] See, for example, John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire* (Harlow: Longman, 2004).
[389] Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 1.

The previous chapter has noted the ways in which a rewriting, especially one of a text so far removed from Victorian Britain both culturally and temporally, allows the opportunity to experiment with the presentation of identity, including sexual difference. C. J. W. L. Wee suggests that in the 1850s, Charles Kingsley thought that 'a primitive vigor and character could be recovered either from non-European lands [...] where manly energy was unconstrained by modern life, or from English historical precedents'.[390] There is something of this notion in *Sigurd the Volsung*; the past can be presented as an admirable and idyllic time of simpler values and responsibilities. Yet the kinds of warrior masculinity found in the *Poetic Edda* or the *Völsunga saga* are not completely idealised, and the tragic nature of the text works against a portrayal of these kinds of masculinities as aspirational.

1: The male body

> The highest thing that art can do is to set before you the true image of the presence of a noble human being. It has never done more than this, and it ought not to do less.[391]

> Grip him by the hand, and you would feel like thanking God that you had met a man.[392]

There was a widespread interest in physiognomy in the Victorian period, particularly in the writings of Johann Lavater.[393] Lucy Hartley states that physiognomy had a second phase of increased popularity in the 1870s.[394] It was, therefore, an influential doctrine during the period in which *Sigurd the Volsung* was written and published. Indeed Cesare Lombroso's

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[390] Wee, C. J. W. L., 'Christian Manliness and National Identity: the Problematic Construction of a Racially "Pure" Nation', in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. by Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 66-88 (p. 68).

[391] John Ruskin, 'Lecture 2' in *The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 20: Lectures on Art*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen 1905), pp. 45-72 (p. 46).

[392] Robert Blatchford, 'William Morris obituary', *Clarion* 253 (October 1896), 324-5 in *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1973), pp. 390-4 (p. 391).

[393] Johann Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy Calculated to Extend the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. by C. Moore, (London: H. D. Symonds, 1797).

[394] Lucy Hartley, 'A Science for One or a Science for All? Physiognomy, Self-Help and the Practical Benefits of Science' in *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres In Nineteenth-Century Scientific Thinking*, ed. by David Clifford (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 71-82 (p. 74).

L'Uomo Delinquente (*Criminal Man*) was produced in the same year and argued that criminality was signified by readable bodily characteristics, to the extent that specific facial features could identify a particular type of criminal.[395] Hartley states that 'the main task for the physiognomist was to render each appearance characterful; that is, to take the external form of an individual as exemplarary of his or her character' (p. 77). This appears to be reflected in the representation of the male body in *Sigurd the Volsung*; there are clear connections made between outward appearance and identity. Yet, as Hartley argues, physiognomy was constructed as a skill that had to be learnt in order to correctly decipher the true meanings of physical signs, suggesting that a reading of the body will never be straightforward.[396] Nevertheless, this discourse does emphasise the possibility that there can be an accurate interpretation of the body. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, the interest in the male body and its links to identity is particularly expressed in the portrayal of eyes, male beauty, and battle.

1.i: Eyes

Chris Otter argues that 'the eye made the Victorians particularly verbose', alluding to the importance given to the eye in Victorian culture not only as revealing the essence of an individual but as a sign of human difference from animals.[397] In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, there are several references to Sigurðr's piercing eyes, which protect him from foes and render him permanently recognisable.[398] In *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris reflects

[395] Cesare Lombroso and Gina Lombroso Ferrero, *Criminal Man, According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso* (New York: Putnam, 1911).
[396] Hartley, 'Physiognomy', p. 79.
[397] Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 22.
[398] Tarrin Willis comments that 'eyes in general appear to be a window into the personality of characters in the sagas'; see 'Physiology and Behaviour in the Sagas', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 279-297 (pp. 279-80). Indeed, heroic nobility is often signified by fierce eyes in Old Norse literature, such as the piercing eyes of Þórr. Yet this method of producing identity does not seem to be as prevalent in the Old Norse sources as it is in Morris's text.

the Victorian fascination with eyes by expanding the previous texts' focus on this organ.[399] Indeed, it is not just Sigurd who is ocularly distinctive. When Sinfiotli is sent to Sigmund for fostering, we are told that:

> But now full glad was Sigmund, and he let his love arise
> For the huge-limbed son of Signy with the fierce and eager eyes. (p. 32)[400]

Sinfiotli has a distinctive body due to both his excessive size and his eyes, which connote fighting ability and a keenness to learn from Sigmund. His body is uncanny; he is not tall or muscular, but has enormous arms and legs. This portrays him as rather ungainly, and also brings to mind his youth as an uneven size is common in adolescents. This allusion to his youth and possible monstrosity connects him to Sigurd, and his child-like physicality suggests a similar emotional immaturity, which is later demonstrated in headstrong and impulsive behaviour (such as whilst in the wolf skin, and indeed here we are told that his 'wrath burned in the eyes of Sinfiotli' [p. 33]). Yet despite being odd, his body inspires love in his father. It is his physical qualities which are depicted as instigating affection, rather than his personality, establishing an admiration for the male body which continues throughout the text. His eyes provide a particular metonym for his internal characteristics, and demonstrate the family trait of Volsung heroic ability.[401] Sinfiotli's identity is so directly reflected by this body part that his death is signalled by his eyes being 'no more dreadful' (p. 48). Eyes can signify particular expressions of masculinity, suggesting that male identity can be easily read from the body.

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[399] After Morris's death, his own eyes were said to reveal his personality. Mackenzie Bell writes that 'when Morris spoke, especially when the theme was anything in which he had real interest, his eyes gleamed'; see 'William Morris: A Eulogy', *Fortnightly Review* 66 November 1896, 693-702 (p. 697)

[400] Turner and Scott's redaction of Morris's text completely removes this reference to Sinfiotli's physicality. Instead, we are just told that he 'grew strong and valiant'; this establishes a much more straightforward warrior identity. The references to problematic aspects of his character are also removed; there is no shape-shifting, he does not kill Signy's children, and the description of his death emphasises his heroic qualities and the wrongful nature of his murder: 'so went his days in warfare and valour, and yet his end was not glorious, for he drank of the poisoned cup given him by the sister of a warrior he had rightly slain.'

[401] Eyes are used to identify races as well as families; there is reference made to the 'purblind eyes of the Dwarf-kind' (p. 84).

Sigmund, the father of Sinfiotli, possesses similar eyes. Before he and his son embark on their revenge against Siggeir, the narrator notes that:

> Fierce glowed the eyes of King Sigmund, for he knew the time was come
> When the curse King Siggeir fashioned at last shall seek him home. (p. 35)[402]

Instead of the narrator revealing Sigmund's emotions at the upcoming battle, a physical description is offered. The implied reader is expected to understand his emotional state from his external appearance. This establishes a direct connection between outward physical signs and internal emotions. He is also described as possessing 'eyes of God' (p. 37). His eyes display his heritage; this time, not the family identity of being a Volsung, but his links to the supernatural world. It is curious that Sigmund anachronistically has 'eyes of God' rather than the eyes of a god; the singular form connects him to Christianity and also further enhances him as an elite character. This emphasised supernatural element of Sigmund's identity perhaps explains how his appearance marks his individuality even after he has died. When Elf's men visit the scene of his last battle they discover his body:

> So they turned their faces to Sigmund, and waded the swathes of the sword.
> "O, look ye long," said the Sea-king, "for here lieth a mighty lord:
> And all these are the deeds of his war-flame, yet hardy hearts, be sure,
> That they once durst look in his face or the wrath of his eyen endure. (p. 57)

Even more so than with Sinfiotli, his body reflects his identity as a warrior and also his high status. The men are confidently able to identify these traits, even from his corpse.

The clearest emphasis on the eye's ability to reflect identity is found in the descriptions of Sigurd, which are much expanded from the Old Norse texts. From the moment of his birth, Sigurd's eyes are recognisable:

> In the bed there lieth a man-child, and his eyes look straight on the sun,
> [...]
> Men say of the serving-women, [that] [...]
> they shrank in their rejoicing before the eyes of the child,
> So bright and dreadful were they; [...]
> Yet the hour seemed awful to them, and the hearts within them burned

[402] The reference to Sigmund's eyes is also redacted from Turner and Scott's text.

As though of fateful matters their souls were newly learned. (pp. 62-3)

Sigurd's eyes signify defiance, bravery, and supernatural ability. But the presence of such an identity in a newborn is not celebrated, but seen as an ominous sign. Indeed, Otter discusses the discourses of protection which began to focus on the vulnerability of babies' eyes during the Victoria era.[403] The disjunction between Sigurd's infant physicality and his intimidating eyes is unsettling. An innate warrior masculinity, which is not developed during maturation, is uncanny.

Ferocious eyes are not alarming in themselves. Descriptions such as 'fierce-eyed warriors' (p. 62) are often used as a metonym for courage. Yet Sigurd's excessive possession of this trait marks him out as different. Gripir identifies and greets him because of this physical sign:

> Hail King with the eyen bright!
> Nought needest thou show the token, for I know of thy life and thy light. (p. 70)

Regin similarly recognises Sigurd as special because of his eyes:

> I looked on thine eyes in the cradle: and now I deem through thee,
> That the end of my days of waiting, and the end of my woes shall be.[404] (p. 74)[405]

Sigurd's eyes do not just identify him as a warrior, but as a chosen individual. Yet the ability for eyes to straightforwardly signal identity is diminished by Regin's misreading. He sees Sigurd as his saviour, but although he does indeed kill Fafnir for him, he also murders Regin. It is notable that the other character who is so clearly identified by his eyes is Odin, who is identified by his single eye. Indeed, this connection is made explicit later in the text when the narrator states that 'his eyes were the eyes of Odin' (p. 223). This comparison is made at the point where Sigurd attempts to control his own destiny and marry Brynhild rather than continue to have Gudrun as his wife. Eyes are connected to a display of masculine power,

[403] Otter, *Victorian Eye*, p. 43.
[404] Regin also mentions that: 'I fell to the dreaming of dreams, and I saw thine eyes therein/ […] And I thought that thou shouldst be he, who should bring my heart its rest' (p. 88).
[405] Both of these identifications of Sigurd by his eyes appear in Turner and Scott's text; by removing the details of other characters' eyes they associated him more fully with this body part.

although ultimately Sigurd's attempt to be in command of the situation is thwarted by Brynhild's reluctance to accept him as a husband; Sigurd's body reflects his desire for control but masculine authority is not always successful. Eyes can signify both individual difference and a character's heritage, although Sigurd's descent from Odin is not clarified in this text.

Yet links to antecedents are not always portrayed as positive. Hiordis questions whether her son finds his identity problematic:

> "Art thou wroth, O Sigurd my son, that such eyes are in thine head?
> And wilt thou be wroth with thy mother? do I withstand thee at all?"
> "Nay," said he, "nought am I wrathful, but the days rise up like a wall
> Betwixt my soul and the deeds, and I strive to rend them through." (pp. 91-2)[406]

Eyes here become a metonym for fate as well as identity, and are depicted as determining later actions. The body does not just reflect an inner identity, but also constructs it. Although Sigurd denies that he is angry, his responsibilities are oppressive. Rather than fate being depicted as inevitable, it is something that he has to work hard to achieve. This positions his actions as within his control, rather than an unavoidable result of his identity. The relationship between identity and body parts is not straightforward as they are portrayed as depicting a future potential, rather than a current status.

Eyes are not only used to identify male characters. From her first appearance in the text, Grimhild is described as having 'glittering eyes'.[407] But these kinds of physical metonyms are used far less for women than for men; they are depicted as having more complicated characters which are not as identifiable from physical traits. This clearly connects with other ways in which women in *Sigurd the Volsung* are presented as unknowable. The concept of 'glittering eyes' is also a much more over-determined symbol

[406] The concept of Sigurd's bodily heritage as being a burden is redacted from Turner and Scott's narrative, although they retain a mention of his eyes: 'The babe had eyes of such wondrous brightness that the folk shrank from him, while they rejoiced over his birth, but his mother spake to the babe as to one who might understand, and she told him of Sigmund and Volsung, of their wars and their troubles and their joys'.

[407] See, for example the descriptions of Grimhild as '[Guiki's] wife of the glittering eyes' (p. 131, p. 153 and p. 170), and 'the queen of the glittering eyes' (p. 156).

than that of 'fierce eyes', which clearly connote a warrior identity.[408] The adjective 'glittering' is also used of the hoard. It therefore suggests danger, as well as allure. Female eyes are contrasted with more easily interpretable male eyes:

> And his queen in the high-seat sitteth, the woman overwise,
> Grimhild the kin of the God-folk, the wife of the glittering eyes:
> And his sons on each hand are sitting; there is Gunnar the great and fair,
> With the lovely face of a king 'twixt the night of his wavy hair:
> And there is the wise-heart Hogni; and his lips are close and thin,
> And grey and awful his eyen, and a many sights they win:
> And there is Guttorm the youngest, of the fierce and wandering glance,
> And the heart that never resteth till the swords in the war-wind dance. (pp. 131-2)[409]

The eyes of Hogni and Guttorm are much more comprehensible than those of Grimhild. Gudrun inherits Grimhild's glittering eyes at the end of the narrative, when she is pretending to be pleased that Atli has killed her brothers (p. 302). Her glittering eyes connote her ability to dissemble rather than a particular, fixed identity; the true feelings of a woman are repeatedly presented as unknowable.

In the excerpt just quoted, it is notable that Gunnar is the only brother to not be described in terms of his intimidating eyes. In contrast, his description refers to his beauty and his long locks. Men are frequently represented in terms of their physical appearance. Siggeir, for example, is depicted as inferior to the Volsungs as: 'nor reached his helm to the shoulder of the least of Volsung's sons' (p. 4). Similarly, the description of Regin as 'low of stature' (p. 62) is presented as a flaw. Height appears to be a straightforward sign of masculinity. Yet Morris also depicts men in terms of their beauty, which has a more complicated relationship to gender identity in *Sigurd the Volsung*.

[408] Glittering eyes also appear in Old Norse literature, especially in relation to serpents. Leslie Donovan notes that valkyries are also often associated with gleaming eyes in Old Norse literature; see 'The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn, and Arwen' in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. by Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003) pp. 106-32 (p. 113).

[409] Turner and Scott retain two mentions of Grimhildr's glittering eyes but does not include this scene with its comparison to the eyes of her sons.

1.ii: Beauty

Representations of beauty reveal characters' identities in *Sigurd the Volsung*.[410] When Sigurd cuts Brynhild out of her armour, we are told that her face is 'the fairest that ever was born' (p. 123). This is followed by sexualised imagery:

> A river of sun-bright hair
> Flows free o'er bosom and shoulder
> Then a flush cometh over her visage and a sigh up-heaveth her breast,
> And her eyelids quiver and open. (p. 123)

Brynhild is not the only female character whose attractiveness is commented on; Signy, Borghild and Gudrun are described as lovely (p. 24, p. 42 and p. 218 respectively). In particular, whiteness connotes beauty for women. Gudrun especially is referred to as good looking because of her white arms (see, for example, p. 131, p. 159, p. 162, p. 174 and p. 218) and Signy is praised as being 'snow-white' (p. 2). Women are depicted in terms of their physical appearance. Yet in *Sigurd the Volsung*, there is much more of a focus on male attractiveness.

From the outset of the text, men are praised not just for typical masculine attributes, such as strength or courage, but for their beauty. The first example of this is Volsung:

> And there stood the high King Volsung in the very front of war;
> And lovelier was his visage than ever heretofore.
> (p. 14)

This approbation of his physical features is not depicted in a feminine manner. He is praised for his attractive face at the same time as he is about to embark upon combat. Indeed, the proximity to battle increases his beauty. When Sigmund is dying, he instructs his wife to 'grieve not for me; for thou weepest that thou canst not see my face/ how its beauty is not

[410] In contrast, Sverrir Jakobsson suggests that, in Old Norse literature outward appearance was unimportant. He argues that 'ugly features were something that had to be overcome rather than a factor in marginalization. In the end, the narratives seem to be telling us, what mattered were the inner qualities of a person'; see 'Strangers in Icelandic Society 1100-1400', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007), 141-157 (p. 152).

departed' (p. 55). Beauty is also shown to be a persistent quality. Facial attractiveness is portrayed as a reliable and enduring indicator of male identity.

Indeed, beauty appears to be essential for praiseworthy male characters. As Sigurd matures, we are told that: 'now waxeth the son of Sigmund in might and goodliness,/ and soft the days win over, and all men his beauty bless' (p. 67). Attractiveness is shown to be as important as strength and kindness. Thus, there are multiple references throughout the text to the beauty of Sigurd. He 'grows [...] strong and lovely' (p. 72), is 'fair and lovely' (p. 95) and is praised for both 'the might of his limbs, and his waving locks' (p. 141).[411] At times, the focus on Sigurd's body becomes sexualised. After he defeats Fafnir, the narrator describes Sigurd from Regin's point of view:

> Afoot [Regin] went o'er the desert, and he came unto Sigurd and stared
> At the golden gear of the man, and the Wrath yet bloody and bared,
> And the light locks raised by the wind, and the eyes beginning to smile,
> And the lovely lips of the Volsung, and the brow that knew no guile;
> And he murmured under his breath while his eyes grew white with wrath:
> "O who art thou, and wherefore, and why art thou in the path?"
> Then he turned to the ash-grey Serpent, and grovelled low on the ground,
> And he drank of that pool of the blood where the stones of the wild were drowned,
> And long he lapped as a dog; but when he arose again,
> Lo, a flock of the mountain-eagles that drew to the feastful plain;
> And he turned and looked on Sigurd, as bright in the sun he stood,
> A stripling fair and slender, and wiped the Wrath of the blood. (p. 113)

Sigurd's body is objectified by Regin's gaze. It is not Sigurd's feat of dragon killing which is focused on, but his appearance. Regin appears to be confused and disturbed by his fascination with Sigurd's appearance. His animalistic actions may be an attempt to restore a sense of masculinity linked to ferocity and battle, but after he drinks the blood he returns again to gaze on Sigurd's body. Regin's feelings towards Sigurd are not clarified at this point. Even for a character whose abjected masculinity has been established, in his lack of heroism and problematic character, an unambiguous depiction of homoerotic male desire may be too transgressive. The desirability of Sigurd's body is more clearly expressed in the reaction of

[411] Sigurd is also referred to simply as lovely; see p. 203, p. 210, p. 213 and p. 217.

female characters, such as Gudrun, whose feelings on seeing him are: 'how fair is Sigurd the King that beside her beauty goes!/ How lovely is he shapen, how great his stature shows!' (p. 175). The revelations of heterosexual desire are more acceptable, but it appears that Sigurd is desired universally. Turner and Scott redact Gudrun's appreciation of Sigurd's physicality but retains that of Regin; perhaps suggesting that this male gaze becomes less problematic in the period between the publication of the two texts. Sigurd's face reveals his identity, and his inability to be duplicitous (this trait is also mentioned earlier in the text when it is his eyes which 'know no guile' [p. 101]). Yet the possibility that his physical features could be deceitful disrupts a clear connection between outward appearance and inner identity.

It is not just Sigurd, however, who is depicted as beautiful. Gunnar is described as 'the lovely war-king' (p. 178) and his physical features are admired: 'ruddy and bright is his visage, and his black locks wave in the wind' (p. 198). Once more, attractiveness is shown to coincide with a warrior identity. Indeed, we are told that 'fair now on the ancient high-seat, and the heart of the Niblung pride,/ stand those lovely lords of Giuki with their wedded wives beside' (p. 272). Here, male beauty is clearly prioritised over its female equivalent. Beauty is another sign of impressive male physicality, in a similar manner to a display of excessive vigour. Yet the cultural meanings of beauty and the particular expressions of male attractiveness in *Sigurd the Volsung* which, for example, focus on hair, indicate that this is a different kind of admirable physicality. Attractiveness cannot function in quite the same way as an obviously masculine display of brute strength or prowess in physical sporting activities.

The description of Gunnar's hair flowing in the breeze echoes that of Sigurd's tresses drifting freely when observed by Regin. This image is repeated for Sigurd's hair when he faces the wall of fire that surrounds Brynhild: 'but thereon is the Volsung smiling as its breath uplifteth his hair' (p. 121). Sigmund's locks are also described when he takes part in battle: 'white went his hair on the wind like the ragged drift of the cloud' (p. 53). Female hair

was frequently portrayed in mid and late-Victorian literature, with loose, long hair often connoting both desirability and fallen women.[412] Yet in *Sigurd the Volsung*, there are few references to female hair and it is male hair that is given more attention. The male characters could appear feminised through these frequent references to hair moving with the wind, but the juxtaposition of these descriptions with scenes of male heroism suggest that it is, instead, a method through which male characters express a different kind of masculinity.

In *Sigurd the Volsung*, there is a focus on the male body. There is a clear interest in male eyes, and their link to identity, although an apparent connection between a person's interior and exterior is ultimately disrupted. Male beauty, and the face and hair in particular, are also emphasised. Yet the text appears to resist a presentation of male beauty as feminising, and to construct it as connected to a warrior masculinity. The focus on the desirability of male rather than female characters perhaps counters the contemporary cultural association of women with sexuality. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, there are few depictions of male desire for women.[413] Instead, it is the male body which is subject to an admiring gaze. In contrast, the male body is rarely described in either the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga*. In these texts, attention is most commonly given to body parts in battle, when they are injured or removed.

1.iii: Battle

> Though his words fell like sword strokes, one always felt that the warrior was stronger than the sword. For Morris was not only a genius, he was a man. Strike at him where you would, he rang true.[414]

> The women dare not look on lest they see them sweat with blood![415]

[412] See Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).
[413] Compare, for example, Gudrun's clear physical fascination with Sigurd, whereas his love seems to stem from pity rather than desire (p. 172). As discussed in the previous section, the incest scene also dramatically reduces Sigmund's agency; he does not seem to be as keen to consummate their relationship as he is in *Völsunga saga*.
[414] Blatchford, 'William Morris obituary', p. 391.
[415] *Sigurd the Volsung*, p. 16.

Chapter Two explored the different representations of battle in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Bradley Deane has produced an extensive study of adventure fiction from 1870 to 1914, in which he deals with contemporary conceptions of heroism. He argues that in this period:

> The standard of manliness was carried by new champions; paragons of midcentury manliness, such as the entrepreneur, the missionary, and the affectionate family man, had been elbowed aside by the untamed frontiersman, the impetuous boy, and the unapologetically violent soldier.[416]

Morris's text, as a product of this period, also emphasises a heroic and violent male identity. Deane labels this emerging male identity as 'imperial masculinity', as ideals of maleness were affected by representations of exotic male figures from the colonies. He suggests that:

> Casting off mid-century constructions of middle-class Christian manliness, these romances emphasize new masculine qualities – raw strength, courage, instinctive violence, bodily size, and homosocial commitment to other men – that could become a bridge uniting the ancient and modern in ways that trump other cultural differences [...] The British men who travel to these lost worlds do not confirm their manliness by vanquishing the primitive, but by partaking of it, by immersing themselves in the struggles of the men they recognize as their primal counterparts. (ibid., p. 149)

Of course, the male characters in *Sigurd the Volsung* are not represented as savages. But both their temporal and geographical alterity is emphasised, and so Deane's analysis raises interesting issues of whether these figures can act as an 'empowering fantasy' of heroism, like the male characters from adventure fiction of this period (ibid., p. 8).[417]

In *Sigurd the Volsung*, conflict is mostly described in terms of metaphor. Dentith has argued that 'an ethic of heroic masculine violence, so central to the meaning of primary epic, is also central to *Sigurd*' but that much of the violence in *Sigurd the Volsung* is undetailed, and presented in a positive way as freedom from oppression.[418] He does not comment on its

[416] Bradley Deane, *Masculinity and the New Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[417] Emelyne Godfrey argues that there was also 'much interest in the figure of the heroic average urban man' in the mid to late-Victorian period, demonstrating the importance of a connection between heroism and masculinity; see *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature: Duelling with Danger* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.
[418] Dentith, 'Barbaric Past', p. 251.

links to masculinity, nor in detail on the moments at which it becomes more graphic. Yet Dentith also acknowledges that:

> When the poem was published, the reviews commented overwhelmingly on its violence, finding it more like the stories that were becoming known from different parts of the empire than the dignified epic material with which classically trained nineteenth-century scholars were familiar.[419]

The effect of war on the body is more commonly depicted in dream representations of combat, where blood flows more freely than in actual warfare. Nevertheless, there are also some moments of where there is a focus on bodily reality, such as in Sigmund's encounter with Siggeir:

> On the battle came,
> As the tide of the winter ocean sweeps up to the beaconing flame.
> But firm in the midst of onset Sigmund the Volsung stood,
> And stirred no more for the sword-strokes than the oldest oak of the wood
> Shall shake to the herd-boys' whittles: [...]
> Nor back nor forward moved he: but fierce Sinfiotli went
> Where the spears were set the thickest, and sword with sword was blent;
> And great was the death before him, till he slipped in the blood and fell:
> Then the shield-garth compassed Sigmund, and short is the tale to tell. (p. 37)[420]

Battle is first presented in terms of ecological similes and is depicted as inevitable. Dentith argues that these kinds of similes 'seek unequivocally to heighten and elevate Sigmund's battle-prowess by allusions to the dramatic phenomena of the natural world'.[421] Yet they also portray Sigmund's strength and resistance as natural and innate, suggesting the hegemonic quality of a warrior identity in this text.[422] Sigmund and Sinfiotli are distinguished for their superior fighting ability; even if a warrior identity is inherent in all men, it can still differentiate individuals. Sinfiotli's stumble is gruesome, revealing the visceral reality of battle, but is also humorous. The comedic element diminishes the sense of Sinfiotli as a great

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[419] Dentith, *Empire*, p. 79.

[420] The tale is even shorter in Turner and Scott's version, as she only briefly mentions the battle, removing the natural imagery but retaining Sinfiotli's fall.

[421] Dentith, *Empire*, p. 75. Dentith also suggests that he uses natural images as 'the terms of comparison which might be provided from his contemporary nineteenth-century world would take him away from the world he is seeking to recreate in Sigurd. So he resolutely remains within the world of the poem itself for his similes'; see 'Barbaric Past', p. 245.

[422] Natural similes are also used in Sigmund's final battles where his sword is compared to lightening, and his voice is like thunder (p. 43).

warrior. In battle, the male body is accentuated when it is most vulnerable. The function of physicality to demonstrate masculinity through strength and force is undermined by its ability to be damaged.

Indeed, Dentith notes that an increase in the amount of detail about warfare in *Sigurd the Volsung* coincides with a defeat.[423] Similarly, Sigmund and Sinfiotli are overpowered in their more vivid battle against Siggeir. Yet many other battles which end in defeat (such as Volsung against Siggeir, and Sigmund's final battle) do not include explicit details or references to the bodily effect of war. Indeed, there is some graphic detail in the portrayal of Sigurd's killing of Fafnir:

> Him-seemed the grave grew straiter, and his hope of life grew chill,
> And his heart by the Worm was enfolded, and the bonds of the Ancient Ill.
> Then was Sigurd stirred by his glory, and he strove with the swaddling of Death;
> He turned in the pit on the highway, and the grave of the Glittering Heath;
> He laughed and smote with the laughter and thrust up over his head.
> And smote the venom asunder, and clave the heart of Dread;
> Then he leapt from the pit and the grave, and the rushing river of blood,
> And fulfilled with the joy of the War-God on the face of earth he stood
> With red sword high uplifted, with wrathful glittering eyes. (p. 110)

This description includes a gruesome image of streaming body fluid, which is reminiscent of the battlefield flooded with blood in *Am.* (st. 53). The snake envelops Sigurd's heart. This figurative reference to his difficulty in gaining courage portrays his body as violated by the snake, indicating an acceptance of an animalistic identity, which enables him to act: either as a reaction to this bodily invasion, or in response to gaining a more violent identity from the snake. Indeed, his body is altered by this encounter, as his eyes become 'glittering' rather than ferocious. As has been explored in the first section of this chapter, glittering eyes signal a problematic identity.[424] It is surprising that this occurs during the most justified and celebrated moment of violence in the text. Its inclusion suggests that there is an ambivalence in all violent actions. The image of a 'river of blood' is used again in the text for Sigurd's

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[423] Dentith, 'Barbaric Past', p. 252.
[424] As Ennis notes, 'it is a negative rather than a positive epithet'; see 'Comparison', p. 106.

own death (p. 230). This provides a clear connection between Fafnir and Sigurd, and again presents violence negatively, as the seemingly acceptable killing of Fafnir is linked to the questionable murder of Sigurd. A warrior identity is an important expression of masculinity in *Sigurd the Volsung*, but this is continually questioned as an idealised state.

As Dentith notes, the final battle in the text, against Atli, is by far the most detailed and graphic. Boos comments that 'the horrific, near-masochistic descriptions of the cycle's extended final battle-scenes [are] unique in Victorian poetic representations of war'.[425] As such, this excerpt is worth examining in detail:

> So before the wise-heart Hogni shrank the champions of the East
> As his great voice shook the timbers in the hall of Atli's feast.
> There he smote and beheld not the smitten, and by nought were his edges stopped;
> He smote and the dead were thrust from him; a hand with its shield he lopped;
> There met him Atli's marshal, and his arm at the shoulder he shred;
> Three swords were upreared against him of the best of the kin of the dead;
> And he struck off a head to the rightward, and his sword through a throat he thrust,
> But the third stroke fell on his helm-crest, and he stooped to the ruddy dust,
> And uprose as the ancient Giant, and both his hands were wet:
> Red then was the world to his eyen, as his hand to the labour he set;
> Swords shook and fell in his pathway, huge bodies leapt and fell,
> Harsh grided shield and war-helm like the tempest-smitten bell,
> And the war-cries ran together, and no man his brother knew,
> And the dead men loaded the living, as he went the war-wood through;
> And man 'gainst man was huddled, till no sword rose to smite.
> And clear stood the glorious Hogni in an island of the fight,
> And there ran a river of death 'twixt the Niblung and his foes,
> And there from the terror of men and the wrath of the Gods arose.
> Now fell the sword of Gunnar and rose up red in the air,
> And hearkened the song of the Niblung, as his voice rang glad and clear,
> And rejoiced and leapt at the Eastmen, and cried as it met the rings
> Of a giant of King Atli, and a murder-wolf of kings;
> But it quenched its thirst in his entrails, and knew the heart in his breast,
> And hearkened the praise of Gunnar, and lingered not to rest,
> But fell upon Atli's brother and stayed not in his brain;
> Then he fell and the King leapt over, and clave a neck atwain,
> And leapt o'er the sweep of a pole-axe and thrust a lord in the throat,
> And King Atli's banner-bearer through shield and hauberk smote;
> Then he laughed on the huddled East-folk, and against their war -shields drave
> While the white swords tossed about him, and that archer's skull he clave
> Whom Atli had bought in the Southlands for many a pound of gold;
> And the dark-skinned fell upon Gunnar and over his war-shield rolled

[425] Boos, 'Fin de Millénaire', p. 289.

> And cumbered his sword for a season, and the many blades fell on,
> And sheared the cloudy helm-crest and rents in his hauberk won,
> And the red blood ran from Gunnar; till that Giuki's sword outburst,
> As the fire-tongue from the smoulder that the leafy heap hath nursed,
> And unshielded smote King Gunnar, and sent the Niblung song
> Through the quaking stems of battle in the hall of Atli's wrong:
> Then he rent the knitted war-hedge till by Hogni's side he stood,
> And kissed him amidst of the spear-hail, and their cheeks were wet with blood.
> (pp. 281-2)[426]

The description begins with body parts being removed or penetrated by Hogni's sword, showing the effects of violence in a graphic manner that allows the implied reader to imagine the suffering he inflicts. Hogni is not presented as invincible; although he is able to kill his opponents, he is also injured himself. The details of the blood wetting his hands and reddening his vision adds a further element of gruesome visceral reality to the description. It is a repulsive and arresting illustration of the brutality of combat. The scene reveals the chaos of war, and the loss of the warriors' individuality; they are commingled together into a great mass of men. Yet it is emphasised that despite this throng of fighters, the brothers are still distinguishable. Hogni is separated from other men by a 'river of death', recalling the 'river of blood' imagery of Fafnir's and Sigurd's demises. This metaphor also portrays the horrors of war, and detracts from a tone of celebration of Hogni's deeds. The use of landscape imagery is retained from the depictions of previous battles, but in this case it is mixed with the visceral reality of combat resulting in a representation of battle as disturbing and disruptive rather than natural.

When the focus returns to Gunnar, he is also described as piercing or rupturing body parts. His enemies are clearly identified as both individuals, in terms of their relationship to Atli, and also as a race of 'East folk' with a distinctive skin colour. The differences between the brothers and their enemies are made clear, and the battle is presented as a personalised vendetta against Atli. These enemies are Othered by their variation from the Niblungs, and

[426] This scene is entirely absent from Turner and Scott's narrative, as it ends with the funeral pyre of Brynhild and Sigurd.

their connection to Atli offers a justification for their deaths. Yet the recognition of the enemy as individuals also engenders sympathy for them in the implied reader and renders their lives grievable. This excerpt establishes the brothers' status as excellent warriors; it also emphasises their close attachment as they embrace. Yet this sign of solidarity is not romanticised, but is presented in terms of horrific bodily reality. This mixing of bodily fluids, both between the brothers and also between the Niblungs and Atli's men, is a transgression of the boundaries of an individual, and establishes a commonality between the brothers and their foes, despite the attempt at Othering. Masculinity is concerned with bonds: not only the homosocial relationships of family love, but also the connections of shared experience and generic physicality between all men.

Battle is often represented as a positive force in *Sigurd the Volsung*, and a way for male characters to prove their masculinity. Yet the more detailed depictions of battle also express the visceral reality and the bodily horrors of war, rather than acting as the 'empowering fantasy' that Deane observed in adventure fiction.[427] Violence is presented in ambivalent terms in *Sigurd the Volsung*. It is not always portrayed as a positive course of action, but it is frequently presented as inevitable. Male glory can be obtained from battle, but ultimately combat is presented as problematic. An admirable masculinity can also be constructed by an association with impressive buildings.

2: Houses

> The art of house-building begins it all [...] these common things not only shelter us from wind and weather, but also express the thoughts and aspirations that stir in us.[428]

In her exploration of the connections between houses and identity, Andrea Tange argues that:

> For the Victorians, home was not just an idea; it was an idea that was explicitly rooted in a material object [...]a house was made into a home [...] through careful attention to

[427] Deane, *The New Imperialism*, p. 8.
[428] Morris, 'The Beauty of Life', p. 104.

> the interplay between the physical space and the identities contained within [...] British middle-class identity from the 1830s through the 1870s was clearly architectural.[429]

Tange articulates the ways in which houses constructed identity in the Victorian era.[430] Of course, a consideration of *Sigurd the Volsung* is complicated by the fact that, despite being published in 1876, this text is not set in the Victorian period, or even in Britain. Yet it is to be expected that the alterations that Morris makes to the narrative would relate to the semiotics of his contemporary society, and this is indeed the case in his focus on architecture in his text.[431] Indeed, Frederick Kirchhoff has argued that Morris's own Red House 'was an extension of Morris's body, an outward form approximating an inner notion of the self'.[432] John Tosh has successfully argued against notions of the home as a purely feminine space, clearly demonstrating the ways in which houses produce conceptions of masculinity.[433] He contends that:

> The domestic sphere, then, is integral to masculinity. To establish a home, to protect it, to provide for it, to control it, and to train its young aspirants to manhood, have usually been essential to a man's good standing with his peers. (p. 4).

Tosh does qualify his statement with the assertion that domesticity as a 'profound attachment [...] was essentially a nineteenth century invention' (p. 4). Yet as this section will establish, these ideals of a male responsibility for his home and occupants, and the links between this home and male identity, are expressed in *Sigurd the Volsung*, albeit in a slightly different manner to the historical evidence that Tosh examines.

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[429] Andrea Tange, *Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature and the Victorian Middle Classes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 5-6.

[430] Wendy Parkins addresses the ways in which Morris's Red House constructs the identities of its inhabitants; see 'Feeling at Home: Gender and Creative Agency at Red House', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15:1 (2010), 61-81.

[431] Morris may also have been inspired by an unusual reference to a building in the *Poetic Edda*. In relation to the depiction of Atli's hall in *Akv.*, Dronke notes that 'the description of a building is unique in Old Norse poetry'; see '*Atlakviða* Commentary' in *The Poetic Edda Volume I: Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 46-74 (p. 54).

[432] Frederick Kirchhoff, *William Morris: the Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1990), p. 113.

[433] Tosh, *A Man's Place*.

One of the alterations that Morris makes to the narrative in *Sigurd the Volsung* is to offer a greater insight into the characters' relationships with physical structures.[434] The buildings portrayed in the text link quite clearly to masculinity; the dwellings are described as belonging to the male head of the family, and there is a sense that an impressive house reflects on its owner.[435] The text begins with an account of a building, and indeed this first section is entitled 'Of the dwelling of King Volsung, and the wedding of Signy his daughter' (p. 1). The chapter titles more commonly refer to the events that will occur in that section, so it is revealing that the emphasis here is placed on the house.[436] This accentuation suggests that this building is particularly important: appearing at the outset of the text, it establishes the need for a reader to pay attention to characters' dwellings.[437]

The portrayal of Volsung's house demonstrates its fine décor and its ability to exceed all others:

> Thus was the dwelling of Volsung, the King of the Midworld's Mark,
> As a rose in the winter season, a candle in the dark;
> And as in all other matters 'twas all earthly houses' crown,
> And the least of its wall-hung shields was a battle-world's renown,
> So therein withal was a marvel and a glorious thing to see,
> For amidst of its midmost hall-floor sprang up a mighty tree,
> [...]
> And when men tell of Volsung, they call that war-duke's tree,
> That crownèd stem, the Branstock; and so was it told unto me.
> So there was the throne of Volsung beneath its blossoming bower.
> But high o'er the roof-crest red it rose 'twixt tower and tower,
> And therein were the wild hawks dwelling, abiding the dole of their lord. (pp. 1-2)

The wall decorations are a clear display of warrior masculinity. Yet the comparison to a rose connotes femininity, although, as with the depictions of male beauty, the feminising force of this image is reduced by its juxtaposition with combat. The distinguishing feature of this

[434] Dentith acknowledges the added representation of landscape in the text, but does not comment on this focus on buildings; see *Empire*, pp. 81-2.
[435] For example, when Signy is asked about her prospective marriage, her father asks 'wilt thou lie in a great king's bed?' (p. 3); this clearly links her husband's status to the objects in his house.
[436] For example, some of the other section titles are 'Of the slaying of Siggeir the Goth-king', 'Sigurd rideth to the Glittering Heath', 'Of Sigurd's riding to the Niblungs'.
[437] Ashurst comments that 'particularly impressive among the many evocative descriptions [is] the opening sequence, which brings the dwelling of King Volsung before the reader's eyes'; see 'Morris and the Volsungs', p. 54.

dwelling is the tree, which is described more briefly in *Völsunga saga* (p. 4). The tree suggests masculinity, as a phallic sign, and is also disruptive; it intrudes into the home and unsettles a binary opposition between nature and culture. The presence of nature within a domestic dwelling permits a posthuman identity that does not insist on clear boundaries between humans and the ecological world.[438] Yet the distancing created by the narrator's comment works against this transgression of borders. This is the only moment when the narrator makes their presence known. It reproduces the phrase used in *Völsunga saga* at this point in the narrative, 'svá er sagt' (so it is said, p. 4), but also undermines the veracity of the description; it becomes a story rather than a fact. Volsung's house both confirms his masculinity and calls into question the idea of a secure human identity.

The tree in Volsung's dwelling is also the site of an apparent test of masculinity. This 'sword-in-the-tree' scene is much extended from that in *Völsunga saga*, and appears to be taken by many of the characters as a chance to demonstrate brute strength. Yet just as in *Völsunga saga*, the sword comes out easily for Sigmund. He is not proven to be the strongest man there, but the one who has been chosen. Odin suggests that he has enchanted the sword but this is not made explicit; it could equally be read as the tree making the decision. Thus, the building which houses the Volsungs is not just reflecting their masculinity and status, but constructing it as well. This possibly sentient tree further disrupts the nature/ human divide. Indeed, *Sigurd the Volsung*, like the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, often uses tree imagery for male characters; the contrast between Volsung and Siggeir, for example, is clarified by

[438] Weiner comments on the growing concern over violence towards animals in the Victorian era, indicated by the establishment of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824; see *Men of Blood*, p. 13. This anxiety about animal welfare also suggests a breaking down of the boundaries between animals and humans, as it instigates the concept of animals as having similar feelings to people, and that brutality towards animals is something that people should be troubled by, rather than animals being depicted as an Other whose suffering is not of interest to humans. See also John Miller's discussion of the rise of animal rights in the Victorian period: *Empire and the Animal Body: Violence, Identity and Ecology in Victorian Adventure Fiction* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), p. 72.

their respective comparisons to an oak and a bramble respectively (p. 4).[439] Natural imagery can be used to both enhance and reduce masculinity.

After escaping from the wolf which kills his brothers, Sigmund takes up residence in a house which is even more closely associated with the environment than his family home:

> E'en as a house of the Dwarfs, a rock, and a stony cave.
> In the heart of the midmost thicket by the hidden river's wave.
> So is Volsung's seed abiding in a rough and narrow home;
> And wargear he gat him enough from the slaying of earls of men,
> And gold as much as he would [...]
> Alone in the woods he abided, and a master of masters was he
> In the craft of the smithying folk. (p. 24)[440]

Sigmund's dwelling is not an artificially constructed building, but a cave. It is less impressive than Branstock, but it is still filled with gold and battle equipment, expressing his masculinity through the evidence of successful violent attacks and wealth. Craftsmanship was emphasised in the construction of Volsung's house, and Sigmund is also depicted as forging metal. Yet this particular trade links him to the non-human, a connection that has already been established by the type of dwelling he has chosen. Sigmund is temporarily cast out from society, and this status is reflected in his dwelling. Nevertheless, although his status as a human becomes questionable, he is still depicted as masculine.

When Sigmund defeats Siggeir, he returns to Branstock as the new head of the household. Returning to both home and homeland is crucial for Sigmund. His identity is closely connected to a sense of place. Yet Sinfiotli, who accompanies him, does not seem as content in Branstock, and soon travels elsewhere to gain fame in battle (p. 48). This establishes the complex relationship between home and masculinity; a house can express masculinity, but the demands of hegemonic masculinity dictate that a man must also prove himself outside of the domestic sphere. Tange argues that identities established outside and

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[439] This imagery could also be influenced by Morris's knowledge of the use of trees to describe warriors in skaldic verse.

[440] Turner and Scott reduce this description to: 'Sigmund dwelt long in the wild-wood, abiding in a strong cave deep hidden in a thicket by the river-side'. Here, he is associated with nature but not with the supernatural.

inside of the home can be reconciled by a separation of these two aspects of a man, which 'enabled him to inhabit potentially conflicting roles without being hypocritical, since different aspects of his identity would be clearly associated with different spaces' (p. 137). Indeed, we can see evidence of a different kind of masculinity being produced by an identity associated with the home; raiding expeditions are depicted as an exclusively homosocial role, whereas Sinfiolti's close relationship with his father is interrupted by the arrival of his stepmother.

Yet the significance of a domestic masculinity is demonstrated in Sigmund's final scene:

> So there lies Sigmund the Volsung, and far away, forlorn
> Are the blossomed boughs of the Branstock, and the house where he was born.
> To what end was wrought that roof-ridge, and the rings of the silver door?
> [...]
> Then the Gods have fashioned a folk who have fashioned a house in vain;
> It is nought, and for nought they battled, and nought was their joy and their pain,
> Lo, the noble oak of the forest with his feet in the flowers and grass,
> [...]
> Then come the axes of men, and low it lies on the ground,
> And the crane comes out of the southland, and its nest is nowhere found,
> And bare and shorn of its blossoms is the house of the deer of the wood.
> But the tree is a golden dragon; and fair it floats on the flood,
> [...]
> There are tidings wherever it cometh, and the tale of its time shall be told
> A dear name it hath got like a king, and a fame that groweth not old. (p. 58)[441]

The focus on the house emphasises its importance. Natural elements are made prominent, and clearly gendered as male; the house itself has a male identity. The tree is personified as mourning Sigmund, offering an even clearer example of its sentience; here the boundaries of the human are more obviously transgressed. The fashioning of both people and the house indicates a constructed notion of identity. The transient state of the house is also accentuated. It is given a fresh lease of life when it is reformed into a ship. This fresh identity offers the tree a fame and a new existence, but depicts men as having ultimate mastery over the natural

[441] Turner and Scott do not include this quotation in their text.

world which reaffirms the distinction of both a human and masculine identity. Nevertheless, this re-formation indicates the flexibility of identity.

Like Sigmund's cave, Gripir's house does not establish clear boundaries between humans and their natural environment:

> On a crag from the mountain reft
> Was the house of the old King builded; and a mighty house it was,
> Though few were the sons of men that over its threshold would pass:
> But the wild ernes cried about it, and the vultures toward it flew,
> [...] amidst was Gripir set
> In a chair of the sea-beast's tooth; and his sweeping beard nigh met
> The floor that was green as the ocean, and his gown was of mountain-gold,
> And the kingly staff in his hand was knobbed with the crystal cold. (p. 79)

Gripir's house is impressive, reflecting his high status. Like the cave, it is isolated and more connected to the ecological realm than to people, again interrogating the purpose of distinct boundaries between humans and nature. Boos has argued that depictions of the love of nature in Morris's work have 'deeply "feminine" qualities', indicating that Gripir's gender identity may be affected by the portrayal of his appreciation of the ecological world.[442] Yet just as with Sigmund, other aspects of Gripir's masculinity are expressed, such as his impressive beard and his position of authority, establishing the commingling of the human with other animals as a threat that needs to be countered with a confirmation of gender identity. The absence of any reference to a hegemonic masculinity in terms of a warrior identity, however, detracts from the sense of Gripir's manliness.

Regin, another character with a non-standard masculinity is depicted as having a prominent role in the construction of his family abode:

> I toiled and I toiled; and fair grew my father's house;
> But writhen and foul were the hands that had made it glorious;
> And the love of women left me, and the fame of sword and shield:
> [...]
> And myself a little fragment amidst it all I saw,
> Grim, cold-heart, and unmighty as the tempest-driven straw. (p. 76)[443]

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[442] Boos, 'Gender Division', p. 22.
[443] Turner and Scott delete the content of this quotation between 'glorious' and 'and myself', removing the reference to Regin's sexuality.

Despite being able to enhance the appearance and status of his father's house, Regin's work is juxtaposed with his loss of female attention and a warrior identity. This creates a division between men in terms of their status and jobs; figures of authority who can employ others to create a house have their masculinity affirmed by their dwelling, but the men who actually construct these buildings are subject to an abjected masculinity. The wording used to describe Regin's sexuality is ambiguous. The phrase 'the love of women left me' could equally refer to him lacking female attention, or the termination of his desire for women. Regin finds himself outcast from society, and retreats into nature and to his craft. A detachment from society leads to an inability to have masculinity confirmed by others, which appears necessary to be recognised as fully male.

The house of Heimir is initially feminised as it is described as belonging to Brynhild, rather than her father:

> There is the burg of Brynhild, the white-walled house and long,
> And the garth her fathers fashioned before the days of wrong.
> […]
> And the mint and the blossomed woodruff they strew before their feet,
> […]
> Most goodly were its hangings and its webs were glorious
> With tales of ancient fathers, and the Swans of the Goths on the sea,
> And weaponed Kings on the island, and great deeds yet to be;
> And the host of Odin's Choosers, and the boughs of the fateful Oak,
> And the gush of Mimir's Fountain, and the Midworld-Serpent's yoke. (p. 134)[444]

The natural environment is represented by a 'garth', which is a more cultivated portrayal of nature. Yet the guests are also greeted by a floor covering of herbs, indicating that nature is not so easily controlled and separated from the main building. The house is decorated with pictures of masculine feats. Even when an image depicts the female figures of Valkyries, they are described in terms of the men that they relate to. Despite its initial relation to Brynhildr, the house is still associated with a clear display of masculinity; domestic buildings confirm

[444] Turner and Scott remove this scene completely. The extended description of the wall hangings is reminiscent of the description of the house in *Laxdæla saga*.

only male identity. The wall decorations reflect both the past and the future, indicating that the house forms its own self-contained world, but this world is constructed and narrated rather than a reflection of reality.

A different concept of housing is depicted in the description of Sigurd's approach to the Niblungs' dwelling (p. 151). The Niblungs' house is characterised by its fortifications. This defensive structure clearly associates the house with combat. But the high level of protection highlights its potential vulnerability and constructs its inhabitants as fearful rather than possessing the courage of an idealised manliness and the confidence to offer hospitality. Atli's house is portrayed in a similar manner:

> Its long white wall,
> And its high-built guarded gateways, and its towers o'erhung and tall;
> And ever all along them the glittering spear-heads run,
> As the sparks of the white wood-ashes when the cooking-fire is done. (p. 274)

Atli's house seems designed to both intimidate strangers and protect its inhabitants.[445] Its fortifications are accompanied by weaponry, producing a slightly more aggressive exterior than the Niblungs' abode, which appears solely concerned with defence. Yet both of these dwellings expose weakness as much as they promote a belligerent, warrior identity. These houses are associated with problematic occupants; both the Niblungs, in their murder of Sigurd whilst he sleeps, and Atli, in his ambush of the Niblungs, are depicted as acting unethically and against an honourable code of warfare. These dwellings which focus on defence seem to indicate an absence of a straightforward heroic masculinity for its occupants.

A male character's home is shown to reveal aspects of his identity and status in *Sigurd the Volsung*. The close connection between male figures and their homes is perhaps unsurprising given the importance of domesticity to middle-class masculinity in the mid to late-Victorian period.[446] The houses of characters that are depicted positively in the text

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[445] The portrayal of the defensive nature of Atli's hall is present in *Akv.* (st. 14).
[446] See Tosh, *A Man's Place*, pp. 30-43.

demonstrate a fine balance between nature and culture. An encroaching environment is juxtaposed with an exhibition of warrior masculinity, indicating the commingling of different forms of identity. Yet the acceptance of nature can also be problematic; characters associated too fully with the ecological realm are presented as lacking a hegemonic masculinity. Male identity is not just natural, but is formed through culture, which is a necessary component of masculinity. Houses can also detract from as well as support a heroic masculinity; dwellings which are focused on a defensive association with war indicate vulnerability and are inhabited by characters who do not fully accord with an ethical code of war. Houses can both reflect and construct masculinities for their occupiers.

3: Singing songs, telling tales

> In music the individual may dissolve but is not betrayed.[447]
>
> Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives.[448]

Both the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* include a remarkable scene where Gunnarr plays a harp whilst imprisoned in a snake pit. This incident is mentioned in several poems and demonstrates the diverse attitudes to musical performance in the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*.[449] Gunnarr's harp recital is an important moment which is re-worked by several texts, perhaps due to its puzzling nature. The number of surviving artistic depictions also attests the influence of this episode. [450] Outwith the descriptions of Gunnarr and his harp, music is rarely mentioned in the *Poetic Edda*. In *Sd.*, singing and drinking is mentioned as a cause of grief

[447] Peter Dayan discusses the effect of music on identity, as music is both 'absolutely universal and absolutely personal'; see *Music, Writing, Literature: from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 118.
[448] Simon Frith, 'Music and Identity' in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 108-27 (p. 124).
[449] Dronke notes that the origins of this episode are obscure but may have a classical source; see *Edda* p. 66-7. The episode occurs only in the Scandinavian versions of the Völsung legend; see Philpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 49. The harp recital demonstrates the particular interests of the *Poetic Edda* in performance and identity.
[450] See Dronke, *Edda*, p. 131.

(st. 30), and in *Hm.*, the blowing of a horn announces an attack (st. 18). Similarly, in *Völsunga saga* a horn signals battle (p. 20) but is more commonly used for drinking. In his rewriting, Morris accentuates moments of performance, by adding in many references to singing, harp playing, and story recitations, thereby transforming it into a major theme of *Sigurd the Volsung*. Several critics have explored the representation of music in Victorian literature and its effect on gender identity, but these studies have prioritised female identity.[451] Karen Yuen argues that music was:

> [An] aspect of Victorian culture that influenced gender identity on a grand scale […] Britain, especially in the nineteenth century, experienced an explosion of musical activity that no individual could have avoided in his or her day-to-day life [… the] division of the sexes found its way into virtually all aspects of music [... but] as if these divisions were not enough, music as a whole was considered to be a 'feminine' art.[452]

Discussing the relationship of music to the masculinity of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, she suggests that:

> Enthusiasm for music can still be found in his works, but it now coexists uneasily with an awareness of its danger to his masculine identity. Fascination and fear of music commingle, producing works that can only be described as ambivalent in tone. (p. 91)

Unlike Rossetti, Morris does not seem anxious about the effect of music on masculine identity. Yet, perhaps aware of its contemporary cultural meanings, he emphasises its ability to produce different expressions of masculinity. In *Sigurd the Volsung,* it is almost solely male characters who perform music and tell tales. Music is distanced from its feminine associations, and is closely connected to other more straightforwardly masculine values, such as heroism.

Morris often appears to idealise heroic masculinity. Yet he also, perhaps unconsciously, undermines the values that he appears to advocate. Boos has observed that

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[451] See, for example, several of the essays in Losseff, Nicky, and Sophie Fuller (eds), *The Idea Of Music In Victorian Fiction* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Burlington, VT, 2004).
[452] Karen Yuen, 'Bound by Sound: Music, Victorian Masculinity and Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Critical Survey,* 20 (2008), 79-96 (pp. 79-83).

‘the epic plot of *Sigurd the Volsung* ostensibly celebrates male heroism in a warrior-dominated society, but the poem’s most important women determine much of its action’; her point is valid, but does not acknowledge that Morris questions this male heroism as much as he promotes the significance of the female characters.[453] The prominence of performance destabilises a sense of rigid and naturalised identity. It also similarly destabilises the temporality of the text, acting as a fictional medievalism that does not reflect the content of the Old Norse sources which rarely depict music or tale-telling, as Morris’s familiarity with these texts would have revealed.

In *Sigurd the Volsung*, singing and harp-playing are an essential component of the construction of society. This is evident from the text’s opening:

> The masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
> The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast. (p. 1)

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the text commences with roles distributed according to a binary concept of gender. Music is also foregrounded in the first few lines, and it is also closely linked to masculinity through the reference to ‘mighty men’. In the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, masculinity is closely linked to battle and physical prowess. Morris retains the importance of a heroic male body, but emphasises that this body is also used for musical performance.

Throughout the narrative, moments of violence, where the male body is focused on, are also moments of performance. After he and his brothers are captured by Siggeir, Sigmund shows that the strength of his spirit has not been diminished. We are told that:

> We tell thee now, King Siggeir, that all will soon be done;
> For the two last men of the Volsungs, they sit there one by one,
> And Sigi’s head is drooping, but somewhat Sigmund sings;
> For the man was a mighty warrior, and a beater down of kings. (p. 19)[454]

[453] Boos, ‘Fin de Millénaire’, p. 289.
[454] The mention of Sigmund’s defiant musicality is removed from Turner and Scott’s text.

This scene suggests that Sigmund sings because he is a mighty warrior; performance is an essential component of this masculine identity. This scene does not appear in previous versions of the legend. Indeed, Morris increases the heroism of Sigmund's escape from this predicament; in *Völsunga saga*, he is aided by his sister, Signý, but in *Sigurd the Volsung* he escapes using only his own strength and abilities. The musical performance is closely connected to images of masculine warrior ability. By using literal moments of performance at times at which a heroic masculinity is accentuated, the text draws attention to the performativity of gender. The heroes of the text reveal that their bravery is not an inherent part of their identity, but instead something that is acted out. Morris's repeated emphasis on performance presents identity as unstable and changeable, and undermines a concept of heroism as an innate part of masculinity.

Music is important throughout the text. It often appears to emphasise emotion, as a kind of pathetic fallacy. After killing his step-uncle, Sigmund's son, Sinfiotli is encouraged by his step-mother to drink poison from a cup, although he believes he foresees the dangers in this drink:

> But again came Borghild the Queen and stood with the cup in her hand,
> And said: "They are idle liars, those singers of every land
> Who sing how thou fearest nothing; for thou losest valour and might,
> And art fain to live for ever."
> […]
> But Sinfiotli said: "I have looked, and lo there is death in the cup."
> And the song, and the tinkling of harp-strings to the roof-tree winded up. (p. 47)

The veracity of performed tales is questioned by Borghild. But this does not fully undermine the importance of music, as Borghild is using her criticism of songs to force Sinfiotli into drinking the poison she has given him; Sinfiotli is able to counter the accusation that he is too timid to drink by revealing that he knows that it contains a fatal toxin. The ceasing of the music at the moment when Sinfiotli drinks the poison heightens the emphasis on the text as a performance. Acting almost as a film score, the music, or its absence, accentuates the

unreality of the tale. Tucker has commented that this also occurs when the characters '[depart] from action into the privileged consideration of action, [as] this consideration typically means discerning their role as plot functionaries'.[455] Both of these techniques draw attention to the status of the text as a performance; this is also achieved by its poetic form, making it more likely to be read aloud, as Morris may well have done.[456] Indeed, Carlyle refers to poetry as 'the music of human speech', connecting even more closely this formal alteration to the text and its focus on song; unlike the Old Norse texts, *Sigurd the Volsung* is solely composed of poetry.[457] Music is frequently used to draw attention to other performance and performative aspects of the text. This also occurs in its representation of the appropriate tutoring of a young prince.

In *Völsunga saga*, a courtly education is a vital method of constructing masculinity. *Sigurd the Volsung* extends this to an appreciation of musical instruction. When we are first introduced to Sigurd's foster-father, Regin, we are told about his musical abilities:

> [Regin] was deft in every cunning, save the dealings of the sword:
> So sweet was his tongue-speech fashioned, that men trowed his every word;
> His hand with the harp-strings blended was the mingler of delight
> With the latter days of sorrow; all tales he told aright. (p. 62)

Regin is presented as not being heroically masculine, as he is not proficient at sword fighting. His musical ability, therefore, disrupts a link between musical performance and heroic masculinity. Nevertheless, harp-playing is one of the areas in which Regin trains his foster-son Sigurd:

> So is Sigurd now with Regin, and he learns him many things;
> Yea, all save the craft of battle, that men learned the sons of kings:
> The smithying sword and war-coat; the carving runes aright;

[455] Tucker, 'Macropoetics', p. 376.
[456] Henry James describes Morris reading aloud from his (then unpublished) Earthly Paradise in 1869; see *Henry James: Letters*, ed. by Leon Edel (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975), p. 94. Similarly, Wilfrid Blunt experienced Morris reading his poems aloud in 1891, despite being unimpressed with his reading style; see Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870-1918* (Oxford, 2006), p. 366. There is evidence that the text was read aloud by others; see Ernest E. Unwin, *XII Book Club Minute Book*, Vol. 2 (1915-31), Private Collection 18-19, available at http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=27076 (accessed 08 September 2014).
[457] Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 25.

> The tongues of many countries, and soft speech for men's delight;
> The dealing with the harp-strings, and the winding ways of song.
> So wise of heart waxed Sigurd, and of body wondrous strong. (p. 68)

This emphasis on music as a necessary part of the courtly identity is not present in *Völsunga saga* and it indicates the performative nature of courtliness. The use of the word 'so' indicates that, in order to possesses a heroic male body, a knowledge of music and song is necessary. Masculinity can be formed through a musical education. Yet Regin demonstrates that musical prowess is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a hegemonic masculinity.

In *Sigurd the Volsung*, Gunnar's harp performance is significantly extended and includes the words of Gunnar's song (pp. 297-9). The comparison of Gunnarr's song to 'the march of Odin's kings' (p. 296) associates the harp performance with a warrior masculinity. [458] Music is also portrayed as 'orderly' (p. 296), allowing Gunnar to gain some control over his situation of imprisonment. Gunnar describes the beginning of the earth, which is also masculinised through the use of male pronouns. He emphasises the ability to trace his lineage back to the world's origins, establishing the status and importance of his family. Gunnar recounts his memorable deeds, and links combat to music. As in some previous versions of this scene, the music is a sign of defiance, and of bravery in the face of death. Yet it is also Gunnar's chance to articulate his own story. By linking his identity to the creation of the earth, Gunnar gives himself a timeless, eternal quality, which suggests that his identity will endure.[459] This is the longest speech in the text, and is the most extensive opportunity that a character has to establish their identity. Music offers Gunnar a chance to control his own representation. This excerpt demonstrates the importance of the construction of masculinity through stories and song.

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[458] As mentioned, Turner and Scott's text ends with Brynhildr and Sigurd lying on their funeral pyre, so all of Gunnar's harp performances are erased from her version of the narrative, in an opposition to Morris's increased portrayal of music.

[459] It is possible that Morris is drawing on the creation song performed in Heorot in *Beowulf*, a text that he also translated.

Yet Gunnar's distinction from other men is accentuated by the narrator's portrayal of his act:

> Now nothing might men hearken in the house of Atli's weal,
> Save the feet slow tramping onward, and the rattling of the steel,
> And the song of the glorious Gunnar, that rang as clearly now
> As the speckled storm-cock singeth from the scant-leaved hawthorn-bough
> When the sun is dusking over and the March snow pelts the land.

Gunnar's performance demands attention. He is compared to a storm-cock, or mistle thrush, a bird which is known for solo performances in inclement conditions. Like the bird, Gunnar's song is a sign of determination; indeed, this connection connotes aggressiveness as mistle thrushes are one of very few species of birds to defend food stores against attack.[460] Yet a mistle thrush's call is performed in a minor key, giving it an atmosphere of melancholy. Gunnar may wish to celebrate his warrior identity, but his performance is compared to a sorrowful and solitary style of birdsong. He does not have full authority over his representation. The narrator also refers to him in the previous extract as a 'child', thereby diminishing him. The position of a character's composition as a text within a text means that identity can be contested.

The significance of music is indicated by the addition of an extra moment of harp performance to Gunnar's role earlier in the battle (p. 283). This musical performance is depicted as a valuable skill. Even when the intensity of the battle means that Gunnar has to stop playing his instrument, he continues to sing. This is a sign of sedition which denotes his heroism; his battle prowess is emphasised immediately after the description of his continued singing. Music becomes a rebellious act, perhaps similar to the way that football chants are used nowadays to intimidate the players and supporters of the opposing team. In this way, music is a bodily act that becomes very similar to the physical aggression of battle. Male

[460] Piotr Skrka and Joanna D. Wjcik, 'Population Dynamics and Social Behavior of the Mistle Thrush Turdus viscivorus During Winter', *Acta Ornithologica* 40:1 (2005), 35-42 (p. 35). A mistle thrush's song is described as 'loud [and] wild'; see M. North and E. Sims, *Witherby's Sound-guide to British Birds. Part Two: The Smaller Birds (Passerines)* (London: H . F . G . Witherby, Ltd, 1958).

embodiment is achieved through song as well as battle, yet this defiant use of music suggests that the link between masculinity, aggression and power is ever present in the text, especially as there are no women who perform this role.

Yet the continual desire to perform ancient tales suggests the existence of trauma. Freud describes such a compulsion where a person 'is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience, instead of [...] remembering it as something belonging to the past'.[461] In trauma, therefore, a person becomes contained within the past. The persistent representation of history in song in *Sigurd the Volsung* suggests that the characters cannot escape the past, and remain defined by it. When Volsung performs, we are told that 'his hands that loved the oar/ now dealt with the rippling harp-gold' (p. 4), thus confirming a connection between music and other more clearly masculine physical endeavour. Indeed, it is 'deeds of man-folk' (p. 4) that are the subject of the song. The use of this noun rather than 'human' suggests a focus on men. Yet Volsung does not sing about his current life, but of 'the shaping of earth,/ and how the stars were lighted, and where the winds had birth' (p. 4). Male performance is centred on creation myths and the repetition of old stories. This fixation on the past portrays the characters as trying to resolve their current issues by making sense of history; an escape from the strictures of fate is attempted by constantly re-visiting the ancient decrees of destiny in an effort to re-form them. Similarly, this preoccupation may depict the characters as trying to break from the pressures of the traditional values of warrior masculinity. The trauma of the characters also indicates the difficulties of *Sigurd the Volsung* as a project; although gender identity is given a particularly Victorian expression, it still remains difficult to alter the representations of sexual difference provided in the Old Norse iterations of this narrative.

[461] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Hogarth Press; 1920), p. 18.

In a more straightforward manner, songs are also used to commemorate male lives. When Sigmund dies, we are told that:

> The songful sing above him and they tell how his end is as good
> As the best of the days of his life-tide […]
> And the warders look for his coming by Odin's open door. (p. 16)[462]

The song is a celebration of Sigmund's life, but it also indicates the editing that occurs in the production of narrative. Sigmund is reassured that his death is one of the most admirable moments of his life, despite it occurring after a defeat. He is also reassured that he will be united with Odin in the afterlife. The singers cannot be certain of this fact, and so it further emphasises the artificial nature of performance. This is supported by a later reference to 'singers' honeyed words' (p. 289). Indeed, the potential peril of song is alluded to by Signy's reasoning that incest may be permissible due to the existence of:

> The ancient song
> That the Gods were but twin-born once, and deemed it nothing wrong
> To mingle for the world's sake. (p. 27)

Old narratives can be used as an exemplar for current behaviour. Yet as the incestuous relationship is depicted as problematic in the text, there is a danger in following the guidance of antiquated narratives.

Indeed, too much focus on music is portrayed as being detrimental to the development of a male character. As briefly discussed in the previous section, Sinfiotli feels the necessity to leave Branstock:

> And yet but a little while he loved the song and the laughter,
> And the wine that was drunk in peace, and the swordless lying down,
> And the deedless day's uprising and the ungirt golden gown.
> And he thought of the word of his mother, that his day should not be long
> To weary his soul with labour or mingle wrong with wrong;
> And his heart was exceeding hungry o'er all men to prevail,
> And make his short day glorious and leave a goodly tale. (p. 43)

[462] Sigmund's life is not musically commemorated in Turner and Scott's text.

He is concerned for his future reputation. To stay at home and enjoy the pleasures of performance is portrayed as frivolous, and is linked to an unheroic identity. Sinfiotli prioritises being the subject of song, rather than a performer or its audience; enjoying musical performance is not depicted as an active identity. Nevertheless, the desire to be commemorated demonstrates a clear concern for his identity to be established through the performance of others. Yet when Sigmund is facing death, he does not initially see consolation in a musical commemoration, declaring 'I am nought but a picture of battle, and a song for the people to praise' (p. 49).[463] Sigmund expresses the desire to move beyond a textual symbol. A sense of the disconnection between reality and representation is created. This is also suggested in Knefrud's later confidence 'that my name with thine [Gunnar and Hogni] may be told of when the song is sung in the end' (p. 258). Of course, the text's own narrative confirms that this will be the case, but they are linked by betrayal rather than solidarity. Sigmund's complaint also indicates that his identity exceeds his battle heroism and admirable deeds. Yet this lack of faith in the power of music is ultimately rejected:

> From his mouth grown tuneful and sweet the song of his kindred streamed;
> And no more was he worn and weary, and no more his life seemed spent:
> And with all the hope of his childhood was his wrath of battle blent. (p. 53)

Here, a song is able to inspire Sigmund and restore him as a warrior who desires fame and power. Music enables the construction of a particular identity, yet there is an ambivalence surrounding its ability to reflect reality.

Music is not just connected to the identity of an individual. Songs are frequently used to establish a male community. In Heimir's hall, 'the song of men goes roofward' (p. 143), an image which occurs throughout the text, such as in Giuki's hall (p. 131). This repeated image emphasises the necessity of song for unification, and the similarity of the different communities that Sigurd visits. They are all connected by musical performance. Indeed, when

[463] This problematising of textual representation is not present in Turner and Scott's narrative.

Sigurd arrives at the Niblungs, the existence of civilisation is signalled by 'the song of smitten harp-strings [which] came faint from the cloudy hall' (p. 153). Musical performance is depicted as an essential component of a society. Music can also create a community within war. When the Niblungs are involved in battle, they are reminded of their collective aim through music:

> Hark now, how the horns of battle for the clash of warriors yearn,
> And the mighty song of mocking goes up from the thousands of throats,
> As down the wind and landward the raven-banner floats. (p. 164)

Music offers a harmonising influence, and can establish unity between a group of people.

The connection between music and cohesion in society is so clearly established that the absence of music demonstrates a problem with a person or community. Sigurd's unhappy state is illustrated by the revelation that 'his songs are seldom sung' (p. 182). Problems in the Niblung family are also revealed by the absence of community music:

> But the hushed Kings sat in the feast-hall, till Grimhild cried on the harp,
> And the minstrels' fingers hastened, and the sound rang clear and sharp
> Beneath the cloudy roof-tree, but no joyance with it went,
> And no voice but the eagles' crying with the stringèd song was blent;
> And as it began, it ended, and no soul had been moved by its voice. (p. 168)

Music is central to both individual and community identities; consequently, its absence is disturbing. Yet it is an almost exclusively male identity that is constructed by musical performance in *Sigurd the Volsung*. Signy and the sorceress sing a spell to alter their appearances, but they do not have an audience. Indeed, Grimhild is unable to control music; she can order a harp to be played, but she cannot ensure that it is a community performance. This connection between music and men establishes performance as a way in which masculinity can be expressed. Yet the very nature of performance indicates the ways in which this association is not natural, but performative.

Even more so than in previous versions of the Völsung legend, in *Sigurd the Volsung* literal performance is entwined with a warrior masculinity. The heroes of the text reveal that

their bravery is not an inherent part of their identity, but instead something that is acted, whether consciously or not. At moments in the text when the male body is most clearly accentuated, such as battle scenes which focus on physicality, musical performance is also emphasised. The tragic nature of the text means that *Sigurd the Volsung* must, like its medieval predecessors, question as well as valorise a warrior masculinity. The use of music in *Sigurd the Volsung* is closely tied to its representation of these kinds of gender identities as performative. The emphasis on musical performance differentiates Morris's rewriting from its sources. The final section of this chapter will explore another of its distinguishing characteristics: its focus on the mythological character of Baldur.

4: Baldur

In Old Norse mythology, Baldr has a special status. Like Sigmund in the Völsung legend, who cannot be harmed by poison, Baldr cannot be harmed by anything except mistletoe. Yet this loophole allows Loki to arrange for his death at the hands of his brother, comparable with the tragedy and disorder of the Völsung legend where kinship bonds are broken. In Old Norse texts, Baldr is a tragic figure who signals the end of the world. The repeated mentions of Baldur in *Sigurd the Volsung* are, therefore, surprising, although Snorri lauds him as the foremost of the Æsir.[464] Yet, as O'Donoghue has argued, representations of Baldr and his death in particular had a 'unique poetic popularity' during the Victorian era.[465] She argues that:

> Close engagement with the Baldr myth evidently summoned up profound responses in some Victorian poets. The application of the myth not only to human emotions - pity, grief, filial affection and lack of it, and so on - but also to philosophical issues such as mortality and transience and the value of beauty - played a part in how engaged they became with their source material. But what is particularly significant is the versatility of the myth of Baldr, the way in which an individual poet might take the original story and turn it into something entirely different. (ibid., p. 167)

[464] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: VSNR, 2005), p. 23.
[465] O'Donoghue, *English Poetry*, p. 148.

O'Donoghue explores the portrayal of Baldr in several Victorian poems, but does not specifically address Morris's use of Baldr. In her discussion of *Sigurd the Volsung*, she observes that 'the mythic concept of Ragnarök dominates not only the whole action of the poem, but also Morris's depiction of history and time as expressed in it' (ibid., p. 172). Morris's employment of Baldr is closely associated with this emphasis on Ragnarök, yet it also goes beyond the use of the myth as end-of-the-world imagery. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, Baldur is also evoked as a character, with mentions of specific parts of the narrative, and as a male figure of approbation.

After Sigmund kills the wolf, Signy consoles him with a description of his favourable future:

> By the side of the sons of Odin shalt thou fashion a tale to be told
> In the hall of the happy Baldur: nor there shall the tale grow old.
> (pp. 22-3)

She suggests that tragic circumstances are never permanent, indicating a comprehension of fate as a wheel of fortune. Signy encourages her brother not to complain about his current discomfort, as he will reside with Odin in the afterlife and will then be in control of his situation; he will be able to create his own narrative. The reference to Baldur relates to the idea in *Völuspá* that he will return in a new, better world. Signy offers a similar consolation to her brother, signifying both his importance and the potential for his future happiness.

The next reference to Baldur is less optimistic, as it takes place in the aftermath of Sinfiotli's murder. Sigmund is depicted as deeply affected by the death of his son:

> Then up rose the elder of days with a great and bitter cry
> And lifted the head of the fallen, and none durst come anigh
> To hearken the words of his sorrow, if any words he said,
> But such as the Father of all men might speak over Baldur dead.
> (p. 48)

Sigmund's grief is compared to that of Odin for Baldur. This image is of another father who has lost his son, but it also associates Sinfiotli with Baldur. In Old Norse mythology, Baldr is

an innocent character who is killed for no reason other than Loki's desire for disruption. The comparison to Baldur establishes Sinfiotli's death as more problematic than in *Völsunga saga*, as it indicates that he too is the victim of one malicious person: Borghild. This defence of Sinfiotli is reinforced by *Sigurd the Volsung* establishing his reason for killing Borghild's son as his greed (pp. 44-5), rather than to win the woman he desires for himself as in *Völsunga saga*, and so Sinfiotli appears much more likely to stimulate readerly sympathy in *Sigurd the Volsung*. A different kind of identity is established for Sinfiotli through his connection to a more praiseworthy figure.

Sinfiotli is not the only male character that is associated with Baldur in *Sigurd the Volsung*. Once Sigurd has defeated Fafnir, he travels to find Brynhild:

> Lo, lo, the horse and the rider! So once maybe it was,
> When over the Earth unpeopled the youngest God would pass;
> But never again meseemeth shall such a sight betide,
> Till over a world unwrongful new-born shall Baldur ride. (p. 97)

Sigurd is even more clearly compared to Baldur than Sinfiotli.[466] In *Sigurd the Volsung*, Baldur becomes an anachronistically Christ-like figure of resurrection.[467] Here, Sigurd is presented as an unusual sight, which will only be repeated when enacted by Baldur. In the *Poetic Edda*, there is little detail about Baldur, but Snorri provides a fuller description in *Gylfaginning*:

> Annarr son Óðins er Baldr, ok er frá honum gott at segja. [...] Hann er svá fagr álitum ok bjartr svá at lýsir af honum. (p. 23)
> (The second son of Óðinn is Baldr, and good things are said about him. He is the best, and all praise him; he is so fair of visage, and so bright, that it shines from him.)[468]

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[466] Clark argues that this connection is also present in Old Norse literature. He suggests that 'the deaths of Sigurðr and Baldr may be linked as parallel murders of two paragons which constitute events of catastrophic proportions and far-reaching consequences'; see 'Kin-Slaying', p. 32.

[467] See, for example, in Gripir's speech, where he states that: 'May the Gods or the high Gods' masters 'gainst the tale of the righteous strive,/ And the deeds to follow after, and all their deeds increase, / Till the uttermost field is foughten, and Baldur riseth in peace!' (p. 100). This connection is also noted by Carlyle who notes that Baldur is a figure 'whom the early Christian Missionaries found to resemble Christ'; see *On Heroes*, p. 17.

[468] O'Donoghue has convincingly argued that Snorri's account may not have been representative of the Old Norse tradition of Baldr; see 'What has Baldr to do with Lamech? The Lethal Shot of a Blind Man in Old Norse Myth and Jewish Exegetical Traditions', *Medium Ævum* 72:1 (2003), 82-107. Yet for the purposes of appreciating the meanings that Morris tries to invoke, Snorri's account is useful as it is likely to be the ultimate source for Victorian cultural interpretations of Baldr.

Knowledge of these qualities of Baldur also existed in Victorian culture.[469] Carlyle, for example, describes Baldur as ‘the White God, the beautiful, the just and benignant’.[470] Through association, Sigurd’s related virtues are accentuated. Baldr’s brightness accords with the repeated references to Sigurd’s golden appearance.[471] Yet in this connection, Sigurd also becomes more than just an admirable man. Despite the positive connotations of the comparison to Baldur, it also associates Sigurd with being outside of a normal human identity.

This is not the only scene where Sigurd is linked to Baldur. When he arrives at Heimir’s hall, the crowd asks in response: ‘are the sons of Odin coming, and the days of Baldur the bright?’ (p. 141). This reinforces the identification of Sigurd with Baldur, as it is depicted as an obvious connection. When the funeral pyre is created for him and Brynhildr, we are told:

> They are gone - the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:
> It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth:
> It shall groan in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped,
> And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead:
> It shall yearn, and be oft-times holpen, and forget their deeds no more,
> Till the new sun beams on Baldur, and the happy sealess shore. (p. 244)

It appears that Sigurd is unable to function as the Baldur who is the sign of resurrection; this is a role that can only be performed by Baldur himself. Instead, Sigurd’s identity is linked to Baldur as victim. This places him in a weak, powerless position, as he is unable to escape his fate or make any difference to the world save ridding it of Fafnir – a dragon who, despite his potential danger, does not seem to be an actual threat to people’s lives in the text. This deed also retrieves the hoard, but this is a futile endeavour as neither Sigurd nor his wife are able

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[469] Ashurst suggests that ‘by the mid-1870s several direct translations of eddic material were available, and re-tellings based on these were achieving strong sales, to the extent that Morris was able to take a basic knowledge of the mythology for granted’; see ‘Victorian Values’, p. 68.
[470] Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 17.
[471] Ashurst argues that in *The Lovers of Gudrun*, Morris depicts the ‘gold-haired and Baldur-like Kiartan’; see ‘Victorian Values’, p. 66.

to benefit from it, and its ownership leads to further death and destruction. In his mythical incarnation, Baldr is a passive figure, and one who does not seem to accord with the values of a positive masculinity that are created in *Sigurd the Volsung*. He is a very different aspirational figure than other men in the text who are associated with active combat, such as Sigurd and Gunnar. The reference to Baldur gives hope for a new world, but this is one where Sigurd and his accomplishments will be forgotten. This erases the significance of Sigurd, and the idea of his identity as notable and enduring.

The final reference to Baldur occurs towards the end of the text. When Atli has captured Hogni and Gunnar, he interrogates them before killing them:

> "Craftsmaster Hogni," said Atli, "where then are the shifts of the wise?"
> Said Hogni: "To smite with the sword, and go glad from the country of lies."
> "So died the fool," said Atli, "as Hogni dieth today."
> "Smote the blind and the aimless," said Hogni, "and Baldur passed away." (p. 278)

In this scene, Atli taunts them with the hopeless nature of their situation. He suggests that their attitude of Northern courage, of a continued desire to fight even in a fruitless predicament, is misguided. Hogni's retort to this statement is to mention Baldur's death, implying that as he was killed by someone who would not have been thought to be successful in killing him, seemingly impossible deeds can be achieved. Yet this comparison is strange, as Baldur's death is universally depicted as a tragedy, not a triumph of murder against the odds. Höðr's killing of his brother is not a heroic feat, but an accident that comes about from Loki's trickery and a lack of foresight in neglecting the mistletoe's oath. Hogni's statement suggests that no-one is invincible, and so Atli himself might be defeated. Indeed, this does occur, as Gudrun kills him. Hogni's response, therefore, establishes a link between Baldur and Atli. This is surprising, as we have previously seen that a connection to Baldur connotes positive characteristics of wisdom and fairness, and a victim status, both of which Atli appears to lack. This raises the question of whether Atli's connection to Baldur should be read as redemptive, in a similar manner to Sinfiotli's association. The rest of the text seems to

clearly establish Atli as an irredeemably negative figure. Perhaps this confusing reference alludes to the complexity of all identities. Or perhaps it instead undermines the connection of different characters and the ways in which this can reconstruct identity.

Baldr's story is of a tragic male figure whose death is a portent of Ragnarök. This myth also illustrates the inability to act against fate. Baldr's fear of harm is apparently resolved and yet a small loophole leads to his death. This sets in motion the events that lead to the chaotic destruction of the world. Baldr's death appears futile, but also allows for him to have a second coming in a new and better world. The references to Baldur that are added to *Sigurd the Volsung* perhaps allude to this possibility; indeed, Morris's rewriting enables the characters of the text a new lease of life in a fresh Victorian context. Baldur also offers a different form of approved masculinity, and provides a male identification with an important role of saviour. In their 1910 version of *Sigurd the Volsung* with parts of the narrative removed or condensed, Turner and Scott erase all references to Baldur from the text. In doing so, they alter the representation of male identity and reduces the possible expressions of approved masculinity in the text.

5: Conclusion

The previous chapter illustrated the alterations made to female identity in *Sigurd the Volsung*, where active and vocal figures from the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* are reduced to silent, unknowable characters. This does not happen to the men portrayed in *Sigurd the Volsung*. Indeed, there appears to be a real interest in male identity, and the different ways in which masculinity can be expressed. The concept of a hegemonic warrior masculinity which is present in the Old Norse sources is expanded through the additions of other aspects of masculinity, such as an increased focus on performance, and an exploration of the ways in

which masculinity can be established through architectural objects. In her discussion of Morris's later romances, Boos argues that:

> There was then, something stubbornly consistent in the insight of Morris's humanitarian socialist "religion": that genuine reconciliation of gender tensions may not be possible without healing other forms of social alienation, in particular an end to war. In some sense, moreover, he may also have come to realize […] that the converse was true as well.[472]

In Boos's terms, then, the very nature of the narrative, which Morris would have a hard task to alter to the extent that scenes of war and warrior identity were removed altogether, works to enforce a sense of gender division.

Nevertheless, Morris's expansion of the possibilities for male identity in his rewriting of the legend offers a different conception of sexual difference, albeit one that is indeed rooted in its dissimilarity. Whilst overall the options for female identity are overtly reduced, the alteration of masculinities in *Sigurd the Volsung* presents an ultimate view of the instability of gender. Perhaps the most complicated way in which a male identity can be performed in *Sigurd the Volsung* is through an association with the mythological figure of Baldur, who does not appear in *Völsunga saga* or the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*. Baldur's portrayal in *Sigurd the Volsung* is complicated, and indicates the inability for male identity to be reduced to a single aspect or set of aspects. Masculinity seems less circumscribed than femininity in this text. Indeed, male identity encroaches into traditionally feminine areas such as the expression of beauty. Morris retains most of the narrative of the Völsung legend, but in rewriting it, rather than just translating it, he is able to open up the possibilities for male identity and introduce a fluid concept of masculinity.

This thesis has made reference to Turner and Scott's redaction of *Sigurd the Volsung* alongside Morris' text. Their abridgement further illuminates the representation of gender in *Sigurd the Volsung*, by providing an alternative portrayal of sexual difference by removing

[472] Boos, 'Gender Division', p. 22.

parts of the text; it demonstrates how some expressions of femininity or masculinity can be rendered as non-viable when they are eradicated or reduced. When Turner and Scott abbreviated *Sigurd the Volsung* one of the most striking alterations that they made was to close the narrative at the end of book three. In doing so, the events of the final book, the one named for Gudrun, are completely erased. This obviously has a profound effect on the representation of Gudrun, and therefore female identity; Gudrun becomes a character who is solely known by her love for Sigurd and grief at his death as we do not see her in an active role as avenger. Yet Turner and Scott's revision of the text also affects the portrayal of male identity, removing both the representation of the Niblung brothers' courage, and also the most extensive battle scene in the text where violence is most clearly problematised. Morris closes his third book as follows:

> They are gone - the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:
> It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth:
> It shall groan in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped,
> And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead:
> It shall yearn, and be oft-times holpen, and forget their deeds no more,
> Till the new sun beams on Baldur, and the happy sealess shore. (p. 244)

And the text as a whole ends with:

> Ye have heard of Sigurd aforetime, how the foes of God he slew;
> How forth from the darksome desert the Gold of the Waters he drew;
> How he wakened Love on the Mountain, and wakened Brynhild the Bright,
> And dwelt upon Earth for a season, and shone in all men's sight.
> Ye have heard of the Cloudy People, and the dimming of the day,
> And the latter world's confusion, and Sigurd gone away;
> Now ye know of the Need of the Niblungs and the end of broken troth,
> All the death of kings and of kindreds and the sorrow of Odin the Goth. (p. 306)

Whereas Turner and Scott end their edition in this manner:

> They are gone - the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:
> It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth.
> Ye have heard of Sigurd aforetime, how the foes of God he slew;
> How forth from the darksome desert the Gold of the Waters he drew;
> How he wakened Love on the Mountain, and wakened Brynhild the Bright,
> And dwelt upon Earth for a season and shone in all men's sight.
> Ye have heard of the Cloudy People, and the dimming of the day,
> And the latter world's confusion, and Sigurd gone away

In the reduced version of the narrative, an emphasis on Brynhildr's involvement in Sigurd's death is removed in an attempt to reduce the complexity of ending with them positioned as a happy couple. The import of both figures is also diminish, as is a sense of hope of ultimate redemption. Yet the final few lines, the 'farewell' in Phelan's term, retains Morris's didactic narrator and simplifies the message of the text; it becomes solely focused on Sigurd, and is about an individual figure rather than a wider questioning of a society focused on honour and violence. Sigurd is no longer merely an emblem of a particular expression of male identity, but becomes the whole meaning of the text, which closes with his demise, rather than positioning his death as one of many others. Turner and Scott abridge the narrative, and in doing so, they invoke gender identity in yet another manner. The print history of Morris's text demonstrates the continual desire to rework the narrative as a whole, and its representation of sexual difference.

In *The Influence of Old Norse Literature on English Literature*, a text published before Turner and Scott's edited version of Morris's narrative, Conrad Hjalmar Nordby entitles his chapter which addresses Morris's contribution to this field 'By the Hand of the Master', and asserts that 'were it not for William Morris, the examination that we are now making would not be worthwhile' (p. 37). Indeed, Morris can be credited with the transformation of the Völsung legend to a part of British as well as Icelandic literary history.[473] His success is, perhaps ironically, evidenced by the fact that his epic poem is not the last word on the Völsung legend's representation in English literature; it is not just followed by Turner and Scott's reduced edition, but by other re-workings of the legend in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Common to all of these, however, is a marginal presence in the literary canon. Just as *Sigurd the Volsung* failed to capture the audience attention that

[473] Morris was the first person to translate *Völsunga saga* into English, although Herbert published a summary of the narrative in 1806.

Morris clearly felt it deserved, none of the later re-workings of this narrative has a central place in the canon. They are part of less respected genres such as children's literature or fantasy, and, in the case of Tolkien's *Sigurd and Gudrún*, which was published posthumously, have an unusual textual history. Perhaps because of this peripheral existence beyond the mainstream of British literature, these texts are in a position to re-work gender identity and produce alternative possibilities for sexual difference; this is especially true in the case of Melvin Burgess's rewritings of the Völsung legend in *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*. The final chapter of this thesis will, therefore, address what happens to gender in these works that follow on from Morris's epic.

Chapter 5: After Morris

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been several English language rewritings and translations of the Völsung legend.[474] Stephan Grundy, an American author, used his time as a student at the University of St Andrews to compose *Rhinegold*, a novel which retells the Völsung legend, using elements from both the Scandinavian and German tradition.[475] This text offers fresh conceptions of gender through its graphic depictions of physicality and sexuality; for example in Sigifrith's violent rape of Gundrun on their wedding night (pp. 583-5). Another American author, Diana L. Paxson, provides an even more overt focus on gender in her 'Wodan's Children' trilogy of novels, which are similarly influenced by both Völsung traditions.[476] These novels are focused on female experience, and paganism, emphasising the benefits of a female community of magic. Yet a full exploration of gender in these novels, something that has been critically neglected, will not be provided in this thesis. In order to provide an examination of the British afterlife of the Völsung legend following its Old Norse incarnations and its rewriting as *Sigurd the Volsung*, this thesis will now focus on the most notable British rewritings in terms of their representation of gender identity: Tolkien's *Sigurd and Gudrún*, and Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*.

[474] See, for example, Arthur Peterson, *Andvari's Ring* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916); Margaret Schlauch (trans.), *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Saga of Ragnar lodbrok Together with the Lay of Kraka* (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1930); Dorothy G. Hosford, *Sons of the Volsungs* (New York: Holt, 1949); Picard, *Gods and Heroes*; Finch (ed. and trans.), *The Saga of the Volsungs*; Ursula Dronke, (ed. and trans.) *The Poetic Edda Volume I: Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) W. H. Auden and Paul B. Taylor (trans.), *Norse Poems* (London: Athlone Press, 1981); George K. Anderson (trans.) *The Saga of the Völsungs: Together with Excerpts from the 'Nornagestsháttr' and Three Chapters from the 'Prose Edda'* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982); Jesse Byock (trans.) *Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990); Carolyne Larrington, (trans.), *The Poetic Edda: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996); Kaaren Grimstad (trans.), *Völsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs; The Icelandic Text According to MS Nks 1824 b, 4°* (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2000); Andy Orchard, *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore* (London: Penguin, 2011).

[475] Stephan Grundy, *Rhinegold* (London: Penguin, 1995).

[476] Diana L. Paxson, *The Wolf and the Raven* (New York: Avon Books, 1993); Paxson, *The Dragons of the Rhine* (New York: Avon Books, 1995); Paxson, *The Lord of Horses* (New York: Avon Books, 1996).

1: *Sigurd and Gudrún*

An exploration of Tolkien's rewriting of the legend as *Sigurd and Gudrún*, which is both clearly influenced by Morris's poem, but also asserts its individuality, is assisted by paying attention to the ways in which the narrative is constructed in this text, and how it differs from its predecessors. The representation of gender is not, as has been mentioned in previous parts of this thesis, just affected by the content of the texts, but also by the ways in which their narratives are constructed. More sustained attention will now be paid to the narrative form of the texts in order to further elucidate their representation of gender identity.

In her short story 'Happy Endings', Margaret Atwood provides a commentary on the nature of narrative fiction. After including several different permutations of a story involving two characters, John and Mary, the story concludes:

> You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. [...]
> The only authentic ending is the one provided here:
> John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.
> [...]
> That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.
> Now try How and Why.[477]

Atwood argues against the importance of events in a narrative, or its fabula. Mieke Bal defines a fabula as 'a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors' whereas a story is 'a fabula that is presented in a certain manner' and a narrative text is 'a text in which an agent relates ("tells") a story in a particular medium'.[478] It is the importance of the narrative text that Atwood foregrounds, arguing that all plots are ultimately similar. This is obviously the case in the series of texts which this thesis has examined; as rewritings, they share the same fabula, with some exceptions such as the different ending of *Sigurd the Volsung*. Indeed, all the texts accord to some degree with

[477] Margaret Atwood, 'Happy Endings' in *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* (London: Virago, 2002), pp. 63-70 (p. 70).
[478] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 5.

Atwood's provocative summation of endings as the death of the main characters, with the exception of Guðrún. Nevertheless, the stories of the texts are altered; characters are represented in diverse ways, which are likely to entail different kinds of audience sympathy, and I have argued that these representations vary in particular with regard to their representation of gender identity. In Atwood's terms, it is the 'how and why' that separates the narratives. This way of thinking about the differences between the texts in terms of their narratives is particularly productive when approaching my own ending, the conclusion of this thesis. Some attention has been paid to narrative techniques throughout the thesis, but a focus on this aspect brings together the differences between the texts that have already been examined, before moving on to the text that is about to be analysed: Tolkien's *Sigurd and Gudrún*.

1.i Narrative technique in the *Poetic Edda*

It is not surprising that, given the disparate nature of the poems, the *Poetic Edda* varies in the narrative techniques that it employs. Some poems are delivered mainly in direct speech, whereas in others the story is expressed through the perspective of a narrator. The kind of third-person narrator who is employed in poems such as *HH.* is often referred to as an omniscient narrator, alluding to their ability to see into the minds of characters and offer a perspective that appears to be all pervading, both spatially and temporally. Nicholas Royle, however, has convincingly argued that this term, with its religious connotations, is misleading.[479] He contends that this kind of narrator should be seen as telepathic: both in the sense that they are able to see inside the minds of characters (but this power has limits, as they are not everywhere at once but instead move between one particular perspective or another), and in the sense that there is something uncanny about this kind of narrator. Royle

[479] Nicholas Royle, 'The "Telepathy Effect": Notes toward a Reconsideration of Narrative Fiction' in *Act of Narrative*, ed. by Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 93-109.

uses Derrida's concept of being-two-to-speak to explore the ways in which there is a constant doubling going on; the narrator is both providing access to a character's mind and speaking for them. If we accept this useful concept, we can instead say that the narrative of *HH.* uses this third-person, telepathic narration.

This technique allows the narrator to offer the reader explanations of events and judgements of the characters; they can present Helgi as heroic and praiseworthy, and in doing so, this judgement seems more final and authentic than one from the mouth of a character. While a character is recognised as a singular individual, who may be biased or incorrect, the perspective of the narrator creates the impression that they have complete knowledge; of course, as Royle points out, the presence of the unconscious means that characters can never be fully knowable in this manner. Nevertheless, epithets delivered by a telepathic narrator attach more firmly to a character than judgments delivered in the flyting, for example. In this poem, these narratorial judgments are used to establish the praiseworthy status of male characters. Female characters are, therefore, constructed as either more complex, less knowable, or perhaps of less interest to the narrator, and by implication, the audience.

This kind of third-person telepathic narrator is not present throughout the *Poetic Edda*. Indeed, the next poem in the compilation, *HHv.*, does not have any narrator at all within the poem. Instead, the compiler makes themselves known in a more emphatic manner than at the outset. In *HH.*, they merely introduced the vague subject of the poem. In *HHv.*, the compiler-narrator not only offers an extended introduction by explaining events prior to the fabula of the poem, but also regularly interrupts the action to insert comments and events into the text. This disrupts the poem; the poetry and prose is easily distinguishable by its form, despite the fact that no clear delineation is made in the manuscript. In modern editions of the text, the layout means that the compiler-narrator is even more obviously present and obtrusive.

The compiler-narrator simplifies and clarifies the text for the audience; without them the dialogic exchange would be harder to follow, especially if the poem was read rather than listened to. The compiler-narrator includes judgments about the characters, and these are clearly gendered. Sigrlinn is identified by her beauty, and is completely passive. Sváva is described as protecting men in battle, but this is not depicted. Yet male characters are portrayed in a warrior context, and are praised by the compiler-narrator. In contrast, the poetry reveals that Sváva is a wise figure, and Hrímgerðr is able to hold her own in the flyting, although she is ultimately defeated. The presence of the compiler-narrator transforms the poem, and these alterations affect the representation of gender. Indeed, this can be seen even more strongly in the texts which are entirely mediated through the compiler-narrator; *Sf.*, for example, sets up a clear binary between an evil female figure and praiseworthy male characters.

In *Sd.*, the compiler-narrator inserts the element of Sigurðr mistaking Brynhildr for a man because of her armour, and so both constructs and deconstructs the connection between outward appearance, a warrior identity, and gender. The effect of the compiler-narrator on the representation of gender is not always straightforward, but it is ever present. As has been established, the compiler-narrator does not have an equal presence within the poems. There seems to be a particular impulse to comment on those poems which do not have their own telepathic narrator. The function of the compiler-narrator is to provide a sense of authority where that is missing, and to overtly reduce the dialogic nature of the texts. Yet as the compiler-narrator actually adds an additional voice, rather than one of finality, they make the situation more rather than less complicated. Nevertheless, there is a clear urge to explain and simplify both the fabula, and the representation of gender identity. This is illustrated by *Gðr.II*; the compiler-narrator lessens the effect of the poem's female voice by insisting on the presence of a male audience figure, whose own stories are asserted to be as important as

Guðrún's. The *Poetic Edda*, therefore, is affected on both the level of story and of the narrative text by the presence or absence of the compiler-narrator or narrator, and this has implications for the representation of gender.

1.ii Narrative technique in *Völsunga saga*

The effects of the compiler-narrator or narrator in the *Poetic Edda* can be seen even more clearly through a comparison with *Völsunga saga*. This text differs slightly from the *Poetic Edda* in its fabula; as has previously been noted, events before the beginning of the *Poetic Edda* fabula are added, as well as those that may have taken place during the *Poetic Edda* lacuna. Yet it also differs from the *Poetic Edda* in its story, and this is frequently achieved through the alternative style of narration. *Völsunga saga* has a telepathic narrator. Rather than creating temporal separation, distance is established by foregrounding fictionality. From its opening, *Völsunga saga* is depicted as a tale, in contrast to the poems of the *Poetic Edda* which do not refer to their fictional status (although there are some moments when the compiler-narrator alludes to this, such as the discussion of the various deaths of Sigurðr). In fact, in *Völsunga saga*, the tale is almost given its own agency. It starts: 'hér hefr up ok segir frá þeim manni; (here begins and tells about that man, p. 1). This opening, just like that of *HH.*, places an emphasis on male characters but here Sigi, the first man mentioned, is problematic rather than admirable.

The narrator makes reference to the fictionality of the story in each of the first four sentences. This tale is less certain that that of the poems of the *Poetic Edda*; the emphasis on the construction of the fabula from existing narratives and hearsay both creates support for this account (it is not something that the narrator has imagined, but pre-exists) but also foregrounds its artificial nature as a tale. The wider import of the story is also emphasised by the narrator, who describes how a narrative event leads to an alteration of nomenclature in the

case of Breði's drift. Yet the frequent references to statements that are held to be true by amorphous and anonymous people detract from a sense that the narrator is in control, and introduce the possibility of falsity. The narrator does not offer undisputed facts. This is of course, a common component of saga style and is not unique to *Völsunga saga*, but as *Völsunga saga* is an alternative presentation of the Völsung fabula, these differences are notable in comparison to the *Poetic Edda*. As I have previously argued, *Völsunga saga* opens with problematic male violence, but the truth of this fabula is questioned in sharp contrast to the ways in which admirable male violence is presented in *HH.*, in a much more confident manner.

Yet there are frequent attempts to establish the narrator as knowledgeable, and able to telepathise into the thoughts of different characters; the narrator confidently asserts that Siggeirr is only pretending to be satisfied by the result of the sword-in-the-tree contest, and that he will later take revenge (p. 5). The narrator oscillates between these two modes, of authoritative telepathy, and a devolution of responsibility to the creators of the fabula. Indeed, the narrator sometimes appears as deliberately unreliable; in contrast to previous statements about Siggeirr, the narrator states that he wants to make up for leaving Völsung's hall early with an invitation to his own dwelling, although perhaps the implied reader is expected to read between or beyond the lines of this statement due to the earlier revelation of Siggeirr's motivation (p. 6). Nevertheless, this allows the implied audience some freedom in interpretation and is another delegation of control. At the outset of *Völsunga saga*, and in the elements that are added to the fabula, it is a male character who is overtly described as deceptive, although the narrator's trustworthiness is also called into question.[480]

Indeed, the speech of male characters is also revealed by the narrator to be unreliable. King Eylimi states that he allows his daughter to select her own husband because of her

[480] Signý could be described as deceiving her husband when she arranges for the vengeance for her family, but the narrator does not classify her actions in the same way as Siggeirr's. Similarly, Borghildr's murder of Sinfiötli is quite upfront; she openly offers the cup and does not deny that it contains poison.

wisdom, but the narrator's comment which precedes his statement suggests that Eylimi, in fact, realises that choosing either suitor will lead to strife and so wishes to make Hiordis responsible for the choice (p. 19). This degrading of a character's honesty overtly establishes the narrator as a more reliable figure, but in actual fact destabilises the notion of an universal truth being offered; it indicates that people, and men especially, never quite mean what they say. The narrator frequently creates suspense in the story; the implied audience is not initially privy to the reasons for Signý wanting her brothers to be placed in stocks rather than killed immediately, although again they may be expected to assume that she is attempting to ensure their survival rather than wanting to cause them extended suffering (p. 7). Similarly, the detail given about Sinfiötli's susceptibility to imbibed poison creates a sense of anticipation, as it is likely to be assumed that this will have a later significance (p. 10).

The narrator of *Völsunga saga* does not frequently supply characters' thoughts or motivations, which again appears to establish those that are given as more authoritative; for example, the detail that Reginn leaves Sigurðr alone to defeat Fáfnir because he is scared (p. 30). The hegemonic nature of a warrior masculinity is supported by narratorial comments. The narrator is, therefore, able to establish a sense of the correct way to behave. The inclusion of two comments confirming the private nature of Guðrún's grief (p. 61 and p. 76) indicate that female grief should not be a public display, as it is in *Gðr.I* or in Brynhildr's earlier performance of sorrow. Both male and female behaviour is circumscribed by narratorial comment. Yet an attempt by the narrator to establish a totalising viewpoint in *Völsunga saga* is destabilised by their refusal or inability to reveal the final outcome of all the characters. The narrator asserts that Guðrún's lamentations cease (p. 77) but does not comment on whether this is because she dies, becomes happy, or decides that her grief is no longer worth expressing. The narrative immediately shifts the perspective to her sons' experiences, attributing this change of focalisation to the demands of the story as 'þat er nú

segja frá sonum Guðrúnar' (it is now told about Guðrún's sons p. 77). Paying attention to the construction of the narration in *Völsunga saga* demonstrates the attempts to establish gender roles as fixed, and yet the unreliable and incomplete perspective of the narrator, and the frequent references to the story as a tale, destabilise this endeavour.

1.iii Narrative technique in *Sigurd the Volsung*

The narrator of *Sigurd the Volsung*, like that of *Ghv.* (st. 1) and *Am.* (st. 36) uses the first person pronoun, establishing their nature as an individualised character rather than an omniscient figure. As has been observed, the narrator's view often appears partial; although there is frequent telepathy of character emotion and motivation, there are times at which this is admitted to fail, such as in the case of Signy. In the depiction of the sword-in-the-tree contest, the narrator refers to the fact that, in his failure to draw the sword, Siggeir 'mended not the tale' (p. 7). This conception of the fabula and possibly the story as unalterable is reiterated throughout the narrative, in many different ways. It is expressed in the overall sense, in contrast to *Völsunga saga* (and parts of the *Poetic Edda* that are not summarised by the compiler-narrator), that there is no suspense; the fabula is already formed and cannot be altered.[481] The chapter titles inform the reader of the events contained within: 'Of the ending of all Volsung's Sons save Sigmund only and of how he abideth in the wild wood'; 'Sigurd slayeth Regin the Master of Masters on the Glittering Heath'; 'Sigurd rideth with the Niblungs, and wooeth Brynhild for King Gunnar' (p. v). In Atwood's terms, both the narrator and the implied author seem concerned solely about the 'how and why' rather than the what; it is made clear from the outset that Sigurd and Brynhild (and Sigmund, and Regin, and Gunnar, and Hogni, and …) die.

This knowledge of the future asserts the authority of the narrator but in *Sigurd the Volsung*, characters' knowledge of the future is also foregrounded. This is not depicted as a

[481] This also fits in with the framing of the poem within the doom of *Ragnarök*.

special, prophetic ability, as in the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga*, but rather as prolepsis being an essential part of the fabula which pre-exists the narrative. So Sigmund does not celebrate his retrieval of the sword, but the narrator reveals that he is instead sobered by the knowledge of future tragedy:

> For this was the thought within him; Belike the day shall come
> When I shall bide here lonely amid the Volsung home,
> Its glory and sole avenger, its after-summer seed.
> (p. 8)

The qualifier 'belike' makes Sigmund's thoughts less certain, yet there is a clear anticipation of tragedy; joyful moments are transient and unable to redeem the wretched nature of the narrative. This knowledge, however, is emphasised most clearly for male characters; whilst the prophetic abilities of female characters are questioned and doubted by other characters, the narrator presents the foreknowledge of Sigmund and Sigurd as fact.

At one point, early in the text, the narrator asks a series of questions of the implied reader:

> And who next shall shake the locks, or the silver door-rings meet?
> Who shall pace the floor beloved, worn down by the Volsung feet?
> Who shall fill the gold with the wine, or cry for the triumphing?
> Shall it be kindred or foes, or thief, or thrall, or king?
> (p. 16)

This temporarily constructs that narrator as being in a superior position, as they appear to be testing the knowledge of the implied reader. Yet the implied reader does not need to wait long for confirmation of the answer, as it is revealed by the title of the next chapter. Indeed, even in the rare moments where characters do not consciously know the plot, it is implied that they are aware on an unconscious level. Sigmund does not initially realise that Sinfiotli is his son, but he is depicted in this role before Signy's revelations: he loves Sinfiotli (p. 30) and is responsible for raising and educating him (p. 31). Not only do characters and the implied reader have knowledge of the fabula alongside the narrator, but so does the natural world. When it is revealed that Sigmund is alive, 'all heaven o'erhead was blue/ and […] the golden

sunlight lay' (p. 23), foreshadowing his successful vengeance. The narrator does not provoke the interest of the implied reader through a gradual revelation of the fabula, but through the ways in which the events are described.

The tale itself is given agency in a similar way to *Völsunga saga*. We are told 'the tale beginneth to tell' (p. 131) at the beginning of the third book. This relinquishment of the control of the fabula occurs at the point at which the story becomes most heartrending; the narrator dissociates themselves from causing the action by presenting the tragedy as inevitable. Yet the narrator does manipulate the experience of the implied reader. Before characters are represented in their own words, they are often subject to lengthy introductions, demonstrating a particular interpretation of a character. The narrator, therefore, plays a significant part in the text's representation of gender identity. Grimhild is criticised for attempting to assert control (p. 166) and Atli's men, who see themselves as 'the fashioners of things' (p. 303), are subject to narratorial disapprobation; the stoical acceptance of the text's fabula is seen as a necessary part of identity for both male and female characters.

The conclusion of the text creates a sense of doubt in the certainty of the fabula, as Gudrun's 'ending' is asserted in the final chapter heading, but her death is not actually depicted. The text closes with a direct address to the implied reader:

> Ye have heard of Sigurd aforetime, how the foes of God he slew;
> How forth from the darksome desert the Gold of the Waters he drew;
> […]
> Now ye know of the Need of the Niblungs and the end of broken troth,
> All the death of kings and of kindreds and the sorrow of Odin the Goth. (p. 306)

This appears to place the implied reader in the active position; the emphasis is on the audience who have heard the tale, rather than the narrator who has told it. Yet it also means that the narrator retains control as they are defining the story for the implied reader. This entails a control of the representation of gender identity; the fabula is summarised as the actions of an important hero, and the devastation caused by male oath-breaking and death.

The narrator constructs a focus on male deeds and female passivity until the close of the narrative.

1.iv Narrative technique in *Sigurd and Gudrún*

> Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.[482]

Sigurd and Gudrún offers yet another iteration of both story and narrative. *Sigurd the Volsung* is established as a narrative with a fixed fabula and story that is both gendered and also known to the narrator, the implied reader and characters alike. In contrast, *Sigurd and Gudrún* offers a narrative which circles around elements of the fabula, with the temporal progress through the fabula interrupted by prolepsis, analepsis and repetition.[483] Tolkien's poems commence with 'Upphaf' (beginning), the first section of *Völsungakviða en nýja*, which echoes the start of the heroic section of the *Poetic Edda* with its emphasis on ancient time. It also opens with a contrast to *Sigurd the Volsung*. Unlike Morris's focus on architecture, in its first lines 'Upphaf' prioritises the natural: 'unwrought was Earth/ Unroofed was Heaven' (st. 1). This is a clear differentiation from *Sigurd the Volsung*'s opening of 'the roofs were thatched with gold/ Earls were the wrights that wrought it' (p. 1), resulting in a distancing the text not only temporally from its implied reader but also from previous rewritings of the fabula. Indeed, the alterations continue, as the sequence of events in the fabula is supplemented and rearranged. 'Upphaf' does not describe the birth of Helgi, like the heroic section of the *Poetic Edda*, or the background to Volsung's birth like *Völsunga saga*, or Loki's murder of Otr like *Skáldskaparmál*, or the arrival of Siggeir's messenger, like

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[482] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 86.

[483] As mentioned in the introduction, Tolkien had read the Old Norse sources as well as Morris' translation of *Völsunga saga*; see Shippey, 'Review', p. 292 and Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 1995) p. 77. It is not clear whether Tolkien read *Sigurd the Volsung* itself, although it seems logical that he would have done, given his appreciation of Morris and his interest in the *Völsung* legend. Just as with differences between the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, this thesis will examine differences between *Sigurd and Gudrún* and *Sigurd the Volsung* without relying on a conscious authorial motivation for these variations of the fabula.

Sigurd the Volsung. Instead, *Sigurd and Gudrún* provides us with a reimagining of *Völuspá*, from the mythological section of the *Poetic Edda*. This opening provides less of a separation between mythological and legendary elements of the narrative, just like the appearances of Odin or mentions of *Ragnarök* in *Völsunga saga* or *Sigurd the Volsung*. It also provides an emphasis on fate, prophecy, and femininity from the outset.

'Andvara-gull', the following section, acts as a companion and contrast to 'Upphaf', as it retains the emphasis on mythological figures, but this time alters the focus to male gods. Andvari's curse becomes more specific than in previous versions of the fabula such as *Rm.*, as it will create an 'end untimely/ of Ódin's hope' (st. 11). Loki extends the ring's curse as:

> The doom of kings
> the fall of queens
> fire and weeping
> end untimely
> of Ódin's hope. (st. 13)

Loki's prophecy also considers the fate of the women in the text, unlike Andvari who only describes what will happen to male characters. The juxtaposition of fire and weeping encapsulates the oscillation of female characters between action and grief. These two attempts at beginning *Sigurd and Gudrún* differ in their presentation of gender. 'Upphaf' focuses on female prophecy and wisdom, and the possibility of hope. In contrast, 'Andvara-gull' depicts male figures who curse rather than prophesy, offering a vision of future strife which appears irredeemable. This gendered prolepsis associates female characters with a less rigid version of the fabula.

Loki's replication of Andvari's words in 'Andvara-gull' fits in with a frequent use of repetition throughout the text. In 'Regin', the eponymous character offers a repetition of the narrative that was produced in 'Andvara-gull'. Indeed some of the lines are identical; for example, the first halves of 'Regin' st. 7 and 'Andvara-gull' st. 2. Yet, like all repetitions, this contains difference:

The falls of Andvari
frothed and murmured
with fish teeming
in foaming pools.
As a pike there plunged
his prey hunting
dwarf Andvari
from his dark cavern.
[…]
With stone struck him,
stripped him naked,
Loki lighthanded,
loosing evil.
The fell they flayed,
fared then onward;
in Hreidmar's halls
housing sought they.

There wrought Regin
by the red embers
rune written iron,
rare, enchanted;
of gold things gleaming,
of grey silver,
there Fáfnir lay
by the fire dreaming. (‘Andvara-gull' sts. 2 and 4-5)

The falls of Andvari
frothed and murmured
with fish teeming
in foaming pools.
There Otr sported,
mine own brother;
to snare salmon
sweet he thought it.

With stone smote him,
stripped him naked,
a robber roving,
ruthless-handed.
At Hreidmar's house
hailed my father,
that fairest fell
for food offered.

There wrought Regin
by the red embers
rough iron hewing,
and runes marking;
there Fáfnir lay

by the fire sleeping,
fell-hearted son,
fiercely dreaming. ('Regin' sts. 7-8)

In Regin's version of this fabula, the gods are erased and it is focalised around Regin's experience. Regin is keen to personalise the story he narrates: he talks about Otr rather than Andvari when discussing the waterfall. The erasure of Loki's identity as a killer indicates that the implied reader should be more concerned with the murdered Otr than with his assassin. Similarly, the way in which Hreidmar is constructed as a welcoming host creates sympathy for him as the implied reader is, unlike him, aware that he is offering hospitality to his son's murderer. Regin talks about himself in the third person, and constructs himself as connected to physical labour rather than magic; he takes this opportunity to demonstrate a masculinity expressed through physical strength rather than a more dubious association with the supernatural. In doing so, he supports a hegemonic construction of masculinity rather than challenging it. He also depicts his brother in a better manner, erasing mention of his greed. As a narrator, Regin can control the identities of himself and others, demonstrating both the power of the narrator's position and its subjectivity.

Derrida has developed the concept of *différance* to explain the ways in which 'in a language, in the system of language, there are only differences'.[484] The way that language is structured means that the definition of each word refers to how it differs from all other words; meaning is constructed through a system of definition with endless referrals to other concepts. Not only do the obvious changes in wording create a difference between 'Andvara-gull' and 'Regin', but even those that appear identical are not; the very fact of the repetition alters the meaning of both iterations, not least because they appear within dissimilar contexts. The position of 'Regin' as a non-identical replication is an echo of the text as a whole; *Sigurd and Gudrún* is an iteration of the Völsung fabula that is notable for its alterations. This

[484] Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 3-27 (p. 9).

deliberate use of repetitions in new contexts draws attention to the status of the text, and also of identity; iterations of gender can also be said to be replications. As Butler argues, '"imitation" is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project and its gender binarisms'.[485] The establishment of *Sigurd and Gudrún* as a text of repetitions without uniformity works against any attempt by the text to offer a fixed notion of gender identity.

'Andvara-gull' ends with Hreidmar banishing the gods from his home. At this point, this part of the narrative is paused until later on in 'Regin'. Instead, the next section, 'Signy', offers a third commencement of the narrative, which echoes the opening of *Völsunga saga*. In this way, *Sigurd and Gudrún* offers several attempts at beginnings: 'Upphaf', which replicates the introduction to the *Poetic Edda* as a whole, 'Andvara-gull' which reproduces the commencement of the Völsung legend in *Skáldskaparmál*, and 'Signy', which provides the opening of *Völsunga saga*. These repeated beginnings are disorientating for the implied reader, especially one who is not already familiar with the fabula. These recurrent commencements draw attention to the problematic nature of opening a legendary narrative, which has been told many times previously in many different versions. They also undermine the notion of the text as a reassuringly stable narrative. The form of the text subverts the fixed nature of its own identity, and, therefore, disrupts the potential for gender to be similarly predetermined or inflexible.

Nevertheless, the narrator often overtly constructs a binary notion of gender. 'Signy' is one of four sections of *Völsungakviða en nýja* to provide a prose introduction. The adoption of a prosimetric form echoes that of the *Poetic Edda*. Its use in 'Signy', however, is curious, as the plot provided in the introduction is present in the poem itself. The prose introduction for 'Signy' signifies its importance and difference from 'Upphaf' or 'Andvara-gull'; perhaps here we have the conclusion of the beginnings. The prose introduction provides

[485] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 85, original emphasis.

a contrast between desirable male and female characteristics. Sigmund and his sons are ‘valiant’, whereas Signy is ‘fair and wise and foresighted’ (p. 72). This distinction is reinforced by the second stanza, where ‘Sigmund and Signy, a son and daughter/ she bare at birth in his builded halls’ (st. 2). The alliteration of ‘son’ with the character’s names places the emphasis on the male offspring, which is supported by Sigmund’s name being mentioned first. Indeed, the next line associates women with natural creation, and men with artificial construction, setting up another opposition. Yet the prose introduction ends by stating that ‘by Signy was a fierce vengeance devised and fulfilled’ (p. 72), demonstrating that a female position is not necessarily equated to one of powerlessness. The contradictory position of gender identity reflects the paradoxical nature of the text; the prose introduction both is and isn’t part of the text, acting as a supplement. As Derrida suggests, supplements are not just an extra and unnecessary entity, but that they are also ‘substitute[s]’ whose ‘place[s] [are] assigned in the structure by the mark[s] of an emptiness’; a supplement draws attention to what is missing from the original concept.[486] As with the compiler-narrator’s additions to the *Poetic Edda*, this destabilises the limits of the text and so provides a challenge to the notion of all boundaries, including those of gender.

Indeed, the borders of the text are also challenged by its use of both English and Old Norse. Each poem has an Old Norse title, which appears as a heading with an English language translation below it. Yet it is this translated title that appears as a header on subsequent pages. Similarly, these Old Norse titles ensure that several of the characters have an excessive identity; Sigurd is both ‘Sigurd’ within the main text, but ‘Sigurðr’ in the title of ‘Fœddr Sigurðr’, a repetition with difference. Gudrún is subject to a similar doubling. Indeed, even her name in the main part of the text, Gudrún, is an amalgamation of other versions of the character’s name; retaining the accented ‘u’, but discarding ‘ð’ in favour of ‘d’. *Sigurd*

[486] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 145.

and Gudrún is published as a series of poems, but in the 2009 paperback edition these are supplemented by a lecture given by Tolkien to the English Faculty at Oxford University, a foreword to the text by Christopher Tolkien, an introduction to the text by Christopher Tolkien, drawings by Bill Sanderson, commentaries on each poem by Christopher Tolkien, three appendices (the third of which, containing Tolkien's Old English translations of Völsung material, is accompanied by its own set of notes), a photograph of a page from Tolkien's manuscript, a list, and pictures of the covers, of Tolkien's and Christopher Tolkien's other works, a cover design depicting the church door at Hylestad in Norway, a blurb, and excerpts from two reviews. There is no outside-of-the-text indeed.

In *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, Derrida comments on a strange addition (the phrase, in inverted commas "I have forgotten my umbrella") to one of Nietzsche's unpublished works. He states:

> This note, which the editors have appended to their classification of these unpublished pieces is a monument to hermeneutic somnambulism. In blithest complacency their every word obscures so well a veritable beehive of critical questions that only the minutest scrutiny could ever recover there those questions which preoccupy us here. One day though, we shall perhaps know the significant context of this umbrella. Perhaps the editors themselves already know. But if they do, they are not saying.[487]

In a similar manner, Christopher Tolkien is not just presenting his implied reader with a rediscovered writing of his father. He himself admits that there 'is no evidence one way or another' of whether his father desired the publication of these poems, and if he did, in what context he would want them to appear.[488] The poems themselves, to a certain extent, and certainly the content apparently outside of the poems, become analogous to Nietzsche's umbrella quotation. These materials encompass both of Derrida's meanings of the supplement. They enrich the text, positioned as additional elements. Yet the explanatory function of these additions also reveals a deficiency in the poems by suggesting that they

[487] Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. by Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 123-5.
[488] Christopher Tolkien, 'Foreword', *Sigurd and Gudrún* pp. 3-10 (p. 5).

cannot stand alone without other materials to elucidate their meaning. This ever present supplementation signifies that an interpretation of the text is not straightforward; there will always be an excess of meaning. The inability of the text to enforce its own boundaries illustrates the instability of all categories and suggests that a multiple conception of gender will also be possible.

The most notable alteration to the story in *Sigurd and Gudrún* is the positioning of Sigurd as a saviour, whom Ódin is awaiting in Valhöll. This sense of anticipation is established from the outset. In 'Upphaf':

> Mighty ones of Earth
> mailclad sitting
> for one they waited,
> the World's chosen. (st. 20)

Similarly, in 'Dauði Sinfjötla', when Sinfjötli is received in Valhöll, he is identified by his difference from Sigurd, the 'world's chosen' (st. 13), for whom the inhabitants 'yet await' (st. 13). As 'Dauði Sinfjötla' is immediately followed by 'Fœddr Sigurðr', Sigurd is a clear replacement for Sinfjötli. He is a chance for Sigmund to try again, with a new son who will be less problematic and fulfil the role of the anticipated warrior, a repetition of Sinfjötli with difference.

Alterations to the fabula construct Sigurd as more heroic; he receives less assistance from Ódin and so appears more independent. Sigurd's warrior ability is also increased through the description of the fight with Fáfnir, which begins with Sigurd severing Fáfnir's heart (st. 28), and only reveals in the subsequent stanza he is 'in the hollow hiding' (st. 29) rather than facing his foe full on. Brynhild also alludes to his future, telling him that 'warriors wait for thee/ in wide Valhöll' (Brynhildr st. 10). In 'Deild', this prediction is fulfilled:

> Thus soon came Sigurd
> the sword bearing
> to glad Valhöll greeting Ódin.
> There feast he long
> at his father's side,

for war waiting,
the world's chosen.

When Heimdall's horn
is heard ringing
and the blazing Bridge
bends neath horsemen,
Brynhild shall arm him
with belt and sword,
a beaker bear him
brimmed with glory. (sts. 78-9)

In this depiction of Valhöll, an idealised location, men are desired, celebrated and established as active warriors, whereas women are there in a supporting role only. This is one of the most clearly gendered moments in the text, and yet the text's reliance on an existing fabula means that *Sigurd and Gudrún* does not end with this fantasy of heroic masculinity and homosociality. Indeed, there is a whole other, lengthy, poem to follow which depicts a female figure single-handedly enacting revenge against her husband; the construction of gender in 'Deild' is supplemented by that of *Sigurd and Gudrún*'s final poem. A single, binary concept of gender is always at risk of being superseded.

Although there are many beginnings, there is only one conclusion to *Sigurd and Gudrún*. This provides an increased note of finality in comparison to the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* or *Sigurd the Volsung*; it is the only text to clearly depict Guðrún's/ Gudrun's/ Gudrún's death. *Sigurd and Gudrún* ends with a call for the audience to participate in the story's continual existence:

Lift up your hearts
lords and maidens
for the song of sorrow
that was sung of old.
(*Guðrúnarkviða en nýja* st. 166)

This reference to the audience of the poem and the age of the narrative setting creates a continuous sense of time, where the story will be persistently re-told. The call is inclusive of both genders, but sets the singing and re-telling of tales as something particularly human. The

boundaries of even this identity are interrogated in the texts that are analysed in the final part of this section: *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*.

2: Burgess

Melvin Burgess's young-adult novels *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* transform the Völsung legend into a tale of technological trauma. This section uses theories of posthumanism to analyse how the technologies described in *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* affect the gender identities that are performed; in these texts, a fresh concept of posthuman gender is established, offering a sense of the multiplicities of masculinities and femininities alongside an emphasis on the importance of gender as a component of identity. Burgess states that he 'didn't want to write about blokes with beards in iron helmets' and so sets the narrative events in a post-apocalyptic London, where gangs rule the city which is cut off from the Outside by the halfmen territories which encircle it.[489] The alteration of the medieval narrative to make use of modern technologies has implications for the presentation of gender identity in both texts; a transitional and liminal concept of identity is explored, which is particularly relevant for a teenage audience who are undergoing a metamorphosis from child to adult. Ármann Jakobsson has observed the importance of Sigurðr's adolescence in *Völsunga saga*; by marketing his novels to a young-adult audience, Burgess similarly emphasises the youth of many of the legend's central characters.[490] Gender is also a prominent issue in adolescence, due to the experience of puberty, and issues of masculinity and femininity are foregrounded in Burgess's novels. The genre alteration to young-adult literature provides a focus on issues

[489] Burgess, 'Bloodtide'. David Clark praises 'the way that the weird post-apocalyptic scenes and grotesque array of deformed or genetically modified characters provide a rationale for several elements of the original story which one would expect otherwise to jar in a modern setting'; see 'Old Norse Made New: Past and Present in Modern Children's Literature' in *Old Norse Made New*, ed. by David Clark and Carl Phelpstead (Exeter: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), pp. 133-151 (p. 141).
[490] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Enter the Dragon: Legendary Saga Courage and the Birth of the Hero' in *Making History: Essays on the fornaldarsögur*, ed. by Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society, 2010), pp. 33–52.

of gender, which is present in all incarnations of the Völsung legend but, in Burgess's texts, uniquely interacts with imagined scientific advances.

2.i: Hybrid identities: halfmen

In *Bloodtide*, the kinds of warrior masculinities expressed in the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga* produce discomfort amongst the text's characters. Odin, the first Norse god to appear in the text, is captured as a spy after being discovered in the Volson headquarters. He is extensively tortured but refuses to speak, and this stoicism along with his excessive height leads Siggy to question his identity, asking: 'is he human? I don't mean a halfman. Is he a machine?' (p. 26). This confusion regarding Odin's state is repeated several times. Rather than becoming a figure of approbation for suffering without expressing pain, such as Högni in *Akv.*, Odin is viewed with suspicion.[491] In this text, an ability to withstand pain does not demonstrate an admirable warrior identity. Despite Siggy using the masculine pronoun to refer to him, the idea of Odin being beyond the human suggests the possibility of him also being beyond gender. Indeed, when Odin survives the hanging, he is described as 'it': Had declares that 'it must be a machine after all' (p. 44), and Siggy explores this question in detail:

> It was a machine. No living thing comes back from the dead. A machine, yes. Only a machine can be restarted. But then maybe the gods aren't alive either. (p. 49)

Odin's impressive size and his resistance to torture could provide him with an excessive heroic masculinity in a situation of gang warfare where bravery and fighting prowess are valued skills. Nevertheless, rather than being praised for his masculinity, Odin is depicted as being beyond binary categories of gender.

[491] Óðinn / Odin also has an uncertain status in *Völsunga saga* and *Sigurd the Volsung*.

Odin's excessive heroic masculinity proves threatening and confusing to the other men in the text: notably it is the Volson brothers who are intimidated by him whereas Signy embraces him (p. 47). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes how:

> Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture.[492]

The torture and hanging of Odin means that, initially, these fantasies of domination can be acted out and his dubiously gendered identity allows his body to be used violently; if he is not truly a man, he deserves no empathy. Yet once Odin has demonstrated that he cannot be contained by the Volson aggression, his entry into the hall and his refusal to be easily categorised as man, god or machine become disturbing. The inability to categorise his gender results in a tension between religion and science; if the boundaries between male and female cannot be enforced, then this disruption of borders is dealt with by an attempt to classify Odin in another manner. He cannot be accepted as ungendered, or as both a god and a machine, without deconstructing the category of human as expressed in Volson society.

Indeed, there is a continued unease about characters who are not clearly gendered. The scientific experiments that lead to the halfmen are seen as problematic:

> The halfman lands were a ring around London fifty miles deep. This was the impossible country where animal, human and machine walked in the same body. In this place, the gods were coming back to life [...] The halfmen weren't born, or even made; they were brewed. (p. 76)

The use of 'men' in the descriptive term suggests a clear gendering, yet the initial images of the halfmen represent them as posthuman and without gender. From the outset, there is an apprehension about the halfmen; the idea of them being brewed rather than made suggests that there is some element of them being out of control, just as a brewer does not have total mastery over the fermentation of a batch of beer. It is when biological sex becomes relevant

[492] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 17).

that the discomfort caused by the halfmen is more clearly articulated. The origin of the halfmen is explained as follows:

> How much easier and cheaper it was to make household robots mainly out of flesh and blood. So many of the engineering problems had already been solved. But being flesh and blood, they bred. Some experiments have too many dangers; these servants had minds of their own. (p. 77)

The problem with this genetic manipulation occurs when their sex comes into play: when they begin to reproduce. At this point, they are described as dangerous; the unease with the halfmen is expressed overtly. As initially indicated, it is a lack of control which is disturbing, as the flesh-made robots have their own minds.

The half men are also said to be 'more than human, less than human, more than beasts, less than beasts' (p. 78). The inability to determine exactly what the halfmen are is unsettling, just as uncertain gender can be troubling. Haraway asserts that 'Derrida got it right: there is no rational or natural dividing line that will settle the life-and-death relations between human and nonhuman animals'.[493] *Bloodtide* appears to support this view; differences between humans and the halfmen are undermined throughout the text. But this expression of the fragility of rigid distinctions between humans and halfmen, or humans and animals is not celebrated. Hayles discusses the terror that can accompany the prospect of the posthuman which 'with its dual connotation of superseding the human and coming after it, hints that the days of "the human" may be numbered'.[494] There is something of this horror in *Bloodtide*; although the extreme violence against the halfmen is questioned, there is something both sinister and absurd about these creatures.

The first halfmen that appear in *Bloodtide* are 'squat, hairy creatures [...] all [of] the same type' (p. 95) and birds which 'seemed to [Signy] that they had the faces of girls; but that far off it was difficult to be sure even with the binoculars' (p. 92). Initially, the halfmen

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[493] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p. 297.
[494] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 283.

appear to be without gender, or their gender is uncertain. Indeed, Signy's first encounter is with a halfman who is initially referred to merely as 'it' (pp. 96-8). This lack of gender forms part of the halfmen's monstrosity, as it is one of the ways in which they are differentiated from humans. Yet as soon as Signy begins to communicate with the halfman, 'it' becomes a 'he' and is named as Karl (p. 98). It is at this point that he is humanised; we are told that he is a trader who is being exploited by Conor, and who fears for the survival of his family and friends. The gendering occurs simultaneously with the humanising of the creature and the creation of empathy for Karl. Gendering is expressed as an essential component of humanity.

When Siggy and his brothers are chained up and left to the mercy of the halfmen, they also encounter creatures without gender. Birds have 'voices like yelling children' (p. 137) and are 'about the size of a child' (p. 138) but, like many pre-pubescent children, remain uncertainly gendered to an outside observer. Similarly, the pigman that attacks and eats Hadrian, Siggy's brother, is initially described as an 'it' (pp. 138-9). Yet when Pig returns after his first Volson meal, 'it' becomes 'he' (p. 146). This occurs just after Pig has spoken to them, wishing them goodnight after feasting on Hadrian (p. 146) and after the surviving brothers, Ben and Siggy, have hurled insults such as 'get off your fat arse' (p. 146) at him. Although negative, the use of insults has an interpellating effect, as has been discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Butler describes how 'by being called a name one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility of social existence'.[495] Siggy and Ben are constructing a humanised identity for the formerly monstrous Pig. Rather than demonstrating a posthuman existence which moves beyond categories of male and female, *Bloodtide* appears to counter the uncertainty of species identity by gendering the halfmen who have important roles in the text and presenting them as very similar to the human characters. In *Frames of War*, Butler uses the concept of grievable lives to express the different recognition

[495] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 2.

that is given to American and Afghani lives that have been lost in recent wars in the Middle East.[496] In *Bloodtide*, it appears that lives are only liveable once gendered. Indeed, the deaths of the halfmen who remain ungendered, and in the background of the text, such as the birdmen, are not mourned; these halfmen are disposable and not recognised as being worthy of grief.

The descriptions of the halfmen suggest that gender recognition is an essential part of being intelligible as a person, and *Bloodtide* demonstrates the importance of gender roles from its opening. In the first chapter, Signy's father, Val, tells her that her marriage to Conor is a necessary sacrifice to ensure control of London. Signy objects to his plan, as she would rather fight in the battle, especially as she is a more accomplished combatant than any of her brothers. She realises that her gender is restricting the role she can play in her family's takeover of London, as it means she is more valuable as a potential wife than a fighter, and resents this. Her father sees her fate as inevitable, declaring 'but you *are* a girl [...] I can't help the way things are' (p. 3, original emphasis).[497] Later on, Signy is literally hamstrung (p. 130) to prevent her having any physical part in revenge against Conor for most of the text, something that does not occur in earlier versions of the narrative.[498] Signy expresses frustration at 'so many *men* shaping me' (p. 349, original emphasis). Despite Burgess's rewriting of the narrative to provide Signy with 'a more active role', her gender means that she is forced into a different position from male characters.[499] Her imprisonment in the water-tower is an extreme restriction to the domestic sphere. Nevertheless she does have the power

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[496] Butler, *Frames of War*.
[497] In *Völsunga saga*, we are just told that Signy objects to the marriage arrangement (pp. 4-5) The *Völsunga saga* Signy's objection is to the particular suitor, rather than the concept of marriage as opposed to a physical martial role.
[498] Similarly, Signy objects to not being allowed a direct role in the halfmen hunt (p. 84) and then realises that 'she had no say over things' (p. 104).
[499] Burgess explains that 'one character, Signy, took me several rewrites. Right at the heart of the story, she is a person of incredible will power and determination, but her life is so passive ... I just couldn't hack it, until I realized that as a female character from centuries past, she had no avenues to act in. It is impossible to imagine a modern woman behaving in the same way. So I gave her an active role to play, and then she sprang into life.'; see 'Bloodtide'.

to shape events, albeit through spying and other indirect activities. Burgess has discussed his predilection for strong female characters, but perhaps does not recognise the full complexity of female agency present in the medieval texts of the Völsung legends.[500] His addition of halfmen to the narrative appear to be an alternative method to open up possibilities for new constructions of gender identities.

Yet Melanie, the female halfman who also plays a central role in the text, also seems to be powerless in comparison to her male counterparts. When she is introduced, we are told that she is the abused ex-wife of Pig, who follows him about as she 'felt it was her duty to keep an eye on him' (p. 164). Her attachment to a man who does not love her, and has been violent towards her, suggests that she is a foil for Signy, but with even less agency; while Signy is plotting revenge against Conor, Melanie is satisfied to spend her time assisting Pig. The segments told from her point of view are striking for their linguistic differences; although other halfman narration, such as that by the male Dag, is distinguished by colloquialisms and the occasional misuse of tenses, her sections are full of dropped aitches and non-standard grammar. She is presented in a very different manner to the rest of the characters; her language clearly distinguishes her. As both a woman and a halfman, Melanie is subject to a process of double Othering and even abjection; perhaps a female halfman is also the mule of the world. As Butler explains, gendering can be explained as 'taking place [...] through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation'.[501] Yet the extreme Othering also suggests that there are different possibilities for femininity than that expressed by the human Signy, although Melanie's abjection questions whether these are actually viable gender identities.

Unlike Signy, Melanie accepts her traditionally feminine role. She originally captures Siggy for food or to sell on, but soon finds that her instinct to 'feel asorry fer anything live I

[500] Burgess, 'Bloodtide'.
[501] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 167.

gets' (p. 171) emerges and so she nurses him back to health. Indeed, when Melanie and Siggy move to London, she carries on 'elping folks out' (p. 228) and fills their house with recuperating halfmen. She cares for others without complaint, and does not seek to take an active role in the rebels' fight against Conor. Although she criticises Siggy's questionable commitment to 'equal rights, men and halfmen, all oinky-together' (p. 229), she does not wonder why her gender restricts her. It may be that for halfmen, gender issues are not considered as pressing as the violent discrimination they face as a species (Melanie is attacked and hanged in public after it is discovered that she is a halfman). Yet the presentation of a different form of gender in a halfman also serves to undo the binary framework of a single masculinity and femininity. It shows that gender is not a single identity, but interacts with other aspects such as species. Melanie illustrates Haraway's assertion that 'there is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women' and demonstrates the multiplicity of gender identity.[502] The halfmen do not only demonstrate the difficulty of enforcing a system of boundaries between species, but also between different types of gender. Nevertheless, the restricted roles of both female humans and female halfmen, and their influence which can only be created through underhand methods, means that *Bloodtide* continues to present some aspects of female identity as essential. Melanie's gendered identity does not fulfil Haraway's ideal of the posthuman moving beyond gender; *Bloodtide* interrogates categories on a species level but does not always present new possibilities for gender.

In *Bloodsong*, halfmen are more fully integrated into society and also fit more clearly into a binary conception of gender. Marshall, the scientist who creates the virus to kill Crayley, is a monkey-man, although he is quick to assert that there are 'two sorts of monkey' (p. 237), creating further divisions of identity. Indeed, prejudice is still present, although it is

[502] Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 155.

no longer a human/ animal divide, as Marshall complains of mistreatment at the hands of dog-men and pig-men who see themselves as superior to monkey-men. This complication of the human/ animal divide is not, however, accompanied by a similar expansion of categories of gender. The idea of crossing species has become more acceptable by this book; the Nibelins are dog-men, but crowds of people are willing to accept Gunar Nibelin as their leader. The halfmen are no longer seen as significantly inferior. Nevertheless, the Nibelin halfmen are presented as differently masculine in this text.[503] In *Völsunga saga*, it is Sigurðr who stands out as a partially monstrous figure and so it is not surprising that he is able to perform feats that others cannot. But in *Bloodsong*, when the difference between Sigurd and Gunar is one of human (although admittedly, a human who has gained invulnerability) and halfman, it suggests that halfmen cannot be as successful in a heroic masculinity as humans. Despite their new acceptance into society, they are not quite on a par with those who are fully human. Yet Sigurd's bodily modification to make him invulnerable undermines the boundaries between humans and halfmen even further, suggesting that a posthuman identity is inescapable; as Haraway has argued, we are always already posthuman.

In *Bloodtide*, the mistreatment of the halfmen is clearly linked to twentieth-century ideas of racism or racial purity. There is frequent discussion of the difference between halfmen who are 'real monsters' (p. 81), and those who are 'more human' (p. 81) and the language used to describe the halfmen's treatment alludes to modern campaigns for racial purity, such as pogrom (p. 230) which has clear connotations of Nazi atrocities like Kristallnacht, and the idea that a percentage can be put on species purity (p. 230) which is reminiscent of the 'one-drop' rule for classification in the twentieth-century USA. The halfmen are initially presented as a monstrous other, but the dividing lines between halfman and human are shown to be transgressible and porous. In *Bloodsong* especially, just as in the

[503] This is also suggested by the representation of Sigurd and Hogni's sexual relationship (p. 146).

'late twentieth century in United States scientific culture' that Haraway describes, 'the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached'.[504] Boundaries between male and female are also questioned, but not as strongly. The re-framing of the Völsung legend into a post-apocalyptic future allows Burgess the freedom to explore different kinds of identities. Nevertheless, in their use of genetic modification to create halfmen, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* stop short of presenting the postgender world advocated as a possibility by Haraway.

2.ii: Womb tanks: a feminine space for cloned identities

Bloodtide explores the scientific advance of 'womb tanks'. These are first mentioned as a method to heal Signy's legs after Conor's assistants hamstring her:

> 'I'll give you back your legs. I'll give you back everything,' whispers Conor. He means it. In one of the rooms below us is a glass womb, one of the artificial wombs use to gestate genetically altered creates [...] Once the baby's born I shall go into it. (p. 253)

The description of the machine as a 'womb' constructs it as a feminine space. Healing is once again feminised; just as Melanie, a female halfman, heals Siggy, a feminised machine can heal physical wounds. Yet it is later revealed that these tanks also have another, perhaps more useful function; 'they could be used to clone, too.' (p. 263). Despite the tanks being described as 'wonders of modern technology' (p. 263), their operator, Dag, is hesitant about this cloning function and 'didn't like what he was being asked to do' (p. 263) when he is tasked with cloning Signy and Siggy's child. When the cloning is begun, the baby 'began to cry [...] Cherry watched as the needle slid in and the baby screamed. She winced' (p. 265). Cloning is represented as something to be feared; the initially comforting image of the tanks as wombs is supplanted by a revelation of their violence, indicating the potentially threatening nature of the feminine.

[504] Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 151.

This negative view of cloning is reinforced by the expression of Siggy's concerns about the process:

> What's a clone? Not just a copy. It's a *forgery*. [...] And transgenic! I wonder what optional extras dear Signy had fitted [...] What'd she done to his mind? What'd she done to his *soul*, if you can call it that. (p. 273, original emphasis)

The use of machines to produce copies of existing individuals is a disturbing one. Siggy's use of the term forgery does not just present cloning in a negative manner, but also undermines the process somewhat, since most forgeries are not completely identical to their original. The idea of modification is even more troubling to him, in particular for its effect on the mind or soul. Identity is seen as something that is internal, rather than embodied, and it is this aspect of identity that distinguishes the human. Clones are seen by Siggy as threatening as they attempt to undermine individuality, and because they alter the core of identity. A concept of an identity that is already fractured, or always in process, does not seem to be accepted by Siggy. Siggy exhibits a terror of the posthuman deconstruction of categories. Yet, not all classifications are dispensed with. Dag is similarly fearful of and dubious about the clones:

> That thing gave me the spooks even before it was out [...] He looked like they all look when they come out – puffy skin, all white, bloated up from months in liquid. But he was good looking under it – good muscles, tall – fine young man. (pp. 276-7)

Just like the halfmen, the clones are clearly gendered. Styr emerges from the womb tank exhibiting masculinity in his height and prominent muscles. A reinforcement of binary gender identity, through the emphasis on characteristics commonly associated with masculinity, is again used to deal with the problematic multiplicity created by advanced technologies.

The transformative power of science is occasionally celebrated. When Signy enters the womb tank to heal her legs, she is excited by the opportunity to modify and improve herself. Nevertheless, the description of the tanks is again unsettling and violent. She 'began

twitching and jerking in a slow motion panic, fighting for the air that was no longer there' (p. 283). We are told that:

> Signy would be rebuilt. Legs, of course. [...] Her bones were to be strengthened, her muscles helped with new technology. She wanted to be sterile[...] And a treat or two for Conor, too. Bigger breasts, for example. (p. 284).

Signy's request for sterility means that she is abandoning one component of traditional femininity: motherhood. Indeed, this rejection continues when she asks Siggy to bring up Styr, the clone, and Cherry to look after Vincent, the original child. Part of the alterations she makes to her body is to transform her into a more warrior-like figure; she is becoming more similar to the male heroes of the text. Yet simultaneously, she desires enhanced breasts, which are a clearly feminine physical characteristics. The concept of gendered components being added to the body at will draws attention to the performative nature of all gender. Nevertheless, it is only the female body which is in need of transformation; although Siggy is offered the chance of modifying his body, which has been partially destroyed when Pig attacked him, he rejects this opportunity and his choice is commended by Dag. Signy's desire to alter her body is reminiscent of her yearning to alter her role in the text. Her dissatisfaction with her feminine body indicates its abjection, and the greater pressures for a female body to be flawless. An injured female body is in need of repair, and yet a wounded male body is celebrated in its imperfection. Cloning offers Signy a method to improve her body by increasing its masculinity, whereas Siggy's gender is not affected by the damage to his face.

In *Bloodsong*, cloning is presented in a slightly more pragmatic manner. Grimhild's motivations to clone Sigurd are explained rationally:

> The boy was too valuable an asset to risk […] a little duplication could undo any serious harm. She already had several Gunars, Hognis and Gudruns cloned, fit and ready to step into the shoes of the original if they needed to. It was only sensible. (pp. 179)

Yet the idea of cloning as logical is undermined by the negative presentation of Grimhild, and the description of her husband's anger and horror when the clones are accidentally revealed

to him (pp. 200-1). In *Bloodsong*, cloning is not just a technological advance: the narrator reveals that cloning is:

> Science? Certainly – but there has to be a little sorcery in there, I think [...]what Grimhild is up to is possible nowhere else in the world [...] anything is possible if Odin wills it. (p. 201-2)

There is a refusal to present cloning solely in scientific terms. The insistence on the hybrid nature of cloning, which requires input from sorcery or influence from the gods, indicates the hybridity of identity itself.

Clones become less distinct from their human counterparts in *Bloodsong*. In *Bloodtide*, Styr is modified to feel no fear or empathy, and is clearly distinguished from his human counterparts. The cloned Sigurd does not appear to be significantly different from the original, in contrast to Styr and Vincent in *Bloodtide*; although the removal of his memory means that his recollections of Bryony are lost, the other characters do not notice the alteration. Nevertheless, the ability of one person to control such asexual reproduction is seen as a dangerous misuse of power, and indeed Grimhild's removal of Sigurd's memory leads to his death. Cloning is depicted as a threat to identity, as Grimhild has the power to start afresh if she does not like the actions of her children. Yet the presence of cloning, and the commingling of science and religious power demonstrate the hybrid nature of all identities. As rewritings, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* are not clones of the medieval legend; their generic, temporal and narrative alterations emphasise their distinction from previous texts. Yet they are also, in some ways, identical to all other versions of the legend in the shared nature of the fabula. This tension between identities which are the same but different, echoing the representation of repetitions with difference in *Sigurd and Gudrún*, is explored through cloning. Nevertheless, clones are gendered in a binary manner just as their original; characters that are postgender as well as posthuman are still not viable identities within the narratives.

2.iii: Cyborgs: postgender figures?

Bloodsong presents science in a different manner from *Bloodtide*. In the later text, hybrid species such as the halfmen are not presented in such a problematic manner, and the discrete nature of science as a category is undermined by the continual insistence on its connection to the gods, a theme that originated in *Bloodtide*. *Bloodsong* also includes cyborgs, which allow it to explore the distinctions between human and machine. From the beginning of *Bloodsong*, technology is foregrounded. We are given a description of Fafnir, a cyborg dragon-man who is later revealed to be an incarnation of Styr, in the first chapter:

> He'd grown enormous, given himself all sorts of wired-up sense – infra-red, sonar, radar. He was about the most technologically advanced organism on earth, but he'd been a man once. (p. 2)

This description of Fafnir presents him not so much as a hybrid between man and machine, but as part of a technological process which has left the human behind. He is posthuman in the sense of 'post' denoting something that supersedes an original human identity. This cyborg identity is presented as something to fear; the slaying of Fafnir is not just depicted as a way for Sigurd to earn 'glory' but also as a 'good deed [...] [as] he terrorises the whole area' (p. 3). Fafnir is constructed as a hybrid between man and machine who illustrates Haraway's 'leaky distinction'[505] between these two identities, and also between science and nature:

> He could wire himself into various security systems set up around his citadel while he slept. Organic security utilised plants or even animals to pick up vibrations and transmit information back to him. (p. 23)

Haraway describes identity as a process, and suggests that 'who cyborgs will be is a radical question'.[506] In *Bloodsong*, cyborgs are something to be feared. Yet a cyborg does not become merely a product of technology, but remains dependent on and rooted to organic material. An insistence on hybridity, rather than binary oppositions between nature and science, demonstrates the collapsing of traditional boundaries. Fafnir becomes at once

[505] Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 152.
[506] Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 153.

hypermasculine, in that he exceeds the strength and battle prowess that is required of male characters, yet also beyond gender; his transformation is so extensive that original categories such as gender no longer seem to apply to him. He is, perhaps, no longer male in the same way that he is no longer a man. Nevertheless, he is referred to by the masculine pronoun throughout the text, reinforcing the impression that the text continually reasserts a binary conception of gender.

Slipper, Sigurd's horse, also demonstrates the hybrid nature of cyborgs who combine machine and animal in one being. He is described as:

> A real, live cyborg [...] He had been given to Alf long ago by Sigmund, and Alf in turn had given it to Sigmund's son. Two systems in Slipper worked together, side by side or on their own [...] technology was not enough to make these creatures. Odin himself was said to have a hand in their brewing. (p. 17)

Slipper has been passed down through men, suggesting a male control of technology. Unlike the process of cloning, which is feminised through its association with the womb and by the exclusively female control in *Bloodsong*, cyborgs are masculinised. Yet like clones, Slipper is not created solely through science but also with Odin's input. Larrington has described the increased importance of religion in *Bloodsong*.[507] Yet religion never operates without the assistance of technology. The continued commingling of religion and science, illustrated in the description of Sigurd who has 'a saddlebag full of science and a sword forged with grit from the godworld' (p. 19), undermines the distinctions between these categories and suggests the usefulness and prominence of hybrid identities. Although the two aspects of Slipper work together, they are still distinct and distinguishable. It is perhaps the reassurance of a continued separation of flesh and machine components which mean that Slipper is unthreatening; boundaries are not fully collapsed in his description. Hybrid identities can be beneficial, but the removal of clear boundaries remains unsettling in *Bloodsong*.

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[507] Larrington, 'Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*', p. 208.

As technology is depicted as affected by religious influence, its hybridity means that it becomes problematic. Regin is presented as being dangerously obsessed with new technology, a fixation which leads to his death. When entering Fafnir's lair, he eschews the temptation of gold to remove the machines which he sees as the 'real treasure' (p. 60). Indeed, he sees science as the only possible solution to the problem of gaining entry to the lair though Fafnir's genetic code. Regin has:

> A small dedicated computer to analyse the monster's tissue […] Regin had confidence in his device […] But the machine had frozen. [...] There were machines that could handle that amount of data, but Regin's handy portable was not one of them. (pp. 57-8)

Regin's belief in technology is seen as misplaced, as the machine is unable to perform the function he requires. He is unable to see another solution to the problem, and is bemused to discover that:

> [Sigurd] had already been inside the citadel. [...] [he] smiled and touched the broken stub of his sword. 'Have you forgotten?' he asked. 'I cut my way in. It was like cake'. (p. 58)

Regin is angry and jealous of Sigurd's ability to access the lair before him. A physical solution to the problem is shown to be better than a scientific one; heroic masculinity appears to be more successful than the intelligent use of technological devices. Sigurd, who has already proved his masculinity in his defeat of Fafnir, is again shown to be Regin's superior. Yet Sigurd did not actually use brute force to enter the lair, but rather a magical sword which came from Odin, just as it was Odin's advice and assistance which enabled him to slay Fafnir. The hybridity of science and religion is partially undone by the suggestion that the gods' influence is more powerful and important than technology. This ranking of religion and science re-establishes a boundary between them.

Nevertheless, the usefulness of technology is initially suggested in the description of the city Crayley:

> This had been the home of industry – a city of machines hidden underground [...] With the age of genetic design it had been modified, but it soon became outdated and inefficient [...] its software maintained it, mended, replaced, expanded [...] but it could not change or re-design itself in any fundamental way. It stuck to its old ways, growing bitter over the centuries.' (p. 75)

Technology can be used to run a productive city without the need for external input. Yet the inherent problems of technology, that it quickly becomes outmoded, undermines the success of this scientific advance. The city possesses an animal-like instinct for survival. The description of its frustration at its inability to create the modifications it desires personifies the city. Indeed, it is later revealed that the city only survives by having Bryony's mother at its core. The city admits that:

> 'Your mother is running this [...] she is running *me*. She's part of me now. If you cut her off, we will all die.' (p. 106)

At the heart of the city is a woman. Crayley is revealed as a cyborg identity, but one that appears to be exploiting human organic material. The city insists that Bryony's mother is in control, but it appears that Crayley really has the mastery in the relationship. Later it appears that the city can do without its current human, as Bryony realises that it desires a new body:

> 'It wants our baby for a brain.' The human brain has seven billion connections. A baby's brain could be wired as it grew. What a processor! What couldn't Crayley do with one of those? (p. 109)

The city requires a hybrid identity.

Although the person at its centre is replaceable, the city cannot survive without a human component. Cyborg identities are used to carefully explore the boundaries of the human in *Bloodsong*. Yet categories of gender remain stable. Sigurd is masculine in a traditionally heroic manner, and is much more active than Signy in *Bloodtide*. Rose Lovell Smith has explored how the nature of sequels enable 'writing from recall' and the comparison of protagonists from different texts in the series.[508] An assessment of Signy and Sigurd

[508] Rose Lovell Smith, 'Ending Only to Begin Again: The Child Reader and One Hundred Years of Series and Sequel Writing' in *Children's Literature and the Fin-de-Siècle: Contributions to the Study of World Literature*, ed. by Roderick McGillis (Westport, CT & London: Praeger, 2003), pp. 31-39 (pp. 32-3).

suggests that each ultimately has a traditional gender identity; although Signy rails against her confinement, she cannot become a hero in the way that Sigurd can. Nevertheless, Signy achieves her revenge and Sigurd is killed before he can take action against Grimhild. Gender is complex in *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, but it is an ever-present aspect of identity. Traditional forms of femininity and masculinity can be undermined, and alternatives offered, but a posthuman identity that goes beyond gender does not become viable.

Burgess's novels clearly explore contemporary worries about the role of science. The halfmen demonstrate a possible result of genetic splicing and modification. In 1999, the year *Bloodtide* was published, a Lords' European Communities committee report confirmed that genetically-modified crops could be farmed, despite fears about the effects of genetically altered foods.[509] Similarly, the womb tanks explore issues surrounding animal cloning, and advanced surgery, and the cyborgs of *Bloodsong* (published in 2005) are some of many early twenty-first century representations which include the revival of the Terminator in a new film and TV series.[510] Burgess's use of these new technologies does not 'cling on to an idea of a quasi-humanist subject' like most children's literature, according to Christine Wilkie-Stibbs, but instead explores the concept of the post-human.[511] In doing so, through depictions of advanced technology, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* explicitly examine species identity. Yet the exploration of science in these texts is also interesting from a gender perspective. Transforming a medieval legend into a tale of cloning, halfmen and cyborgs means that hybrid identities and radical possibilities for gender can be explored in a representation of the posthuman. Yet Burgess does not, like Haraway, see a possibility to move beyond gender.

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[509] European Communities Committee, *Organic Farming and the European Union* (16th Report, HL Paper 93: 1999).
[510] Jonathan Mostow (dir.), *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003); Josh Friedman (EP), *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-9); Joseph McGinty Nichol (dir.), *Terminator Salvation* (2009); Alan Taylor (dir.), *Terminator: Genisys* (forthcoming, 2015).
[511] Christine Wilkie-Stibbs, *The Feminine Subject in Children's Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 119.

Nevertheless, posthuman identities demonstrate the multiplicity of gender.[512] Burgess's young adult audience, in the process of working out how gender interacts with their own identities, can read in *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* gender identities which move beyond binaries of masculinity and femininity, and which offer, as Hayles describes, 'new ways of thinking about what being human means'.[513] Burgess offers an alternative conception of posthuman gender.

3: Conclusion

Sigurd and Gudrún and *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* contain what is the most overtly radical conception of gender identity of the texts that have been explored in this thesis. *Sigurd and Gudrún*, as a narrative which constantly destabilises a straightforward temporal progression and as a text which interrogates the very concept of what is and is not part of this rewriting of the Völsung fabula, offers a context in which there can be no simple categorisation of what it is to be male and female, despite some overt attempts to do so by the narrator's focus on redemption through male heroism. In *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, the limits of the human and of a man or a woman are called into question by the existence of multiple notions of hybrid identities. Yet Burgess's suggestion that there are no possibilities for female characters beyond an accepting passivity in earlier iterations of the Völsung fabula is incorrect; in the *Poetic Edda* in particular there is potential for a variety of expressions of femininity. These texts do not, therefore, offer something that is entirely absent from the other texts, but instead offer fresh ways of depicting gender which themselves will now affect the ways in which we interpret gender in other versions of the Völsung fabula; they propound a clear exploration of

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[512] Kokkola has explored how 'the motif of metamorphosis affords both of these teenage characters and Burgess as a writer the freedom to explore the full range of sensations and emotions evoked in sexual relationships' in his novels *Tiger Tiger* and *Doing It*, although 'for all the surface level subversiveness, they ultimately support a number of traditional values'; see 'Metamorphosis', p. 58 and p. 67).

[513] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 285.

the ways in which repetitions of gender and narrative can offer both similarities and difference.

Conclusion

It has been noted that the Old Norse texts occupy a similar temporality; *Völsunga saga* is believed to have been composed during the period in which the *Poetic Edda* was compiled and the *Prose Edda* was written. These texts also have a shared identity from their focus on the heroic, distant past. Identity and gender in particular are specific concerns of these texts, and their similarities and differences can be elucidated by a careful observation of the representation of gender, as this thesis has done. What, therefore, has been discovered? Despite the presence of hegemonic gender roles, such as the male warrior, or whetting woman, these texts offer complex and often contradictory presentations of gender. This thesis has not set out to explore whether these representations of gender are positive or negative, but rather which roles can be portrayed, and what kind of gendered lives are liveable within the text. The changes in narrative technique between the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* on the levels of both form and content offer different conceptions of gender, with *Völsunga saga* exploring the intersections between a courtly conception of identity and masculinity in particular. The saga-style prose of *Völsunga saga* suggests a coherence and unification that might be expected to reduce the possibilities for gender; nevertheless, in the context of some aspects of gender identities, and the ways in which gender intersects with animal identity in particular, a potential for multiplicity remains. Indeed, this is emphasised by *Skáldskaparmál*, whose condensed format still enables the presentation of different expressions of masculinity, albeit accompanied by a narrowing of femininities.

Through an exploration of the representation of gender in literary iterations of the Völsung fabula in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this thesis has been able to illuminate further the depiction of sexual difference in these later texts, in comparison with the Old Norse sources. Indeed, the final chapter of this thesis referred to Derrida’s

discussion of supplementation. In his introduction to *Dissemination*, Derrida describes how 'prologues […] have always been written […] in view of their own self-effacement' (p. 7) as the content of the text can also render the prologue unnecessary.[514] Yet a prologue does not disappear once the main text is read. It remains as part of the text, or in an uncanny relationship with it as a supplement that is both inside and outside of the text. In a similar way, the ghostly presence of previous iterations of the fabula draws attention to an undecidability about where a rewriting begins and ends.

The Old Norse sources do not, therefore, stand aside from their later interpretations as something complete and originary, but are themselves supplemented by the rewritings of Morris, Tolkien and Burgess. Just as a reading of a text is affected by a reader's emotions and prior experiences, these later iterations become part of the unconscious of the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and the *Prose Edda* as we receive them in English-speaking and especially British contexts. Indeed, it is likely that a modern, English-speaking reader would encounter these texts in reverse chronological order, perhaps reading *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* as a young adult and then tracing its sources back to the Old Norse; at least, it is highly improbable that a British reader would commence their textual experience of the Völsung legend with either the *Poetic Edda* or *Völsunga saga* in Old Norse. Phelan uses the term entrance to describe:

> The flesh-and-blood reader's multileveled—cognitive, emotive, ethical—movement from outside the text to a specific location in the authorial audience at the end of the launch. When the entrance is complete, the authorial audience has typically made numerous significant interpretive, ethical, and even aesthetic judgments, and these judgments influence what is arguably the most important element of the entrance: the authorial audience's hypothesis, implicit or explicit, about the direction and purpose of the whole narrative, what I will call its configuration.[515]

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[514] Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1981). Derrida comments on the strange function of a prologue by describing how 'the route which has been covered must cancel itself out' (ibid., p. 8); a prologue's purpose to explain or introduce the rest of the text becomes unnecessary once the remainder of the text has been read.
[515] Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction*, p. 19.

In his discussion, Phelan acknowledges the importance of the front matter to provide the reader with 'information about the narrative, the characters (listings of traits, past history, and so on), the setting (time and place), and events of the narrative' (ibid., p. 17) which they use to create judgements about the narrative. In the case of the various iterations of the Völsung legend, it is not just the front matter of each text which performs this role, but knowledge of the other versions of the fabula. We can only come close to an understanding of gender in the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and the *Prose Edda* by foregrounding our own modern assumptions and concepts of sexual difference; similarly, we can only come close to an understanding of the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and the *Prose Edda* by foregrounding our knowledge of these later texts. The relationship between 'original' and 'supplement' is always already one of reciprocity; yet this approach to an analysis of these texts has not been utilised before now.

What, then, do these readings of gender in British texts tell us about gender identity in these rewritings and the Old Norse iterations? Morris's reduction of female identities in *Sigurd the Volsung* both indicates a contemporary conception of the role of women and emphasises the wider possibilities for expressions of femininity in the Old Norse texts. The focus on the male body, architecture and performance in *Sigurd the Volsung* offers a sense of the complicated nature of Victorian masculinity, as it re-negotiated the nature/ culture divide, the interest of the narrator in non-hegemonic masculinities, and also a renewed appreciation of the intersection of masculinity with non-heroic identities in the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and the *Prose Edda*. Similarly, Burgess's two novels foreground the presence of posthuman identities in previous iterations of the fabula, such as the proliferation of animal identities in *Völsunga saga*, the intersection of human and supernatural identities in the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and the *Prose Edda*, and the permeable boundaries between humans and both nature and material objects in *Sigurd the Volsung*. With perhaps the most

complicated iteration of the fabula on a narrative level, *Sigurd and Gudrún* invites a re-consideration of the function of the narrator, and the subsequent effect on the representation of gender identity, in other presentations of the Völsung legend.

For ease of presentation, this thesis has addressed the texts chronologically. Yet this structure is not intended to construct a straightforward relationship between the texts of influence or development in a temporal progression. Much like the narrative of *Sigurd and Gudrún*, or indeed that of the *Poetic Edda* as a compilation, the idea of influence and effect is erratic rather than a linear sequence; a reader would not be likely to approach the texts chronologically, establishing fresh intersections between the texts. Indeed, some kind of uncanny temporality seems essential to all the iterations of the Völsung legend that have been addressed in this thesis, as all are located in non-specific pasts or futures. It is not just the settings of these texts that have an unusual relationship to time; Stacey Bartlett demonstrates that the publisher of *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* acknowledges an odd temporality in the press release for their reissue of these texts in 2013:

> Andersen is reissuing Melvyn Burgess' Carnegie Medal-winning Volsunga duo to appeal to a new legion of fans. *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, released in 1999 and 2005 respectively, have a new matching jacket look to appeal to Young Adult and fantasy fans. Charlie Shepherd, editorial director of fiction at Andersen, said the books were published "before their time", and that she hoped the new package for the pair would appeal to a new audience. "We're trying to reach a whole audience that is hungry for books like this, [an audience] that wasn't there for us before," she said. "We want to grab those readers who have finished *Game of Thrones* and *The Hunger Games*."[516]

Like *Sigurd and Gudrún*, which could be described as being published after its time, the publication dates of Burgess's novels as depicted in terms of an asynchronous temporality. Carolyn Dinshaw has argued that these kind of problematic textual relationships to time, and the desire 'for another time, or another kind of time, is queer desire'.[517] This connection of a textual concern with asynchronous time to queer desire emphasises the implications of this

[516] Stacey Bartlett, 'Andersen Repackages "Fresh" Burgess Saga', *Bookseller* 5580 (2013), 21.
[517] Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 71.

status for sexuality and, therefore, gender. The undefined temporal settings of these versions of the Völsung legend, and the asynchronous nature of the production of some of these texts, can be read as another way in which sexual difference cannot be simply defined in binary terms in these narratives.

It seems trite and perversely simplifying to conclude that gender in these texts is complex and multiple; this result could have been predicted without a close analysis. It is hoped, therefore, that the interest in the content of this thesis is contained in Atwood's 'how and why' of these complexities and multiplicities. This thesis has offered an exploration of gender which addresses Old Norse texts alongside *Sigurd the Volsung*, *Sigurd and Gudrún*, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong* in a manner that acknowledges the non-linear nature of influence: an approach that has not been previously used by critics, but which this thesis has demonstrated is an extremely productive way of investigating gender representations in these texts. Derrida has argued that 'woman (truth) will not be pinned down. [...] that which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth – *feminine*'.[518] I would offer the extension of this statement to masculinity as my final comments of the texts explored by this thesis; in the *Poetic Edda*, *Völsunga saga*, *Sigurd the Volsung*, *Sigurd and Gudrún*, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, the representation of gender cannot be reduced to a simple set of oppositions or binaries.

[518] Derrida, *Spurs*, p. 55 (emphasis in original).

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