

***Brynhildr in the Volsung Storyworld: Valkyrie, shield maiden
and maiden-king***

A narrative analysis of Brynhildr from the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani

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Acknowledgements

Indulge me in a short reminiscence: I was just finishing my comparative literature degree when I walked into the wrong class. The class was *Palaeography and Codicology in Medieval Scandinavia* and it was led by Karl Gunnar Johansson. I had absolutely no idea what palaeography was. As I am sure any student walking into the wrong class knows; it is quite awkward trying to make a graceful exit. So I stayed. By the end of the class I didn't want to leave and a passion in old Norse literature and philology had been sparked.

In other words: I want to thank Johansson not only for endless patience and guidance as I put this text together, but also for being a brilliant teacher. Most people can teach the knowledge, but it takes something quite different to teach a passion.

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Table of contents

Acknowledgments	2
Table of contents	3
1 Introduction	5
1.1 Brynhildr	6
1.2 Structure and material	8
2 Theory and Method	9
2.1 Hermeneutics	9
2.2 Stemma and text critical methods	11
2.3 Storyworld	14
2.4 Feminist literature theory	16
3 Extant texts and manuscripts	19
3.1 The poetic <i>Edda</i>	19
3.2 <i>Völsunga saga</i>	22
3.3 <i>Piðreks saga af Bern</i>	23
3.4 <i>Skáldskaparmál</i>	26
3.5 <i>Norna-Gests þáttur</i>	28
3.6 <i>Nibelungenlied</i>	29
4 Brynhildr	30
4.1 Valkyries as a narrative tool in the <i>Völsung</i> storyworld	31
4.1.1 The nubility of valkyries: their roles as brides and teachers	32
4.1.2 The power of valkyries: resurrection, reincarnation and death	38
4.1.3 The <i>Völsung</i> narrative without the presence of valkyries: Brynhildr's function in <i>Piðreks saga</i>	42
4.2 Valkyrie or shield maiden: the influence of <i>Sigrðrifa</i>	45

4.2.1 In defense of Brynhildr's status as a valkyrie	46
4.2.2 Valkyries in the poetic <i>Edda</i> and how they connect to Brynhildr	50
4.2.3 <i>Helreið Brynhildar</i> , life after death and the fulfillment of the Sigurðr cycle	54
4.2.4 Valkyries' inherent nature of war and the link to rebirth	58
4.3 The trope of the maiden-king: The Völsung storyworld's approach to Brynhildr's fight for autonomy	61
4.3.1 The dubious power of the maiden-king	61
4.3.2 Authorial intent: how to love a valkyrie	63
4.3.3 Gender performance and the discourse on female empowerment in Norse literature	68
4.4 The performance of female speech: Brynhildr's whetting of Gunnar	76
4.4.1 The whetting woman in a <i>blood feud</i> society	77
4.4.2 How to read women in Norse literature: the interpretation of feminine space	82
4.4.3 Brynhildr as the manipulative shrew	83
5 Conclusion	89
5.1 Theory and method	90
5.2 Brynhildr as a literary tool	91
5.3 The valkyrie	91
5.4 Valkyrie or shield maiden?	92
5.5 The maiden-king	93
5.6 The whetting woman	94
Literature	97

1 Introduction

My initial interest was in analyzing Brynhildr as she appears in the poetic *Edda*, but soon expanded to the wider Norse canon. On surface level the interest in her as a literary character was not prevalent in the academic writings I had read so far despite her great presence in the narratives. She took place in the poems and sagas with such intention. What was it about her that made it seem as if all the other characters simply existed around her? Be it her gnomic wisdom as Sigrdífa in *Sigrdrífumál*, her passionate rebuke of Sigruðr in *Völsunga saga* or her clash with a gygr after her death in *Helreið Brynhildar*; she demanded the center stage and they all listened. I wanted to see in exactly what degree Brynhildr was able to influence the narrative. But writing an analysis of a character that has been in almost all cases penned by 'anonymous', exist across multiple genres as we understand them, with most likely decades between conception and commitment to vellum, obviously posed a challenge. I needed something that could exist as a unity, but at the same time allow for variances. The answer to this became the concept of *storyworld*, which allows for a narrative to exist of innumerable variances; local, oral or otherwise. But the entirety of the Völsung storyworld is vast and so I restricted myself to what I call the Norse branch. I will expand on what this entails in chapter 1.2.

The writing on female characters in Norse myth and saga has been present in the discourse on Norse literature for some time. There was a growing interest in the eighties in regards to who the women were and what type of narrative relevance they carried with them. The themes and discussions started then seems to have enjoyed quite the Renaissance as of late with anthologies and books concerning themselves completely on the subject of women in Norse and medieval Icelandic literature. And yet I desired more on the topic of Brynhildr in particular, a character often glossed over. Perhaps because of Theodore Andersson's thorough work of analyzing her in *The Legend of Brynhild* (1980), a book I myself will refer to liberally in this thesis. He comments on the slight disregard towards the study of the Völsungs that he perceives in Scandinavian scholars:

The opportunity has been welcomed with varying degrees of warmth depending on time and place. In Scandinavia the legend of Brynhild and Sigurd must compete for popular and scholarly favor with other heroic tales and with the most extraordinary literary creation of medieval Europe- the Icelandic sagas. (Andersson 1980: 16)

Though he is here comparing it to the fervor in which German scholars have been studying the *Nibelungenlied*. But the questions asked now in regards to what constitutes a female presence is not the same as it was when Andersson wrote *The Legend of Brynhild*. His prerogative was to find the 'original' Brynhild, the one he theorized existed before she disappeared behind the male protagonists. But my question will center on the question of how she function within the extant texts that we have. Not only how her character relates to those immediately around her, but those who came before, and those who came after. How does she function in the Vǫlsung storyworld?

To that end, I will establish my reading of the several types of literary tropes that she exist in: that of the valkyrie, the shield maiden, the maiden-king and the whetting women. I will start by discussing the archetype of valkyrie as they appear in the Vǫlsung storyworld specifically, and see if there are any typical characteristics that apply across the narrative and which could have been an effect in how Brynhildr's character was shaped. Next is a discussion on how the title of valkyrie versus shield maiden affect our understanding and interpretation of what Brynhildr's character could have symbolized. What does the title of valkyrie give the narrative versus that of a shield maiden? This first segment function to establish Brynhildr's intent within the narrative framework of the Vǫlsung storyworld exclusively. After which I will move on to the second segment which, expands to encompass the Norse literature scene in a broader sense. The writing of Brynhildr did not exist in a vacuum and was heavily influenced by the movements of its time. What does the trope *maiden-king* has to say for Brynhildr; how does she fit in it and how did she affect it? And in what context can we understand her ultimatum to Gunnar?

The first segment will be divided into two sub-chapters that will discuss the more mythological aspects of Brynhildr within the Vǫlsung storyworld, such as her identity as a valkyrie. The second segment will likewise be divided in two, and will analyze Brynhildr in the context of Norse literature in more general terms. Here I will be discussing tropes such as maiden-king and narrative tools such as *whetting*.

1.1 Brynhildr

Brynhildr Buðlisdóttir is a character from the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and could arguably be said to be the co-protagonist next to Sigurðr himself. She appears in several poems in the poetic *Edda*, as well as in *Vǫlsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga* and *the Nibelungenlied*, to name a few extant texts. Brynhildr is described in several of the texts as a valkyrie and has the power of turning into a swan,

as well as prophetic dreams, the ability to foretell the future and superhuman strength. Even in the texts where she is not explicitly named a valkyrie she showcases some of her powers, specifically strength in *Piðreks saga*. Her personality seems to be fluctuating. While she is satisfied she occupies herself with activities such as chess or weaving, but she is also a formidable warrior and intended to work for her brother as a shield maiden before she got married. When she is crossed, however, she reacts with silence and, in for example *Völsunga saga*, she enters into a depressive state which is hard to rouse her from. Brynhildr also appears to be quite expressive, she laughs with what appears to be *schadenfreude* upon learning of Sigurðr's fate, but also freely cries with grief and hopelessness. This free distribution of emotions also extends to her often seeking confrontation. She in one way or another ends up in an argument with most of the other character's around her, even if she is not the one to start it she is often the one to finish it. These attributes equals a woman who is not easily satisfied with the status quo, and it ends with dire consequences for herself and those who cross her.

There are several variants of how her story is told, but certain elements are universal to the extant texts that we have. After Sigurðr has slain the dragon and Reginn he is told of a place where a valkyrie resides/he can get horses. Upon arriving he finds Brynhildr, referred to in the poetic *Edda* as Sigrdrífa. Upon waking her or earning her trust, she relay onto him kingly wisdom. Whether or not they get betrothed and Brynhildr carries a daughter named Áslaug at this point is divergent, in some variants they do, in others it is not explicit. Brynhildr is then removed to a different location, usually her in-law who is also her foster father. Sigurðr in the meanwhile marries another woman, in some cases he is under the effect of a forgetfulness potion when this happens. In all versions he suggests to Gunnar that he should marry Brynhildr, as she is the very grandest woman they know. They set out to ask for her hand in marriage and again we have a few variants. Either negotiation goes on with Atli, Brynhildr's brother, upon Brynhildr eventually agrees to marry after some time of consideration. This theme of begrudgingly accepting extends to *Piðreks saga*, where Sigurðr and Þiðrek speak up for Gunnar as a great king and she accepts the proposal. Or the variant in which Sigurðr disguises himself as Gunnar and crosses the fire, proving to her that he is the bravest man and she has to keep her own vow and marry him. For a while she is content in her marriage, but in all variants it is revealed to her that Sigurðr is the king she wants or has in some way deceived her, either through the norn's decree or Guðrún's revelations. After which Brynhildr withdraws to contemplate her options. She then approaches either Gunnar or Högni with an ultimatum: Sigurðr is dangerous and must be killed, or she will leave because she will not suffer being married to the lesser king. Gunnar and Högni invariably agree to the terms and either kill Sigurðr themselves or

have him killed. Initially Brynhildr is exultant that her plans came through, especially when hearing Guðrún's wails of sorrow, but it ends with tears and admonishments towards Gunnar for what he has done. In all variants except *Piðreks saga*, Brynhildr chooses to follow Sigurðr in death and kills herself and her servants in order to accomplish that. In the poetic *Edda* and *Norna-Gests þáttir*, is a poem that details what happens after she has died.

1.2 Structure and material

I will distinguish between the German branch and the Norse branch throughout this text. The Norse branch is every text known to us to have been written down in Norway or Iceland in Norse; the poetic *Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Norna-Gests þáttir*. The German branch would be the *Nibelungenlied*. What is not as apparent, however, is where to place *Piðreks saga*. While it is presumed written in Norway and in Norse, and should follow the Norse tradition, the way it is structured, where it is set and how much it differs from the Sigurðr narratives we know elsewhere in Norse tradition, I am tempted to put it in the German branch. Theodore Andersson does this as well in his stemma. Throughout the thesis I will treat *Piðreks Saga* as if it belonged in the German branch, but with Norse influences. Excluding the German branch, excepting *Piðreks Saga*, I am left with the poetic *Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Norna-Gests þáttir*, which will be my material for this thesis. I will detail the dates and manuscripts of each in chapter 3.

It is debated by scholars, among others Andersson (1980), whether *Laxdæla saga*'s Guðrún is in fact based off of Brynhildr, but I opt not to delve into this discussion and will exclude the text from my analysis. The Faeroe ballad *Brynhildar þáttir* will be excluded as well.

Poems in the poetic Edda will be shortened: *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* to *Skamma*, *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* or *Sigurðarkviða in Fornu* will be *Brot* unless Andersson refers to it as *Fornu*, in which I will as well to avoid confusions. *Helreið Brynhildar* is *Helreið*. Likewise the hypothetical *Sigurðarkviðu hin Meiri* will be simply *Meiri*. I will also refer to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* as the Helgi poems when I am discussing all three in a group.

I will establish the theory and method first, then put forward the material I intend to use second. This is because the theory and method heavily influence how I choose to approach the material at hand. As I already mentioned above, I will then continue on to the chapter which contains my analysis of Brynhildr in the light of the archetype valkyrie and the tropes maiden-king and whetting woman.

2 Theory and Method

«No more important key exists to our understanding of Germanic literature than the legend of Brynhild.»

– Theodore M. Andersson 1980

The legend of Brynhildr is not one, but many, often contradicting pieces of story, spread over several narratives and manuscripts. Usually when committing to a character study there is authorial intent to focus on, as well as notes by the author, contemporary literature, author biography etc to help with the interpretations. But Norse and medieval literature in general do not typically operate with what we think of as an *author*. Nearly all of the texts that remain today has been written or compiled by 'anonymous'. This of course brings with it a whole different way of analyzing a text. We can no longer refer to one person at one place in time, but rather a whole society, and typically we need to look at a span of a couple of centuries. If we then are to assume that the poems in Codex Regius stem from an older oral tradition, and most do, it is also reasonable to think we're looking at a compilation rather than a collection. One or several persons have chosen at this point which poems to put into the Codex Regius of the poetic *Edda* to best tell the story of the *Vǫlsungs* and the *Gjúkungs*. At which point one already has to begin interpreting intentions. Why is the poem *Helreið Brynhildar* included in the poetic *Edda* compilation, but disregarded in *Vǫlsunga saga*? Yet it is deemed important enough to be given its own space in *Norna-Gests þátr*?

With the understanding that one is reading someone's interpretation of a story they themselves did not invent, the analysis of the text takes on an additional dimension. There has already been several attempts to analyze Brynhildr as a character in the framework of several different tropes and from many different angles. Theodore Andersson's *The Legend of Brynhild* is an especially in depth one and I will draw inspiration from it in the structure of this thesis. Where Andersson divided the analysis into three, (Brynhildr's youth, Sigurðr's death and the aftermath), I will merely divide her in two: the valkyrie and the maiden-king.

2.1 Hermeneutics

Hans-Georg Gadamer writes about what he calls the universal truth in his work *Truth and Method*; that what we want something to be often cloud our judgment when assessing it. That we often force upon a piece of art the meaning of not just religion, but an entirely new mythology, because we crave that elevated understanding. And of course Norse texts has suffered the same. They have been

the tools in which several nations have tried to re-establish their importance and their common source after long periods of occupation. Who are we? Who were we? Where do we come from? And perhaps the answers are best given to us by our ancestors:

In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. (Gadamer 1988: 273)

The way Gadamer explains it, is that the very subjective interpretation an individual will make of history, is in itself history, because everything that person is, is the sum of what came before. We have an already established idea of what is important when we read an old Norse text because the undercurrent of it has traveled through time in our culture. But, that does not mean our views can't be distorted, or tainted, that the communication can't become lost at some point in history:

What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now. The philosopher, of all people, must, I think, be aware of the tension between what he claims to achieve and the reality in which he finds himself. (Gadamer 1988: xxv)

Ultimate questions are of course well and good, as long as we understand that we cannot find the ultimate answers. The ingestion of art must by its very nature be a personal experience, though through close reading we shed layers of preconceived ideas and notions. Through time the original communicator has been lost and the language, if we consider the art of story a language of its own, has been largely forgotten.

We cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting to let something be said. It would be an inadmissible abstraction to contend that we must first have achieved a contemporaneousness with the author or the original reader by means of a reconstruction of his historical horizon before we could begin to grasp the meaning of what is said. A kind of anticipation of meaning guides the effort to understand from the very beginning. (Gadamer 1976: 101)

But we do not have an author in which to refer to. In some cases, such as the eddaic poems, we are not even sure in what time they were created. Or where. By the use of stemma it is possible to

understand how something has evolved and changed in the manuscript tradition, supposing it to be by the trends of its time, which is a communication of its own. This method only tells us about the texts themselves, however, and little about what other forms of communications might have been influential at the time: storytelling, songs, ceremonies, wives' tales. So even if, by using text critical methods and the stemma, we are able to recreate the closest thing we will ever come to the lacuna in Codex Regius, it only gives us *our* understanding of it. The here and now, as Gadamer calls it. So how do we expand further? How do we “reconstruct the original reader's historical horizon” in expectation of a deeper understanding when we read? The concept of storyworld allows us to cast the net wider than “just” the extant texts. Intertextuality is a widely used term when speaking of the texts' connections to each other, their level of communication and dependence. But storyworld is not the extant texts' relationship to each other, but the society's relationship to the text. A clergyman gets the job of writing down the legend of Sigurðr. He does so with much zeal, except in the version he has grown up with Brynhildr does not kill herself after Sigurðr's death, so he does not include this. This makes the most sense to him and feels the most correct. There is now a written version where Brynhildr does not die and this version is read aloud to an audience somewhere else. They now *also* have a version where Brynhildr does not die. So the clergyman's local variant has now become a part of the larger *storyworld*. Is it more or less correct? Neither, of course, it is just a variant, but it allows us an easier grasp of such polarizing interpretations of the character Brynhildr.

2.2 Stemma and text critical method

In *The Legend of Brynhild* Theodore Andersson made choices such as using *Völsunga saga* to supplement the lacuna found in the poetic *Edda* and recreating the lost *Sigurðarkviða hin meiri*. His main prerogative is to create a hierarchy of the extant texts as well as recreating the sources we know for a fact must have existed at some point [see figure 1].

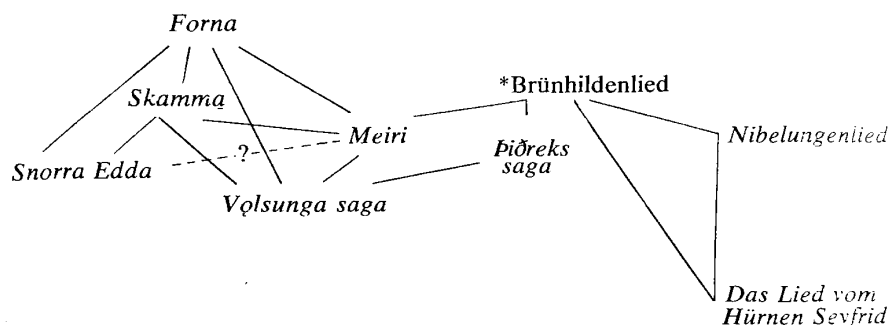


Figure 1.

[figure 1, Andersson's stemma (1980)]

As seen in figure 1 Andersson also operates with the concept of two branches; the Norse and the German, though he calls it the North and South. According to him *Þiðreks saga* belongs in the German branch, which I agree with and use myself. Even if one does not agree with all conclusions reached in this stemma, it does allow for an easy overview of influences. It shows, for instance, that the author of *Völsunga saga* did a very thorough groundwork by researching and putting together several of the texts that are still available to us and that we can recognize. Andersson allows that several of the eddic poems, the prosaic *Edda* and *Völsunga saga* are all inherited from the fractured *Sigurðarkviða in forna*, or *Brot af Sigurðarkviða*, and perhaps with some interlopers that are lost as well. Andersson works with both the branches of the story, but I will almost exclusively keep myself to the Norse version with only a nod to the German. The first part of *The Legend of Brynhild* is mostly centered around trying to identify which parts of *Völsunga saga* are taken from *Sigurðarkviða in forna*, and are thus more “authentic”. Invaluable work for sure, but it also indicates that there are such a thing as an “original” Brynhildr, or a more “correct one”. The hypothesis is that someone's earlier version of her is less influenced or tainted by other materials, closer to the oral version of the story, if there ever was one. That it is important to understand the textual relationships of the major sources that are left to us is without a doubt. Andersson is concerned that the fashions of new criticism, in which one read the text for the text itself, is making us less aware of the evolution of the texts, and thus the evolution of literature:

Something can be said for a little neglect of the sources. Scholars now seem agreed that the reconstruction of a legend in the various stages of its growth is a fruitless endeavor; the extant texts are not adequate to document an evolution on which everyone can agree. (Andersson 1980, 17).

The practice of recreating a fractured text in order to document an evolution has fallen mostly out of favour. New questions have been raised concerning the text and their intertextuality, questions of Christian symbolism, that of genre-loyalty, and not only how society may have affected the text and its evolution, but also how the text could affect society: grammatica, poetry, rhetoric etc. Andersson continues:

Critics now prefer a direct reading without reference to subtexts [...] the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga* may be read profitably as part of the flowering of Icelandic letters in the

thirteenth century. But this is not a full reading. We know that the Nibelung stories antedate the forms and times in which they finally emerged, and we know that they had earlier contexts. (Andersson 1980: 17)

Andersson worries that with the new philological trends scholars feel that synchronic reading is dated and that the questions and the discourse surrounding this has been exhausted. But, as he surmises, one can still be critical of the deductions that has been reached by your predecessors: “For each anterior poetic layer such deductions become progressively more doubtful”, in regards to the work of Andreas Heusler and Léon Polak. Even if the work has been as thorough as Polak's work, then the discourse is never done. Andersson writes:

We have an obligation to concern ourselves with these sources not only because they existed, but because they are a valuable instrument for our critical appreciation of the surviving versions. If we have some idea of the form in which the *Nibelungenlied* poet received the Siegfried story, we are in a position to analyze his contribution. (Andersson 1980: 18)

In other words: what does the texts we have bring to the legend? What does it modify, add or retract? Which part of the story was compelling to the late medieval audience compared to the early medieval audience? And further, does this reflect on the literature of the same period? In conclusion: these are all essential questions in order to understand the period you're reading in. Andersson continues:

If we can reconstruct «The Old Lay of Sigurd» and «The Long Lay of Sigurd» with some plausibility, we can compare them to the extant «Short Lay of Sigurd» and say something about the literary development of the heroic lay in Iceland. Such construction is not otiose, but a prerequisite for the writing of literary history (Andersson 1980: 18).

Because, as Andersson argues, how can we understand a text if we don't understand in what circumstance it was made? There is no communication if it is absolutely one-sided and we are only concerned with our interpretation and not the message itself. And while Andersson's work is invaluable because of this, he spends very little time discussing what his implications could mean for the story that is left. Yes, that Brynhildr had her very own legend is a very compelling hypothesis, but how do we understand it in our extant texts? Why was it prudent to make her a

valkyrie, if she wasn't originally? And perhaps even more importantly, what does this do to our understanding of Brynhildr as a character in the context in which we know her?

2.3 Storyworld

Very few bodies of textual work have a credited author in the old Norse medieval scene of literature, and the texts are seeped in intertextuality. No one text existed in a vacuum; there was a culture of understanding behind it, something which gave it a context that might be difficult to fully grasp as modern readers. But how does one deal with a story that encompasses several authors, several interpretations, languages and bodies of work? A story which spanned across Europe and had no concept of royalty or copyright? I touched upon the concept of *storyworld* briefly above, and will attempt to expand upon it and how I choose to use it in this text.

I used an example earlier of a variant we have in the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani where Brynhildr does not commit suicide after Sigurðr's death. Here I explain it as stemming from an oral variation of the legend, localized to a clergyman's homestead. Because this hypothetically is the version he knows he chooses to keep it when writing down the story, giving us a textual variant that could further influence audience elsewhere. This is a very simplified way of explaining variance, of course. In the introduction to the anthology *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds* the editor addresses the idea that impulses from not only the established elite, but also the common people, could influence the stories that we are now left with:

Almost all the Nordic writing we have from the Middle Ages represents the great tradition, the elite championing new ideals and new storyworlds. But that does not mean that the little traditions did not shape new variants of the storyworld and new oral poetics that could feed back into the great tradition in its local representation. (Mortensen 2013: 5)

Understanding the varied forms of influence on a story is important when looking at all the contradicting versions in which we have the legend of Sigurðr. I am also not interested in creating a hierarchy within these variations as they in one way or another all belong in this storyworld. So when I ask the question, was Brynhildr a valkyrie or just a shield maiden then the answer is: both. But the choice made to include her as a valkyrie does influence our reading, and as such also our interpretation. Andersson (1980) uses a good example when he discusses *Þiðreks saga* where he is of the opinion that *Þiðreks saga* originally was a lot more different from our Nordic variant of the

Sigfried legend. Yet the similarities were enough to make the composer of *Piðreks saga* connect the dots and add what he knew of the legend on top of this, turning *Piðreks saga* into something not quite eddic poems, not quite *Nibelungenlied* (Andersson 1980: 131-132). Through this interpretation of the text a variant of the story was created where none of the characters hail from what we call Norse mythology and there were no real love between Brynhildr and Sigurðr. This hybrid version now belongs to the Norse canon.

In trying to recreate the original reader's world as Gadamer urges, it is paramount to understand the importance of vernacular texts, both for the learned and the common people. There are many layers to the interpretation of biblical imagery in Norse medieval texts. There are the obvious ones such as *Heimskringla* where it is stated without a doubt that the kings were sent from God, and the greatest of them, St Óláfr, was his holy warrior. There are those a bit more subtle, which make no direct mention of Christianity at all, but still exist in the same sphere of Christian context.

Seen [...] from the peasant's point of view, the great tradition and the wider world could turn up in Latin liturgy as well as in vernacular preaching, and in heroic stories of chieftains of old who turned to Christian ways. (Mortensen 2013: 5)

The legend of Sigurðr in itself does not contain any moment where the great heathen heroes understand the fault in their ways and turns to Christ. Not in any of our extant texts are they understood to be anything but heathens. But there is of course plenty of Christian allegory and biblical imagery (the sword cutting the serpent, woman presenting wisdom to the man etc). There is also a constant move away from the heathen mythological aspects and towards salvation. At the end of the poetic *Edda* all the Völsungs and Gjúkung are dead, killed by their greed and thirst for revenge without any gods to watch over them. *Völsunga saga* begins with Óðinn's creation of the Völsung dynasty, but ends with Brynhildr's mortal daughter grieving Ragnar Loðbrók. These remaining descendants from Sigurðr and Brynhildr are mentioned by Gestr in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, which is decidedly religious. Gestr explicitly notes that he enjoyed staying with his Christian ancestors more than Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, since they had better sense and more refined ways in accord with the Bible. Much like the Bible moves from the abstract concept of God's creation of the world, the fall of man, through the many generations of Kings, to the death of Christ and the rebirth of the innocence of man.

Again saints' lives, miracles, classical, biblical, and apocryphal stories would have been a paramount importance in creating an entirely new reservoir of literary content and form. Finally, liturgical performance needs to be placed at the center of literary life. (Mortensen 2013: 17).

The concept of *storyworld*, and in that the extension into the liturgical texts, adds a layer to our understanding of a text. Even without explicit Christian content it is to be understood to have been created in that sphere and cannot be removed from it.

2.4 Feminist literary theory

Literary canon has, throughout most of modern history, been decidedly in favour of male authorship. Male authors and male focused readings have always taken center stage. Suffice to say, trying a feminist reading on texts assumed written by men in the depths of the Christian medieval period can be a challenge. When looking back to interpret women and their role in society during this period a certain picture emerge: women were illiterate, women were excluded from important events, women were delegated to the home, women were thought stupid and insipid, women had no role in society etc. Yet the women represented in old Norse texts are often anything but stupid and insipid. Taken into consideration that these women are almost all of high birth, they continuously show themselves highly intelligent, influential and wise, though also quite calculating. Yet the naming conventions of these stories tend to focus on the male protagonist, even when a female protagonist is as, if not more, prevalent in the story. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* is an example in which Helgi is the male protagonist, but he has a co-protagonist in Sigrún. The time spent on either is about equal, with a slight favour towards her, and ends by the author or compiler mentioning another poem about her; *Karoliophom*. Andersson (1980) argues the same mistreatment of Brynhildr and that several of the Sigurðr poems should rightfully be named after her as she is the central figure. He writes in no uncertain terms: “We have begun with an analysis of the three so-called Sigurd poems in the *Edda*, but what becomes especially clear from this survey is that the poems are about Brynhild, not Sigurd” (Andersson 1980: 78). It could also be argued that *Laxdæla saga* should have been named after Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir as well. But then most of the heroic lays of the poetic *Edda* would be named after women instead of men, going against the old convention that Norse literature is fully focused on male protagonists. The change of the naming conventions could allow for an exercise in thought. If a text is called *Sigurðarkviða* it is easily assumed that it is about Sigurðr, and in consequence our reading will center on him. But what if we take Andersson's

suggestion to heart and call it Brynhildarkviða instead? With Brynhildr as a protagonist the antagonists would be Guðrún and Grimhildr. Grimhildr who meddles with destiny and causes Brynhildr to break her vow, and Guðrún who by speaking aloud that which Brynhildr has suspected forces Brynhildr to act. In this scenario we have three women on center stage, while the male characters fall somewhat more into the shadows.

A method of reading old Norse texts with the focus on the action or inaction of female characters has been explored in depth by academics such as Carol J. Clover (2002), Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013), Judy Quinn (2009/2000), Else Mundal (2013) etc, and terms such as *whetting* has been used to describe and analyze parts of the texts with a new light shed on the narrative. The hypothetical grieving and lamentation ceremonies led by women have been explored, bringing forth theories of lost genres of poetry and songs with women as main contributors¹. The grief of women is a central theme in all of the iterations of the Völsung storyworld. The grief of lost honour, lost autonomy and the loss of husbands and kin are motifs visited several of the Völsung women, especially famous is Guðrún's whetting of her sons and her lament over her daughter. This focus does not necessarily paint the women as weak in a hard world, but rather allows space for their experience. Theodore Andersson (1980) discusses at length the loss of dominant female characters because of the trends of the courtly saga in the German branch, rendering Brynhildr passive while in the Norse branch she was still allowed some measure of autonomy (Andersson 1980: 150). I will discuss the nature of this autonomy further in chapter 4.3 and 4.4.

Hélène Cixous, a deconstructionist and philosopher, writes in her famous essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* of the silencing of women and the lack of a female language. The language we use today belongs in the patriarchal system according to her, something which does not allow women, and then specifically writing women, to express themselves. Even if a woman is to write of the female experience, it will be done through the lens of a man because the language used is that of a patriarchal society. She invents the term *écriture féminine* and invites women to use their bodies to convey a new, feminine language. To make a space that is feminine. And it is exactly in the expression of the female body that scholars has tried to find the female space in Norse medieval literature. Scholars such as Mundal, Clover, Rikhardsdóttir, among many, found remnants of these female spaces in body language and what is interpreted as secular traditions. An example is Else Mundal's article "Female Mourning Songs and Other Lost Oral Poetry" (2013), in which she discusses mourning songs as a phenomenon headed mainly by women. Sif Rikhardsdóttir touches

¹ For further reading see e. g. Sif Rikardsdóttir (2017) and Anderson & Swenson (2002)

upon the same theme in her book *Emotion in Old Norse Literature* (2017). Lamenting and grief seems to be what is found to be the most genuine female space. Carol Clover's article "Hildigunnr's Lament" (2002), analyses not only what appears to be ceremonial actions in Norse literature, but in Latin as well, and paints a picture of a time when women were the head performers of grief. The lamentations were mostly songs, poems or keening, but they were often accompanied by certain gestures such as ripping of clothes, letting ones hair down and clapping of hands. Rikhardsdottir writes this about the scene in *Guðrunarkviða I*, where Guðrún has realized that Sigurðr has been murdered, and how it can be paralleled to literature elsewhere:

Lars Lönnroth comments on this particular scene and the phrase '*Hondum slá*', i.e. The striking of hands together. He considers the phrase to be evidence of an ancient 'formulaic expression of grief' stemming from 'early Germanic poetry', and notes that the act can be found in the Old Saxon poem *Héliand* from the ninth century. (Rikhardsdottir 2017: 105)

Whether or not there were actual remnants of ceremonial lamentation traditions at the time these texts were written down, it was certainly the job of the female character to rouse the audience into feeling. And if we are to entertain the idea that the eddaic poems were used for performance, then imagine the effect it would have had in this instance. Sigurðr lying dead on the ground, Guðrún wakes, realizes what has happened and suddenly she lets out a wail and claps her hands; forcefully and audibly sharing the grief that she is feeling. Brynhildr's physical presence is no less imposing as she laughs, cries and stabs herself in the chest with a sword. There is a call on women to be the conductor of not only the audience's reactions and emotions, but also the characters'. Perhaps even more so in the sagas. It falls on the woman, most often a wife or a sister, to *whet* or *hvöt* the men into action. Especially if the man is hesitant in performing the task that is expected of him.

In the feud situation, the women's (and old men's) words are the equivalent of men's deeds; it is as incumbent on a woman to urge vengeance as it is incumbent on a man to take it; and despite what appears to be the «official» disapproval of whetting women in the literary sources, they are still repeatedly described in admiring terms (Clover 2002: 17)

This action in itself is a performance that only exist in the female character's space, even if it is fictional. A woman cannot merely tell her man to avenge her kin, it has to be done within a certain framework. It usually happens in the hall in front of family and servants (in Brynhildr's instance she

does it in front of the entire court) and there are certain elements added if the whetted man is particularly hesitant such as items from the dead person or goading words about their manhood.

3 Extant texts and manuscripts: the Brynhildr corpus

I mentioned in my introduction that the theory and method I intend to use would influence how I approached the material. Because I will use the concept of storyworld instead of a stemma or a hierarchical segregation of the texts, it made more sense to introduce the method before the material. A *storyworld* exist across genre and time and allows the use of many different theories to be tried. My approach in this chapter is to map out which extant texts are relevant to me and how they associate intertextually and intratextually to each other and to the other works in the manuscripts they exist in. My point of interest is of course Brynhildr and how the different extant texts in this *storyworld* presents her.

Like many of the legendary heroes in Norse literature, Brynhildr's character is renditioned in several different stories and contexts. Her *storyworld* is vast, possibly stretching centuries and several different types of media from carvings, poetry, *þáttir*, to sagas and to possibly even performance-art. Summarizing everything is quite an undertaking and so I will be brief in my attempt. I will not move in on the German, or southern, part of the branch such as the *Nibelungenlied*. *Þiðreks saga* will be exempt from this as explained in the introduction.

Compilations and collections are a large part of our surviving corpus of medieval literature and both intertextuality and intratextuality are important elements in our understanding of the text. The creation of these manuscripts were expensive and time consuming and we can safely assume that there would have been an agenda, an idea or a thought, behind them whether they were meant as gifts, commissions or a rich person's special interest. In this chapter I will summarize each extant text which is to be used in my analysis, highlighting the parts that concerns my paper and how the texts work in relation to the manuscripts they are found in.

3.1 Codex Regius of the poetic *Edda*

The heroic lay, a compilation of eddaic poetry concerning the Vǫlsungs and the Gjúkungs, can be found in the manuscript GKS 2356 4to; the *Codex Regius*. It is the only surviving manuscript with these poems except one notable exception which I will discuss further down. Several of the poems from the *mythological* cycle can be found in *Skáldskaparmál*, written down around 1220. The GKS 2365 4to itself is hesitantly dated to 1275, but is assumed to have been based on an even older manuscript which is now lost. In the poetic *Edda* we find thirty poems, all in either *fornyrðislag* or *ljóðaháttur*, going through the cycle of gods, to lesser mythical beings, to legendary heroes and eventually to the death of the Gjúkung dynasty. Nineteen of the poems belong to the «heroic cycle», beginning with *Vǫlundarkviða*. Sigurðr's legend specifically starts in *Gripisspá*, a gnomic poem in which Sigurðr's future is foretold. This style of foretelling serves as an index to the poems that will follow in the compilation and contains elements that would have been unknown to us because of the lacuna. Theodore Andersson finds *Gripisspá* to be a good source, together with *Vǫlsunga saga*, to recreate the hypothetical *Sigurðarkviða in meiri*: “A further guide to the contents of *Meiri* is the testimony of the prophetic poem *Gripisspá*, which clearly differs in narrative details from *Forna* and *Skamma* and must depend on the alternative version provided by *Meiri*.” (Andersson 1980: 43-44) The mythological aspects such as the gods, the horse Grani, dwarves and dragons continue through the next few poems after *Gripisspá*, until the lacuna at the end of *Sigrdrífumál*. When the text continues it is in *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* and it has taken on a wholly different tone and theme. It begins with Högni asking Gunnar why he has ill will against Sigurðr and he cannot fathom what the king has done to deserve it. Gunnar explains that Sigurðr has been false with them but how, is not explained, only that he in some way broke a vow pledged between them. Because of the lacuna it is unknown what happened beforehand, but parts can be pieced together through Brynhildr's confession at the end of the poem. She wakes up from a, what can be assumed, is a prophetic nightmare and admits to Gunnar that Sigurðr was always a faithful friend and he shouldn't have doubted it. The way she confronts him in this stanza has her pointing the finger of blame on him, which contradicts the poem's portrayal of her hand in the matter. She tells him that he betrayed his very best of friends and willingly forgot the oath they swore to each other:

17 Mantattu, Gunnarr!
Til gorva þat,
er þit bloði i spor

baðir rendut;
nu hefir þu hanom þat alt
illo launat,
er hann fremstan sic
finna vildi. (*Brot 17*. Edda 1965: 240)

Because of the lacuna there is no whetting scene between Brynhildr and Gunnar and we only know it took place because of the comments made by Högni. When Brynhildr wakes up crying from her nightmare, Gunnar is confused since she was laughing over their victory just the evening before. The portrayal in old Norse literary discourse of the *whetting woman* as emotionally unstable has been rather common for some time until anthologies such as *Cold Counsel* brought the motif into a new light. In *Brot*, Brynhildr turns the table and points to Gunnar saying that he had a choice in believing her, and that he did a terrible deed in not supporting the man who thought him the very best. Already here the varied interpretations and portrayals of Brynhildr in the Völsung storyworld allows for a rich reading of her character.

If we are to assume that Sigrdrífa is in fact Brynhildr (which is what the compiler of the poetic *Edda* suggests, a topic I will discuss below), we go from the poem *Sigrdrífumál* where she pours Sigurðr mead and teaches him runes and how to be a good king, to *Brot* where she is accused of having goaded her husband into slaughtering him. Needless to say; the lacuna makes this into a confusing narrative. The name, and therefore also the being, Sigrdrífa is exclusive to the poetic *Edda*. In no other version of the story is Brynhildr named this, which makes it an interesting anomaly in this storyworld. One explanation is that Sigrdrífa was not her name, but her title, and another and more popular theory is that Sigrdrífa was originally a completely different character (Andersson's *The Legend of Brynhild* (1980)). While the first explanation is interesting in that it lends a bit more depth and weight to Brynhildr's history as a valkyrie with her own past, her warrior name and curse, the second is tantalizing in that we suddenly have a new character to consider. If Sigrdrífa wasn't Brynhildr, then who was she? Where does she come from and why did she become Brynhildr in for example *Völsunga saga* and *Skáldskaparmál*?

What the poetic *Edda* gives us is the story of how Sigurðr met Brynhildr, her own explanation as to why she got cursed by Óðinn, as well as how she became jealous of Guðrún and the conversation between her, Gunnar and Högni which led to the murder of Sigurðr. The compiler of the poetic *Edda* also chose to include the poem *Helreið Brynhildar*, which is the only poem in the heroic cycle

that can be found in a different manuscript than GKS 2356 4to. This poem also marks the end of the cycle of the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and the Völsungs, after which begins the second heroic cycle concerning the Gjúkung. I will later focus on the relation between *Sigrdrífumál* and *Helreið*, of how the first and the last poem featuring Brynhildr tie in with each other, and how it affects our reading of the Völsung cycle as a whole. The intentions of the compiler to associate Sigrdrífa with valkyries and then tie her identity directly in with Brynhildr was, in my opinion, not a coincidental one. Just as the preceding generations of Völsungs in *Völsunga saga* tied in with the story of Sigurðr, then *Völundarkviða* and the Helgi poems contribute meaning to the storyworld of Brynhildr as she is presented in the poetic *Edda*.

The transitions in the poetic *Edda* goes from gods, to mythological beings such as dwarves, to mortal heroes and valkyries until the last legendary hero and valkyrie dies, ending as mentioned with Gjúki's dynasty. Brynhildr functions as the last link between the mythological and the world of man. She possesses foresight and superhuman strength as she showcases in *Skamma* when she throws off all of Gunnar's men as they try to stop her in committing suicide. This is followed by her riding to Hel in a wagon with rich drapery, and chasing off trolls with her words alone. The compiler seemed interested in the aspects of Brynhildr that was not a regular mortal, and that her death signified the last departure of the valkyries from the realm. Guðrún, as a wise woman, does perform «magic» as well; she puts her hand in boiling water without getting burnt and she enchants her sons' armors to withstand most damage. Yet she has no connection with the godly like Brynhildr or Sigurðr had, though it is mentioned that she ate of the dragon heart as well. Regardless, the narrative in the poetic *Edda* is more reminiscent of that of a novel than «a fairly loose collection of poems», as suggested by Henrik Janson (Janson 2013: 172).

3.2 *Völsunga saga*

It is assumed that the author of the saga mostly based their version on the poetic *Edda*, or on a similar manuscript which is now lost, as well as *Piðreks saga af Bern*. The manuscript in which the *Völsunga saga* exists, the Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to, is dated to around 1400. The saga is assumed to have been originally written down sometime between 1200 and 1270, which puts it in very close proximity to the GKS 2356 4to manuscript on the timeline. They both lend a unique twist to the material, the Völsung storyworld, in parts attributed to the difference in media; one being a compilation of poetry while the other is a prose narrative. Out of necessity the eddic poems are brief and abridged, while *Völsunga saga* has room and ability, thanks to its format, to delve a bit deeper

into the realm of emotions. Brynhildr appear here as much more heartbroken and bewildered by her own actions towards Sigurðr, and Sigurðr in turn is described to have strong emotions towards her. Whether there were ever an eddic poem visiting this subject it is now lost, and must have existed in a different manuscript (possibly in the hypothetical *Meiri*).

The saga bridges the entire timeline in the poetic *Edda* with added material. In order to incorporate the legendary hero Helgi Hundingsbana he becomes another son of King Sigmundr and is presented as Sigurðr's half-brother. The saga shows a timeline consistency which the other versions of Sigurðr's legend does not, leading all the way back to Oðinn giving Sigmundr the sword, the same sword that Sigurðr later reforges with the help of Reginn into Gramr. In *Völsunga saga* it is explained how the Völsung dynasty came to be through Oðinn's design, implicating his valkyries as necessary brides to create the perfect hero. The last Völsung and valkyrie coupling is between Sigrurðr and Brynhildr, creating Áslaug who marries Ragnar Loðbrók in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, immediately following *Völsunga saga* in the surviving manuscript. The manuscript ends with the lay *Krákumál*, which is Ragnar's lamentation of his own death. It has been suggested that the lay is called *Krákumál* because Áslaug was called the Crow, *Kráka*, which carries with it a set of implications (Byock 26: 1999). That a poem mourning Ragnar's death is named after his spouse can indicate that it was considered a *gráti*² or lament. The addition of *Ragnars saga Loðabrókar* and *Krákumál* together with *Völsunga saga* in the Ny kgl. Saml.1824b 4t manuscript, creates a coherent timeline from the creation of the Völsung dynasty through Oðinn to the exploits of the last living Valkyrie-Völsung mix; Áslaug. The existence of valkyries in the Völsung bloodline is, as with the poetic *Edda*, not a coincidence, dubbed by Judy Quinn (2009) as the *grand design*. I will return to the motif of valkyries applying the mythological to the legendary in *Völsunga saga* in chapter 4.1 and 4.2. And also why Áslaug is an important part of the story in *Völsunga saga*, and by extension *Skáldskaparmál*, yet any mention of her is omitted in the poetic *Edda*.

3.3 *Þiðreks saga af Bern*

Þiðreks saga, found in the manuscript Holm perg 4 fol which is dated to about 1275-1300, is a collection of stories centering around the character Þiðrek. There are two surviving paper manuscripts dating to somewhere between 1600 and 1700 as well. Like *Völsunga saga* it has quite a few elements from the genre *riddarasögur*, it is not, however, a translation of any french courtly

2 For further reading on gráti I refer to Else Mundal's "*Female mourning songs and other lost oral poetry*" (2013), as well as Carol Clover's "*Hildigunnr's Lament*" (2002)

lais, but is heavily influenced by low Germanic legends surrounding the hero Þiðrek, who is based on the historical king Theoderic the Great. It is a common conception that the earliest mention we have of this legend is from the Rök-stone in Sweden, in which there are inscribed 750 runes dating to around the early 9th century. The legend of Sigurðr and how he arrived at Þiðrek's court and was later murdered by his in-laws is one of the stories told in this collection. Brynhildr's role is at the same time both similar and wildly different in this narrative compared to the versions that exist in the Norse branch. The foundation of the motif is the same; Sigurðr tricks her into complying to a consummated marriage with Gunnar and Guðrún is the one revealing the treachery, which leads to Brynhildr seeking revenge. But her superhuman abilities, such as her mighty strength, are tied to her virginity rather than her being a valkyrie. In *Þiðreks saga* her unwillingness to be with Gunnar is a very literal and physical one, she does not view him an equal. Arguably she does not in *Völsunga saga* and the poetic *Edda* either, but expresses a wish that she should have been able to if the fates had been different. Because of these differences in theme, Gunnar's motive to kill Sigurðr is based more on fear of Sigurðr thinking himself the grandest king between the two of them, rather than a belief that Sigurðr has broken a vow between them. In the poetic *Edda* and the *Völsunga saga* it is a matter of his fear of losing Brynhildr and her land, while in *Þiðreks saga* he has already lost half his land when his sister Guðrún married Sigurðr. The question of greed is perhaps more subtle in the *Edda*, but Högni is the one to decide the last outcome in all of the versions. Though he initially balks at killing Sigurðr he is in the end swayed by the promise of gold.

That the death of Sigurðr plays out differently in the various iterations of the legend is a recurring meta-textual theme. The phrase addressing the question of how and when is repeated in the poetic *Edda*, *Norna-Gests þáttur* and *Þiðreks saga* in much the same turn of phrase (though with variations). At the end of *Brot* is this version of the speculation on Sigurðr's death:

Hér er sagt í þessi qviþo frá dauða Sigurdar, oc vikr her sva til, sem þeir dræpi hann úti; enn sumir segia sva, at þeir dræpi hann inni í reckio sinni sofanda. En þyþverscir menn segia sva, at þeir dræpi hann úti í scógi, oc sva segir í Guðrúnarkviþo inni forno, at Sigurþr oc Giuka synir hefði til þings riþit, þa er hann var drepinn; enn þat segia allir einnig, at þeir svico hann í trygð oc vógo at hánom liggianda oc obunom (*Brot. Edda* 1965: 241).

The one who compiled the poetic *Edda* must have been familiar with some of the other versions circulating. The reference to Sigurðr being killed in the forest corresponds with *Þiðreks saga* and *Brot*, while the scenario where he is murdered in his bed is the same as in *Skamma*. The lengths

taken to let the audience know that Sigurðr's murder is contested gives the impression that this was an important part of the experience of performing the legend of how such a great hero was murdered differs depending on which poets tell the tale, but they can all agree that it could only happen through the coldest of betrayals. Of all the poems in the poetic *Edda*, *Brot* is the poem that appears to be the most similar to the events in *Piðreks saga*. The murder of Sigurðr happens out of doors in both of them, though in *Piðreks saga* it is Gunnar who kills him while Högni watches, instead of them sacrificing their younger brother for the kill. Brynhildr gloats upon their return and laugh mightily at her plan being successful. In *Piðreks saga* Brynhildr has it arranged that they carry his body up to Grimhildr where she is sleeping, while in *Brot* it is Högni who informs Guðrún of Sigurðr's death before celebrating with the others. The callousness surrounding Sigurðr's murder and death is thematically very similar, with Grimhildr the losing party.

On the other hand; *Piðreks saga* presents the circumstances of Brynhildr and Gunnar's wedding is similar in narrative but thematically very different. They all involve hesitation from Brynhildr and trickery from Sigurðr in some form, but at different instances. Brynhildr and Sigurðr swear an oath that they would only marry each other, but Sigurðr opted to marry Grimhildr instead once he was promised land and oaths of loyalty from Gunnar and Högni. Brynhildr is rightfully indignant when Sigurðr returns to her with the proposition that she marry Gunnar instead, but after some coercion accepts the conditions. We are already familiar with the motif of Sigurðr asking for Brynhildr's hand on the behest of Gunnar, but in *Piðrek saga* there are no use of disguises, nor is Sigurðr unaware that he is breaking a promise. Where *Völsunga saga* goes to great lengths to excuse Sigurðr's behaviour by the use of a forgetfulness potion, *Piðreks saga*'s Sigurðr does not need such a convoluted relationship with Brynhildr to push the narrative forward. His greatest feature is that he is big and strong and good at slaying enemies which he does gladly, while in the poetic *Edda* and *Völsunga saga* he is also a romantic hero. In *Skamma* for instance it is described how lovingly he treats Guðrún. It is stated several times how he respected both his oath to Gunnar and Brynhildr by never putting a hand on her, which is the opposite of the dynamics between the characters presented in *Piðreks saga*. King Gunnar is Sigurðr's anti-hero in *Piðreks saga* and Brynhildr's character is partially used to reinforce this. She shames Gunnar by hanging him on the wall every night making him unable to consummate the marriage she views as beneath her. Sigurðr is then appealed to solve this problem for him, indicating that in this narrative Sigurðr is the true worthy king, making the betrayal against him even worse. Because of Sigurðr and Piðrek's insurance that Gunnar was a worthy choice, Brynhildr abandons her autonomous reign over her own court in favour of being his queen and wife. After Sigurðr takes her virginity in Gunnar's place she loses her powers and accepts

her place. However, when it is revealed that Sigurðr was the man who had the strength to subdue her, and not her husband, she is both affronted and threatened. She cannot suffer him to live and becomes the one to instigate his murder. That Brynhildr is the one to have him killed further reinforces the motif of *her* being Sigurðr's equal. Gunnar is ordered or coerced into acting against the man who was encroaching on his kingdom. In this narrative Brynhildr fulfills several of the maiden-king tropes in the first half of the story, while she at the same time breaks with them in the later half. Chapter 4.3 will see further discussion on the topic of Brynhildr as a maiden king.

3.4 *Norna-Gests þáttur*

Another text where Sigurðr's legend is but a story in a much larger compilation is in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, a story featuring a semi-immortal man named Gestr and King Óláfr Tryggvason. Gestr is a man destined by the norns to live as long as his candle is not extinguished, consequently he has a very long life and meet all kinds of interesting people; one of them being Sigurðr. Gestr arrives at King Óláfr Tryggvason's court and is asked to retell some of what he has experienced in his long life. There is a mix of what is already familiar from the poetic *Edda* and the *Völsunga saga* and some additional prose. Some paragraphs are very similar to other extant sources that we have, while there is, for example, an expansion on how he grew up with his mother Hjördís together with his half-brothers Helgi and Sinfjotli as well. After a rather long rendition of the forming of the armies and riding into battle, the story of how Sigurðr came to kill Fáfnir and Reginn is mentioned in a short sentence: “Síðan drap Sigurdr þá Fáfnir ok Reginn, þúíat hann uildi suíkia hann” (*Flateyjarbok* 1860: 353). Gestr moves on to Sigurðr meeting Brynhildr (the name Sigrdrífa is not mentioned) and then notes that the full story is better told in a different tale: “ok foru þeirra skifti sem segir í sögu Sigurdar Fáfnisbana” (*Flateyjarbok* 1860: 353). The phrasing indicates the existence of a specific saga called “*Sigurðar saga Fáfnisbana*”, which can be either a reference to a lost saga, the *Völsunga saga* under a different name or just a generic way of referencing to the known stories of Sigurðr. Here, what could arguably be called the highlight of Sigurðr's career, ie. his namesake, is glossed over in a sentence. Gestr also does the «some say Sigurðr died this way, but the Germans say it happened this way», which seems to be somewhat formulaic for how the death of Sigurðr was supposed to be relayed:

Su er flestra manna sögnn, at Guithormr Giukason legdi hann suerde j gegnum sofanda j sæng Gudrunar. en þýuerskir menn segia Sigurd drepinn hafa uerít uti a skogi. en igdurnar sögdu sua, at Sigurdr ok Giuka synir hofd(u) ridit til þings nokkurs ok þa dræpi þeir hann. en

þat er alsagt, at þeir uogu at honum liggianda at vuörum ok suiku hann j trygd.

(*Flatexjarbok* 1860: 355)

This version focuses on the different ways Sigurðr was betrayed by the Gjúkung sons specifically, and Brynhildr is not implied until later. After Gestr has relayed how Sigurðr died a hirdman asks how Brynhildr reacted in the aftermath. Gestr expands on the prose that can also be read in the poetic *Edda*, before relaying the poem *Helreið Brynhildar* in its entirety. As mentioned above this is the only poem that we have from the poetic *Edda's* heroic cycle that is extant outside the Codex Regius compilation. In the poetic *Edda* there is a short prose section before the poem itself explaining how Brynhildr and Sigurðr were burnt on two pyres, but it does not go in depth on the proceedings. In *Norna-Gests þáttr* there is a focus on the richness of Brynhildr's traveling-gear and the honour that is granted her in death: “henni var ekit j ræid æinni, ok uar tíalldat um guduef ok purpura ok gloade allt uit gull. ok sua uar hon brend” (*Flatexjarbok* 1860: 355). In the poetic *Edda* it reads as if Brynhildr meets the gygr on her way to Hel, or as she enters Hel, but in the *þáttr* it is revealed that she spoke to the gygr after she had died, but as she was taken to the pyre, not after it. They pass a mountain while Brynhildr is carried to the pyre and the gygr appears. The gygr explains that she hates Brynhildr for having had Sigurðr murdered and that she used to be of help to him when he was alive. This is the first mention in this story that Brynhildr could have been complicit in the murder, but the gygr appears righteous in her anger. After this first exchange of words the poem *Helreið* begins. Brynhildr gives her account of her youth, her curse and why she hates the Gjúkungs for having tricked her out of her vowed marriage. Brynhildr's ferocity in her recital ends with scaring the gygr back into the mountain. This ends the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr in Gestr's recounting and there are no words of either Guðrún nor her brothers. Though Gestr does quickly mention that he stayed with the sons of Loðbrók for a time. This somewhat reflects the same timeline as *Völsunga saga* in which the audience is first introduced to King Sigmundur and Hjördis Eylímadóttir in Sigurðr's childhood, then the killing of Fáfnir and Regin before marrying into the Gjúkefamily and being betrayed by them. After this is the death of Sigurðr and Brynhildr and the continuation of their legacy in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*. While the author(s) of this *þáttr* appears to have fashioned it after *Völsunga saga* thematically, they abridged parts that is expanded upon in that version, while also adding parts that were completely omitted, such as Brynhildr's meeting with the gygr after her death.

Norna-Gests þáttr can be found in the manuscript GKS 1005 fol, also known as the *Flatexjarbók* (or *Codex Flatöiensis*). It is a large manuscript of 225 pages, many of them beautifully illuminated.

The main bulk of it was crafted between 1387 and 1394, and it was kept on Flatey. This manuscript contains several kings' sagas and *þættir*, among others the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Ólaf saga Haraldsson*, both hailed as bringers of Christ to the north. The compilation also concerns itself with colonization and the building of civilizations and includes *Jómsvíkinga Saga*, *Færeyinga Saga* and *Orkneyinga Saga*. On the theme of expanding Christendom, the author of *Norna-Gest þátr* deeply used the plot device of giving the narrator, Gestr, a long life through a candle created by the norms. This enables him to live long enough to see the fall of heathendom, but also to tell King Óláfr Tryggvason of great legendary kings such as Sigurðr. Yet at the time this manuscript was written down Óláfr Tryggvason was a legend in his own right, living nearly four hundred years before *Flateyjarbók* was even created, and thoroughly steeped in mysticism himself. King Óláfr Tryggvason is portrayed as wise and dutifully Christian, he goes to mass and does everything he should as a Christian king in *Norna-Gest þátr*. Once Gestr is done telling his story of having served at the heathen Gunnar's court, Tryggvason asks Gestr which king he liked to serve under the most. Gestr hurries to explain that the Christian kings were the best as they: “uera elligar þuiat þar uar kristni uel halladin ok þar þotti mer at ollu bezst” (*Flateyjarbok* 1860: 357).

3.5 *Skaldskaparmál*

There is not much added in *Skaldskaparmál*'s short summary of Sigurðr's legend and the mention of Brynhildr is even briefer. The story as it appears in *Skaldsparamál* is an abridged version of what we find in the poetic *Edda*. Brynhildr's death for example is the same as the one in *Völsunga saga*, though the slaughter of Sigurðr's and Guðrún's son is not mentioned. Brynhildr is named “Hildir” rather than “Sigrdrífa” once Sigurðr wakes her up from her cursed sleep. Nothing more is mentioned about their relations after that; not her wise counsel nor that he promised himself to her. The narrative moves straight onto Sigurðr arriving at King Gjúki's court and marrying Guðrún. Sigurðr takes on the appearance of Gunnar and rides through the flames in order to secure Brynhildr's hand in marriage. The argument between Guðrún and Brynhildr is mentioned, coinciding with the versions we have in *Völsunga saga*, *Þiðreks saga* and *Helreið Brynhildar*. After Sigurðr's death, Brynhildr kills herself and they are burnt together; the same ending as in the *Völsunga saga*, rather than the one found in the poetic *Edda* and *Norna-Gests þátr*.

Skaldskaparmál follows the cycle going from godly (mythological) times to legendary to the heroic and finishes with mortal kings. After the death of Sigurðr and Brynhildr there is an explanation as to what happens to the remaining heirs of Gjúki, closely resembling how it is told in the poetic *Edda*.

Áslaug is, like in *Völsunga saga*, mentioned briefly before continuing on with Ragnar Loðbrók and King Froði. It is a familiar pattern in the construction of the legend. Reminiscent of the structure of the Bible which starts with the creation, then the mythology and eventually reaches the birth of Christ; an event much closer in time than the creation, but still historical.

Snorri Sturluson, who is credited with the work of *Skáldskaparmál*, worked in the early decades of the 1200s, which is the dating used for *Skáldskaparmál*. His work on skaldic and eddaic poems were relevant for a long time and we can find it in several different manuscript together with variations of the four grammatical treatises. Codex Wormianus, AM 242 fol, is unique in that it has all four of them. Sigurðr's legend in *Skáldskaparmál* is an abridged version of the story with the highlights added for easily recognizable *heiti*; such as the *otter gold* being the explanation of how the dragon gold got cursed.

3.6 *Nibelungenlied*

This heroic poem belongs to the German branch of this storyworld and will not be treated in this thesis. It was written down in the 1200s, possibly some decades before *Piðreks saga*, and is found in bits and pieces in over 30 manuscripts. The overarching drama between Siegfried (Sigurðr), Brunhild (Brynhildr), Gunther (Gunnar) and Kriemhild (Guðrún) is somewhat the same. Gunther marries a reluctant Brunhild after the involvement of Siegfried who dies at the culmination of the story.

And while this poem had a great influence on the storyworld, especially that of *Piðreks saga*, I will not go deeper into this version of the story.

4 Brynhildr

I use the term *storyworld* to encompass the legend of the Vǫlsung as it exists in our extant texts. The storyworld I am interested in covering is, as I discussed in chapter 3, the poetic *Edda*, *Vǫlsunga saga*, *Piðreks saga*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Norna-Gests þáttr*, which allows me to view them as different iterations of the same story. There are many variants in the texts, even between the different poems telling the same story within the same compilation such as the poetic *Edda*. Which shows just how rich the storyworld of this legend was in the time span these texts were written down. But even with all the variety there are certain themes and story elements that are visited in all of them. Perhaps surprisingly, it is my opinion that Brynhildr is one of the most consistent characters despite her varying personalities and tropes. Her status as a shield maiden and valkyrie is described or alluded to in nearly all the texts with the exclusion of *Piðreks saga*, in which she is still treated as “other” or “more” than the other characters, on par only with the hero Sigurðr.

In this main chapter I will dissect Brynhildr's character with the help of the methods and theories listed above. It will be divided into four parts with two main categories. The first category will be the mythological aspect of Brynhildr and her identification as a valkyrie. This will be handled in two sub-chapters. The second part focuses on Brynhildr's character in the context of the literary discourse she exist in. Sub chapter 4.3 will discuss her in the light of the maiden-king trope while the last sub-chapter analyses her in the role of the *whetting woman*.

The first sub chapter will focus on the concept of valkyries as they appear in the Vǫlsung storyworld with the help of Quinn's (2009) model based on the valkyries as they appear in *Vǫlsunga saga*. Their presence fills a function necessary for the narrative which I will map out, as well as what this has to say for Brynhildr's character. The chapter will analyze the essence of valkyries as they appear first and foremost in *Vǫlsunga saga* and the poetic *Edda*, before discussing the differences and what this implies for the thematic reading of each version. In the former they function first and foremost as brides to the Vǫlsungs, while in the latter they are often described as ill-fated. In conclusion I will compare the Brynhildr's valkyrie aspects to Brynhildr as she appears in *Piðreks saga*, where she exist in a context without valkyries.

The next sub chapter will extend on the concept of Brynhildr as a valkyrie and uses Andersson's (1980) discussion as a foundation to analyze what happens to our understanding of the text if we remove her from the trope. Further I will move in on the subject of Sigdrífa versus Brynhildr, and the nature of their relation to each other as literary characters and specifically the poetic *Edda*'s interpretation of them. My main concerns will be Andersson's disregard of the concept valkyrie and his interest in reading Brynhildr as a character that did not commit suicide. With Quinn's conclusion that valkyries can be read as life-giving creatures coupled with their association to reincarnation I will argue that Brynhildr's suicide was not intended as death, rather as a new beginning.

Part two will concern itself mainly with the literary themes of the narrative rather than the mythological motifs. This will enable me to analyze Brynhildr not only in the closed of sphere of the *Völsung* storyworld, but in a broader context. Friðriksdóttir (2013) discusses the trope of maiden-kings and how we can read these powerful literary characters as a part of an ongoing discourse at the time. It is the concept of powerful women and their effort to achieve autonomy over their own bodies, versus the need to control that power by the other characters in the story that is of interest to me. How does this apply to Brynhildr? Does she follow the trope or break with it?

The theme of power held by women leads to the last sub chapter about the speech of women in Norse literature, the concept of the whetting woman and Brynhildr's relation to these topics. My interest is in the concept of feminine speech existing in a largely female dominated literary theme, that of lamentation and whetting, possibly creating a female space within a literature heavily associated with masculine tendencies. Brynhildr herself exist in a masculine/feminine inbetween in which she embodies different archetypes such as the valkyrie and the maiden-king. These are both capable of physical fighting on par with men, owns lands or hold positions of power and who tends to choose their own spouses, yet they are considered very attractive spouses. In closing I will discuss the scene of Brynhildr's whetting of Gunnar as they appear in *Skamma*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga*, and how it is handled in each narrative.

4.1 Valkyries as a narrative tool in the *Völsung* storyworld

It is the archetype of valkyries as we find them within the *Völsung storyworld* and Brynhildr's identity as one that I intend to analyze in this chapter. Much like the whetting woman, the valkyrie

can be used to further the plot and is an often used narrative tool to invoke prophetic speech, divine design and fated destruction. In the Norse branch of this storyworld the valkyries play an integral and symbolic role and giving Brynhildr this title was not a coincidental one. It has been argued that Brynhildr originally belonged to a different cycle than the Sigurðr one³, and though I do not argue this, it is my belief that her role as a valkyrie is integral for our reading of her character. But to understand what being a valkyrie might imply for Brynhildr's character, I must first establish what a valkyrie is in this particular storyworld and how they relate to each other.

Judy Quinn discusses in the article “the Realisation of Mythological Design: The Early Generations of the Völsung Dynasty” aspects of how the patriarchy in the Völsung dynasty is upheld by the intervention of valkyries. The literary trope of *óskmey*, or valkyries, were used in roles such as educators, life-givers (mothers) and lovers of the various heroes in the *Völsunga saga*, but Quinn points out that the male kin of the female in-laws were usually responsible for the murder of the previous generation's patriarch as well. She details the role of the valkyrie Hljóð, who both helped conceive and then later married Völsung, Sváva who marries Helgi Hundingsbana and Signy who is the daughter of a valkyrie. Quinn only treats Brynhildr in passing and only in her capacity as the role of Sigrdrífa the valkyrie. Quinn's take on this duality of the valkyrie as both the contributor of a new generation and the extinguisher of the last, lends itself not only to the saga, but all the different versions of the legend across the expanse of the storyworld. How does Brynhildr's function as a valkyrie compare to the others, such as Signy, Sigrún and Hljóð? Did the conventions around the valkyrian attributes affect the interpretations of the character Brynhildr, and then specifically the Norse poets' view of her? And how far does this go in explaining the many facets of her character? Valkyries were arguably mythological creatures in the same category as dwarves, gygrs and einherjar and must have brought with them their own set of expectations in regards to behaviour and meaning in a narrative setting. By using Quinn's model of the valkyries as they appear in the beginning of the *Völsunga saga*, and applying it to Brynhildr as we find her in the poetic *Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga*, I hope to find recurrent patterns that can link her to the tradition.

4.1.1 The nobility of valkyries: their roles as brides and teachers

Quinn's focus is on the creation of the dynasty with the help of valkyries in the beginning of *Völsunga saga*, but I will try and apply it to Brynhildr as she appears in the storyworld overall. Quinn's analysis focuses on the *theme* of the valkyrie, as well as the motif, and what the concept of

3 For further discussion on this see Andersson (1980)

a valkyrie might have meant as a granter of life rather than a bringer of death:

I will explore the marriage patterns that occur in the early generations of *Völsunga saga* and the interventions necessary for the dynasty to succeed, before considering what light the narrative sheds on ideas about the valkyrie, since she is here connected with the engendering of a warrior's life rather than its termination, a role that is characteristic of the 'chooser-of-the-slain' in most other Old Norse mythological sources (Quinn 2009: 123)

The valkyries are in this model mythological beings that become earthly as they are sent by Oðinn to help the Völsung dynasty's fertility. For three generations the intervention of valkyries are necessary for them to prosper. The model she proposes follow a repeating narrative where a valkyrie is sent to help conceive the next generation of Völsung, marry the heir, conceive a child with him and then the previous generation dies. According to Quinn there is to be understood a divine mythological design in these texts; the Völsungs are Oðinn's champions in Miðgarðr, his wolves if you will, and to make sure that the game is in his favour he sends valkyries to be the brides. Brynhildr both upholds and breaks with the tradition Quinn proposes. She is not sent from Oðinn to keep the Völsung dynasty prosperous, but through her own vow to only marry the most fearless man a link is created regardless. Brynhildr does ensure Sigurðr's education as a king, his transition into manhood and the continuation of his genes through their daughter Áslaug in *Völsunga saga*, but also his death and the end of the Völsung dynasty. Destiny as a motif plays a large part and is mentioned by the characters often as the inevitable reason that something bad or destructive must happen. Brynhildr and Sigurðr echo the «valkyrie helps hero» motif but not by Oðinn's design. In *Völsunga saga* Oðinn appears to have forsaken the Völsung dynasty when he breaks the sword he granted Sigmundr, after which Sigmundr dies in battle. With the help of Reginn, Sigurðr is able to reforge this sword and upon leaving to avenge his father with it he meets Oðinn again. He later uses it to kill Fáfnir and thus acquires the gold that ensnared the valkyrie as a testament to his bravery. But at this point both the gold and the valkyrie are cursed, indirectly and directly by Oðinn himself. In such a context it reads as if Sigurðr brought the damnation on both the Völsung and the Gjúkung dynasty by carrying these two cursed mythological elements with him to the human world. Whether Sigurðr is cursed or blessed by Oðinn, he still receives the traditional guiding towards becoming a proper man and king from the valkyrie; a motif we see repeated in *Völsunga saga* (though not in the poetic *Edda*). In the poetic *Edda* it is Sigdrífa who tutors Sigurðr and even if the poem is not complete it is theorized from *Völsunga saga* that they form a romantic bond as well.

Like Sigrúðr at a later stage of the dynasty's development, Völsungr is born after the death of his father and in both cases it is a valkyrie who has the dual role of counselor in heroic values and lover (Quinn 2009: 139).

Following this frame of thought then Sigrdrífa fulfills the roles expected of a valkyrie as they are portrayed in *Völsunga saga*, while Brynhildr fulfills the one in the poetic *Edda* (or rather, as they are represented in *Völundarkviða* and the Helgi poems. I will discuss this distinction below). To expand on my point: Sigrdrífa, as she appears in the poetic *Edda*, is the one who tutors Sigurðr and possibly gets betrothed to him. This role is given to a valkyrie named Sigrdrífa, who, though later connected to Brynhildr through *Gripisspá* and *Helreið*, is often concluded to be her own entity. In *Völsunga saga* however, she is named Brynhildr throughout the text, yet recites the poem in *Sigrdrífumál* to Sigurðr upon waking. Why Brynhildr takes this role as an educating valkyrie in the Norse versions (e.g. in the poetic *Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and *Skáldskaparmál*) might be because the tradition had become established to a point where it functioned as a mnemonic device⁴. Another hypothesis is that Sigurðr and Helgi Hundingsbani at one point was the same hero or existed in the same story, and upon branching off Sigurðr's meeting with a valkyrie was still applicable, but taken over by the character Brynhildr. Sigurðr originally had his own valkyrie, Sigrdrífa, much like Helgi had Sváva/Sigrún, in a much earlier state of the story but she morphed into Brynhildr to simplify the narratives or was forgotten except the remains left in the poetic *Edda*.

Quinn argues that valkyries as they are presented in *Völsunga saga* are in their essence 'granters of life': Hljóð carried with her a fertility apple, Brynhildr seems to have had the ability to give victory to her chosen king and Sváva granted Helgi an identity, and they all carried children for the next generation. Valkyries become an integral part in the Völsung heroes' birth and *bildung*, rather than entities of death on the battlefields:

The valkyries [Helgi] saw, however, were not emissaries of death from Valhöll, but life-enhancing spirits who empowered him to become a fully-fledged warrior-king, who granted him full-blown heroic life in place of his incipient princely attitude («Þóttu harðan hug, hilmir, gíaldir»). For Helgi to move into the prime of life, he judged himself to need not just a name (in the voicing of which he demonstrated his instant acquisition of speech), but that which symbolised the gift of life, the valkyrie. (Quinn 2009: 137)

4 For further discussion on memory in Medieval culture see Marry Carruthers (1990)

In other words: the valkyries function as the ones who reveal the potential that are in the Volsung heroes through the nature of their birth. Metaphorically the sun and water to the growing seed. Their aspect as birds descending down to earth to fulfill their purpose reinforces this imagery. And there were numerous ways for the valkyries to fulfill this potential, but their main function were as both mother (in education and birth) and lover (in marrying them). Hljóð helped with the actual conception by bringing the golden apple, while Sváva helped Helgi develop an intellect, or a soul if you will, by giving him a name and the ability to speak. There are two instances of Brynhildr's rising up her hero. The first time she does it is one of her own choosing, a young king Agnarr, who was not the one Oðinn intended and she is duly punished for it. The second time she is trapped in stasis inside a hauberk and has to be set free by Sigurðr. She does not come to him in the shape of a crow like Hljóð does, nor was she able to ride through the air and sea like Sváva⁵. Though it is revealed in *Sigrdrífumál* and *Helreið* that Brynhildr has the shape of a swan, much like the valkyries in *Völundarkviða*. Sigurðr breaks Brynhildr's (Sigrdrífa's) bonds and she is now finally able to grant him wisdom and counsel. She explains to him the reason why she was cursed by Oðinn, which shows her continued fight for autonomy, but also puts her in a similar position as the other valkyries in the poetic *Edda*. They as well rebelled against the male authority in their life in order to choose their own spouse. Brynhildr is in opposition at every turn: when she discovers the deception of Gunnar and Sigurðr she swiftly takes action, upon her and Sigurðr's death she defies the gygr who comes to mock her, and rides to Hel in order to do in death what she couldn't in life. With Brynhildr's status as a valkyrie in mind then the last scenario begets questions such as: will she be able to do her duty and bring Sigurðr to Valhøll, or will they even reincarnate? She ends her speech in *Helreið* by stating that she and Sigurðr will never be apart or struggle with longing, which does imply that she is able to do something for him. Death might not signify when you are a valkyrie, and that giving of life through death is something valkyries are capable of in this storyworld. I will analyze these aspects of valkyrie immortality in greater detail in the following chapter (4.1.2).

In the poetic *Edda* the valkyries are often represented as women who can perform as men; they choose their own spouses, fight like warriors and have claim to land and riches through their highborn status. When a male relation sets out to arrange a marriage for the valkyrie she instantly revolts. This is especially clear in *Helgi Hundingsbana I* and *II*, as well as in Brynhildr's instance where she fights all the iterations of male authority; Oðinn, her foster-father and her brother. This is

⁵ It is interesting to note that Hljóð's bird-shape was a crow (Brynhildr's was a swan), while Áslaug's nickname is the crow. Perhaps a nod to her valkyrie heritage.

the exact opposite of their function in *Völsunga saga* where they are sent by Óðinn to operate as something akin to a fertility goddesses and does so without any preamble. Quinn writes:

The identification of the valkyrie as Sváva, the daughter of a king named Eylimi, underlines another important aspect of valkyries in relation to legendary heroes: their nubility. The valkyrie's life-enhancing powers take a number of forms – the gift of an apple, a name or the power of speech – but are manifested also in her very person as a marriageable princess who might enable a dynasty to flourish into a new generation. (Quinn 2009: 137).

It is an important distinction to make: the power they can bestow and the power that they inhabit. That which they can bestow can either be a magical item given to them (the apple) or intelligence which they have gathered (the name of the hero). But their nubility inhabit them as women. It is unclear whether valkyries are a creation of Óðinn or if they are merely in his possession. But as figures of fertility their bid for independence to choose their own husband can quickly become problematic. This leads to a change of both theme and motif between the valkyries in *Völsunga saga* and the poetic *Edda*, where in the former they are without autonomy while in the latter they both express and fight for their own choices. Quinn writes:

Parallels from the Helgi poems help to contextualise the involvement of a valkyrie in the third generation of the Völsung dynasty. The capacity to grant life through marriage with a valkyrie – problematic in the Helgi poems because of complex kinship loyalties and the crossed wills of Óðinn and his wish-maids – is made propitious in *Völsunga saga* where the valkyrie's desires are in accord with Óðinn's and her own kin group is effectively absent from the action of the narrative. (Quinn 2009: 139)

This is however not that easily solved with Brynhildr whose character is dependent on her relations. Her status as a valkyrie corresponds better with the others in the poetic *Edda* in which she, Signy and Sigrún all desire a Völsung hero but are betrothed to someone else by their male kin. As suggested by Quinn then the valkyries in *Völsunga saga* has a different narrative intent which does not correspond with Brynhildr, making Brynhildr's status as valkyrie near to superfluous in this iteration of the story:

The role of the valkyrie Hjóð is to graft something of the super-human onto the family tree at a crucial time, to reaffirm the 'chosen' status of Völsungr - wished into life rather than

chosen for death, and chosen for greatness – and to furnish him with heroic values appropriate to the patriarch of a great dynasty. (Quinn 2009: 139)

In the context that Quinn proposes the valkyrie is used as a wish-maiden rather than a collector on the battleground and her ability to grant life is her main genus. Typically the association of valkyries are mythological beings who descend onto the battlefield to bring with them the fallen, but in Quinn's model they are used to bring about chosen *living* heroes, first and foremost through their nubility. Their “otherness” is a part of what shapes the Vǫlsung genes and gives them abilities such as withstanding poison, superhuman strength and incredible height without being classified as giants (*Vǫlsunga saga*'s description of Sigurðr for example).

Brynhildr does in many ways fulfill her role as a valkyrie in her nubility. She is a much sought after woman, described as grand and wise. Yet she is not only the mother of Sigurðr's only surviving heir, but by having the Gjúkung kill the last heir of the Vǫlsung dynasty she effectively kills off both families. She even specifically makes sure that Sigurðr and Guðrún's son is killed and burned with him. In other words: she is both the life-giver of the next generation but also the destruction of the very dynasty the valkyries are supposed to supplement. In the *Vǫlsunga saga* Brynhild is interested in ending the dynasty through the patriarchal line, for she cannot suffer the wolf cub to grow up to threaten her, but she is not interested in ending Sigurðr's bloodline completely. She herself also have a daughter with him; Áslaug, who goes on to marry Ragnar Loðbrók. Áslaug is not mentioned in the poetic *Edda*, in which Brynhildr's nubility is not of interest, but she is accounted for in *Vǫlsunga saga*, and so Brynhildr fulfills her valkyrie duty. The name Vǫlsung might be gone, but the heroic blood lives on in Áslaug, and by extension in the line she continues. One step further removed from heathendom. Analyzing the narrative structure and, tentatively, the authorial intent, in this light makes it clear that the function of the valkyries differ between what the compiler of the poetic *Edda* wanted them to represent, and what the author of *Vǫlsunga saga* needed, and this difference affects the writing of Brynhildr's character. The association of valkyries in the context of rebirth, as we find them in the poetic *Edda*, seems to have expanded or taken on another layer in *Vǫlsunga saga*. Sigrún speaks with Helgi in his grave-mound after his death in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, and Brynhildr searches for Sigurðr in Hel in *Helreið*. These elements reads more as something in between life and death, a grey area, than actual life or death itself.

As it stands, Brynhildr's child with Sigurðr survives, allowing the Vǫlsung bloodline to continue through a valkyrie. Even though Brynhildr brought the Vǫlsung dynasty to an end, she did continue

the blood into another generation. Though Brynhild's role as a bride for a Völsung hero is convoluted, her role as a teacher and guide is not. The first meeting between Brynhildr and Sigurðr is given a lot of weight in *Völsunga Saga*, the poetic *Edda* and to some extent in *Skáldskaparmál*. The amount of detail varies between the different iterations, but there are certain elements that are repeated in all of them: Sigurðr finds a sleeping figure and frees her from her restraints, Brynhildr is a valkyrie, and she teaches him valuable lessons (except in *Skáldskaparmál* where the tutoring is not mentioned). This dynamic is an echo of that of Völsung himself, and so the circle begins and ends with the same motif:

Like Sigurðr at a later stage of the dynasty's development, Völsungr is born after the death of his father and in both cases it is a valkyrie who has the dual role of counselor in heroic values and lover. (Quinn 2009: 139)

One can for the sake of argument, distinguish between the poetic *Edda* and *Völsunga saga* as Brynhildr does indeed fulfill these two roles in the latter, but we don't know if she does in the former. In the poetic *Edda* the valkyrie teaching Sigurðr is named Sigrdrífa, even though Brynhildr reflects on her youth in *Helreið* and it is understood that she was Sigrdrífa at some point, the same connection is not made clear in for example *Skamma*. *Völsunga saga* omits any confusion in regards to Brynhildr's role in Sigurðr's life by using the same name for Brynhildr throughout the text.

4.1.2 The power of valkyries: resurrection, reincarnation and death

Brynhildr is given several different names or titles throughout the storyworld. Notably they are all tied in with her “valkyrie persona”: Sigrdrífa in the poetic *Edda*, and Hildir in *Skáldskaparmál* and the poetic *Edda*. According to Andersson's stemma [see figure 1], then *Skáldskaparmál* uses resources from *Forna* and *Skamma*, and perhaps *Meiri*. *Helreið* and *Skáldskaparmál* has a very similar way of titling Brynhildr. *Skáldskaparmál*: “Þá vaknaði hon ok nefndisk Hildir. Hon er kolluð Brynhildir ok var valkyrja.” (*Skáldskaparmál*. Faulkes 1998: 47), and when she mentions her own name in *Helreið* it goes like this:

7. Heto mic allir
i Hlymdalom
Hildi undir hialmi
hverr er kvnni. (*Helreið* 7. *Edda* 1965: 261)

The distinction here is that in *Skáldskaparmál* one can say she was named Hildir, and by extension then all that the word *hildir* means, but was called Brynhildir. In *Helreið* there is again a focus on Hildir, with *undir hialmi* as an added description on how Brynhildir came to be. There appears to have been another, or even several other, valkyries named Hildir. Which is logical as *hildir* is a heiti for battle. The poem *Grimnismál* mentions all of Óðinn's valkyries who are supposed to be residing in Valhöll, and Hildir is mentioned as one of those who bring mead to the *einherjar*:

Hrist oc Mist

vil ec at mer horn beri,

Sceggiald oc Scagul,

Hilrd oc Þruðr,

Hlacc oc Herfiotur,

Gall oc Geiranul,

Randgriþ oc Rathgriþ,

oc Reginleif:

Þer bera einherion al. (*Grimnismál* 36. Edda 1965: 84)

The association here is clear, Hildir's position as a valkyrie and a pourer of mead corresponds with Sigrdrífa. The first action she does upon recognizing Sigurðr is to bring him mead. Sigrdrífa fulfills her duty as a hostess by doing this, as well as drawing parallels to the valkyries and symbolizing the gift of wisdom that she is about to grant Sigurðr.

Another valkyrie-like being with the power of raising the dead is Hildir in the prose *Edda*. It is a story of a young woman who is the daughter of King Høgni. She is kidnapped by another man named Hédinn, which understandably infuriates Høgni. Høgni sets after Hédinn's army in order to bring back his daughter, but upon finding her she reveals that she has a ring around her neck and that if he takes the ring then Hédinn won't attack. Høgni won't take the ring and a battle ensues. Every night, however, Hildir walks out on the battlefield and uses magic in order to restore them to life, and the battle continues the next day. It is said until Ragnarok. After the prose is a poem said to have been originally composed by Bragi and it is quite a bit darker thematically. In it Hildir isn't so much a princess being rescued by her father as she is the personification of war. Instead of offering her father peace she secretly eggs him on and every night she converses with Hel to let the warriors out of her realm, ending in a circle of never ending bloodshed and battle (the ring around her neck

being a metaphor of this). Even if the text does not specify her a valkyrie, Quinn chooses to interpret her as such:

Hildir's power does not extend beyond the bounds of the battlefield – so that diurnal revivification brings only continued fighting and, at the end of the day, inevitable but transient death; but her definitive act is the granting of life. (Quinn 2009: 136)

Personally I would say that Hildir's powers corresponds more closely to the valkyries we know from the poetic *Edda* than those of *Völsunga saga*: she does resurrect the men but the result is not life; it is chaos and more death. Though valkyries in the poetic *Edda* are powerful and gifted they are often referred to as ill-fated, and their very nature is to bring about war and conflict rather than life. In Hildir's case the very act of bringing them to life is the act of causing more conflict. If they had remained dead the war would have been over. There is a duplicity in the poetic *Edda* valkyries that is not as apparent in the *Völsunga* valkyries. Yet the association to Hildir as a character that can bring to life dead men might signify in the reading of Brynhildir. Even if, in the extant texts we have of Brynhildir, it is not stated explicitly that she is able to awaken the dead, then a contemporary audience might have been able to connect the references. It also lends another understanding to the closing stanza of *Helreið*:

Muni við ofstrið
allz til lengi
konur oc karlar
qvicqvir fōdaz;
við scolom ocrom
aldri slíta
Sigurþr saman. (*Helreið 14*. Edda 1965: 263)

With the motif of valkyries as granters of life even through death, which is Quinn's argument, then it should extend to Brynhildir as well. If the valkyrie Hildir is known for the power of conversing with Hel to bring warriors back to life, then Brynhildir traveling to Hel in order to be with Sigurðr might be well within her means. But where I interpret the poetic *Edda*'s valkyries as harbingers of ill-fate, Quinn reads them as a different take on the life-giving aspect:

Although the valkyrie's sphere of action in the Helgi poems remains the battlefield, she

exercises her power of choosing death for warriors by protecting her chosen one [...], and is in that sense a force for life and not death. (Quinn 2009: 135)

At which point I'd argue that the valkyries inhabit not only one aspect of either life or death, but both. Especially in the Helgi poems where the concept of *endrbornir* is so prevalent. Through death they are born again; it is a circle made physical in the beings of valkyries. This reading is further established when Quinn points out that "Like Hildir's power to revivify dead warriors [...], the valkyrie seems to have been conceived of as a figure whose power to decide the moment of a warrior's death could also be imagined as the power to grant life." (Quinn 2009: 135). Brynhildr does indeed decide the moment of Sigurðr's death, meaning that it could have been understated that she was capable of granting him life as well. That she spends so much time preparing the pyre at the end of *Skamma*, as well as in *Völsunga saga*, is somewhat reminiscent of the futile effort Sigrún makes of creating a half-life together with Helgi in his burial mound. Rather than being granters of life in the poetic *Edda*, the valkyries reside over the realm of transition. The transition from life to death, and then through the concept of *endrborinn* also that of death to life. The author of *Völsunga saga* seems to have removed himself from the term rebirth creating a variant where valkyries does not carry with them this aspect. The transition is no longer from death to life, but simply to life.

This brings me to the subject to the power of valkyries and their status after marriage. Let us assume that Brynhildr as a valkyrie in her full power would have been able to bring Sigurðr to Valhöll or in some way release him from the bonds of Hel. Yet Quinn puts forward the notion that valkyries, or valkyrie-like women, forsake or lose some of their mythological power once they transcend into womanhood and gives birth: "[...] though having married and had sons with Helgi, Sigrún seems to have lost her valkyrie powers" (Quinn 2009: 138). This concept is dealt with in a literal degree in *Þiðreks saga*, in which Sigurðr takes Brynhildr's virginity and with it, it appears, her great physical strength as well. Brynhildr with her superhuman strength hangs the weaker king, Gunnar, on the wall every night so that he will not be able to consummate the wedding. Sigurðr on the other hand, who is a legendary hero, has similar powers as Brynhildr and is able to overcome her and so she loses her power of strength. Despite *Þiðreks saga's* concept of Brynhildr's powers and Sigrún's weakened state, Brynhildr appears to keep hers in both the poetic *Edda* and in *Völsunga saga*. She showcases her prophetic abilities at several instances and is still in the possession of great strength. Even if all of Gunnar's court tries to hold her back, they cannot stop her from driving the sword through her chest as she casually throws them away (*Völsunga saga*). As

she is dying she spends a long while foretelling the destiny of the Gjukung dynasty both in the poetic *Edda* and in *Völsunga saga*. And in *Norna-Gests þáttr* it is related how she grappled with a gygr through a *senna* even after she was dead. No small feats. Either Brynhildr must have been an exceptionally strong valkyrie and this is just a remnant of her power, or then she was able to keep them in a much larger degree than the valkyries who came before her. The difference between Brynhildr and the other valkyries as they are represented in *Völsunga saga* seems to lie in how her powers work versus theirs. While theirs are in large degrees blessings directly from Oðinn, such as the apple of fertility, Brynhildr's exists in herself, much like the valkyries from the Helgi poems. Brynhildr was punished by Oðinn and bound in a cursed state of stasis. The reason why she still had all her powers upon waking might have been because it was Sigurðr who woke her; the one destined for her through her own vow. Building on this, and drawing from *Þiðreks saga*, might further explain why she continued to be a valkyrie even after she married; Sigurðr and Brynhildr were never together as anything but brother and sister according to the poetic *Edda*. In *Þiðreks saga* only Sigurðr has the power to take Brynhildr's powers away from her, and this *divine design* motif might have expanded to the rest of the storyworld. Unlike Sigrún, Brynhildr never married her equal and as such never truly took the form of a mortal woman.

4.1.3 The Völsung narrative without the presence of valkyries: Brynhildr's function in *Þiðreks saga*

The question is then: does Brynhildr still fulfill her role as a valkyrie in an iteration of the legend which does not, in fact, have valkyries? In *Þiðreks saga* Brynhildr is never explicitly referred to as a valkyrie, unlike the poetic *Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and *Skáldskaparmál*, but she does have power that makes her capable of choosing her own husband both for marriage and for consummation. In *Þiðreks saga*, Brynhildr's motive to kill Sigurðr is not driven by jealousy as much as revenge. There are no initial trickery to get her to marry Gunnar, no forgetfulness potion and changing of appearance. Sigurðr is straightforward in that he broke his betrothal to her to marry Guðrún and proposes Gunnar as a suitable second candidate. Gunnar and Högni are quite willing to kill Sigurðr for his gold and land, there are no pretenses to Gunnar having second doubts once he realizes that Sigurðr poses a threat to him as a king. While Gunnar loves, or at the very least reverts and fears, Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* and the poetic *Edda*, there are no such feelings in *Þiðreks saga*. And while Brynhildr dying together with Sigurðr is a rather big part elsewhere in the Norse tradition, this does not signify here. As has already been established above then there are two significant tasks a valkyrie has to perform in order to do her duty to the Völsung dynasty: that of education and her

nubility. Using these traits as discussed above on Brynhildr as she appears in *Piðreks saga* might shed some light on the influences they had on the creation of her character outside of the valkyrie identity.

The educating poem Sigrdrífa/Brynhild performs for Sigurðr is present in both *Völsunga saga* and the poetic *Edda*, which makes her responsible for his development into a wise king. Even without the poem one could argue that she does the same in *Piðreks saga*. When Sigurðr arrives at her halls she asks him who he is. He is either unwilling or unable to answer, so she declares to him exactly who he is:

En hann nefnir sic oc kvaz heita Sigurdr hon spyr hver hver ætt hans er. en hann lez þat ægi vita at sægja hænni. Þá mælir brynhilldr ef þú veizt ægi at sægja mer, þa kan ec at sægja þer at þu ert Sigurdr Sigmundar son konungs, oc Sisibe, oc skalltu her vel komin med oss, eða hvert hefir þi ætlat ferð þina."» (*Piðreks saga af Berns* 1908-11: 317)

In other versions of the Völsung storyworld Sigurðr is raised by Hjördís and his step-father, but in *Piðreks saga* he is put on the water as a small baby and ends up being raised by a hind. Mímir finds him in the forest, but Sigurðr's heritage is never revealed to him. Brynhildr educates him with her great insight and gives him knowledge of himself. She is also the one to grant him his horse Grani. While Grani is not a foal of Sleipnir in *Piðreks saga*, it does signify that it is Brynhildr in particular who grants it to Sigurðr. In the Norse tradition both Grani and Brynhildr are the only ties to the mythological world after Sigurðr kills his foster-father Reginn, so that Brynhildr and Grani are linked is might signify. After Sigurðr leaves Brynhildr's court he now equipped with grand armour, a highborn name, his proper heritage and a mighty horse. It is enough to secure himself a princess, Grimhildr, and half a country. In the Norse branch Brynhildr grants Sigurðr the wisdom to be a good and wise king, while in *Piðreks saga* she grants him the means to become the king he was supposed to be from birth.

There are no clear indications for Brynhildr having life-giving nubility in *Piðreks saga*. She is a highly attractive spouse as Sigurðr makes clear for Gunnar, but Grimhildr was even more so. Especially since she also came with riches and half the land. Yet the nature of Brynhildr's powers seems to be something only Sigurðr can recognize. There is something in their common "otherness" that bind them together, much to the dissatisfaction of both. In the poetic *Edda* it is made quite clear that Brynhildr and Sigurðr never consummated their love for each other, and because of the lacuna

it is not entirely certain that Brynhildr's love for Sigurðr was ever returned. In *Völsunga saga* there is a love-quartet and Sigurðr seems to love Brynhildr and Guðrún both, but for different reasons. In the Norse branch Brynhildr and Sigurðr are arguably more equal in their first meeting than in *Þiðreks saga*. They are both without a family for the time being; Sigurðr having killed his last relation Reginn and Brynhildr having been imprisoned, and they end up helping each other. In *Þiðreks saga* Brynhildr is a queen ruling her court alone, and Sigurðr has, again, killed his foster fathers. Both in the Norse branch and in *Þiðreks saga*, Sigurðr is the one who orchestrates the marriage between Gunnar and Brynhildr, but the courtship is quite different. In the Norse branch it is made clear that when the party of the groom arrive at Brynhildr's halls it is only Sigurðr who is worthy of crossing the fire and thus worthy of her. In *Þiðreks saga* that is not apparent until after they are married and Gunnar is unable to consummate the marriage without help. In the Norse branch there is love between the valkyrie and the Völsung heir, and they would have married if it hadn't been for the potion Grimhildr (Gjúki's wife) gives Sigurðr. In *Þiðreks saga* there were obviously mutual respect to begin with, but Sigurðr soon forfeited that when he agreed to take Brynhildr's virginity, and power, by force. In both scenarios Sigurðr was willing to help Gunnar get something he did not deserve through disguise and trickery, and in both it ended with his death. And while it can be argued that Brynhildr fulfills her duty as a life-giving valkyrie by choosing to help her husband in ridding himself of a potential threat, i.e. Sigurðr, her motive is revenge and murder.

The overarching storyline is the same in the Norse branch and *Þiðreks saga*: Sigurðr kills dragon, Sigurðr visits Brynhildr, Sigurðr becomes king and marries Guðrún, Sigurðr tricks Brynhildr, Brynhildr kills Sigurðr. The how and the why differs between the two, but the result is the same. Having analysed the other valkyries and their storylines in the heroic lay in the poetic *Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, there are obvious repetitions. Using Quinn's model it has become apparent that Brynhildr fits the poetic *Edda*'s choice of valkyries rather than that of *Völsunga saga*; she is more a creature of death than she is of life. Comparing the Norse branch Brynhildr to that of *Þiðreks saga* Brynhildr, one can see that elements such as tutor and lover transcends the concept of valkyrie and belongs to the narrative rather than the mythological creature. But Brynhildr was not just a valkyrie, she was also a highborn shield-maiden with the connotations this trope brings with it in Norse literature. Besides that, there is Sigrdrífa who might have been the remains of an original valkyrie who was supposed to function like Sváva, Signy and Hljóð in the narrative, but got replaced by Brynhildr, giving Brynhildr an extra layer as a character. Yet Brynhildr has something none of the other characters in her part of the heroic lays and *Völsunga saga*, except Sigurðr: a backstory. Guðrún, Gunnar, Hǫgni and everyone's stories starts when Sigurðr enters their lives. We know why

Brynhildr was cursed, the name of her previous love, why she is called Brynhildr, that she wanted to be a shield-maiden and never marry and that she loves gold and power. These elements lay the foundation for the theory of Brynhildr having existed in her own narrative outside that of the Völsung storyworld before becoming assimilated in it.

4.2 Valkyrie or shield maiden: the influence of Sigrdrífa

I've addressed the challenges posed when trying to analyze a character existing in such a broad storyworld as the Völsung one, especially when considering that the texts left to us can be both convoluted and fragmented. We have to resort to text critical methods such as the stemma in order to try and establish a chronology and a hierarchy of the texts. Influence from other oral and literary sources are also important, especially with a character such as Brynhildr, or Sigurðr for that matter, who both show clear signs of being synthesized from several traditions into a vaster storyworld. That there is a divide between the character Brynhildr and Sigrdrífa is quite clear. The valkyrie waiting for someone to break her free from the cursed sleep is not the same woman who had to be threatened into marriage. Then why mix these two characters at all? Why was the name Sigrdrífa kept in the poetic *Edda*, but omitted in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Völsunga saga*? And what happened to Brynhildr's character when this merge happened?

The compiler of the poetic *Edda* made the connection between the valkyrie Sigrdrífa clear when he included *Sigrdrífumál*, *Gripisspá*, allowed for the birds in *Fáfnírmál* to name the valkyrie as Sigrdrífa, and ended Brynhildr's story with *Helreið Brynhildar*. Other extant texts treating the same instances of the story uses the name Brynhildr (or Hildir) only, but the actions made by Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* are the same as those made by Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál*. When did the process in which Sigrdrífa became Brynhildr begin, and does this synthesis allow us to remove Sigrdrífa from Brynhildr and analyze her without the “Sigrdrífa-elements”? If my concern had been that of hierarchical cataloging of texts then this would have been a sensible course of action. But with the concept of *storyworld* it would not be a full reading as it disregards the context in which we find these texts, and all the intratextual implications that comes with it. The name Sigrdrífa can only be found in Codex Regius of the poetic *Edda*, which is collected together with the Helgi poems where we find further writing on the motif of valkyries in the Völsung storyworld. By reading these extant texts within the framework of storyworld it becomes necessary to understand the context in which

they existed. When Brynhildr is called a valkyrie in a compilation where valkyries are of significant importance, it is paramount to read her in that horizon of understanding.

4.2.1 In defense of Brynhildr's status as a valkyrie

The work Andersson has done on Brynhildr's story in *The Legend of Brynhild* is, as I have mentioned before, invaluable in understanding her character and the context in which we know her. Andersson maps out both the Norse and the German branch of the legend and all of Brynhildr's different characterizations. He also continues the work of constructing a hypothetical version of the lost poem(s) in Codex Regius' lacuna. In this work there are two conclusions that he draws that are of special interest to me. One is his determined division of the characters Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr, the other is Brynhildr's suicide not being a part of the “original” legend and rather an aspect added much later in the Norse tradition. The latter he bases on the version we have of *Brot*, in which the suicide does not happen, it is also tellingly absent from the German tradition. In the end Andersson concludes with *Völsunga saga* basing the suicide parts on *Skamma* because there can't have been much of it in *Meiri* (Andersson 1980: 240-241). Personally I don't think *Brot* should be included in the analysis on the grounds of the poem's focus. It ends with Sigurðr's death and the speculation of how he died, and does not touch upon anyone's fate after Brynhildr's confessions. Either the poem is incomplete or then it was supposed to only concern itself with Sigurðr's death, not Brynhildr's. According to Andersson's own stemma; *Skáldskaparmál* borrows from both *Brot* and *Skamma*, and in the latter Brynhildr has the same ending as in *Völsunga saga*: she kills herself with a sword and is burned together with Sigurðr. So even if the suicide was not a part of the “original” or older version of the legend, the actions Brynhildr takes after Sigurðr's death was paramount to the audience of the texts we are trying to analyze. The literary tone changes when one liberate Brynhildr from her death, and it can be seen in Andersson's personal reading of her character:

We are accustomed to thinking of Brynhild as a broken woman for whom suicide is the only remaining option. Perhaps we must revise this concept and imagine a victorious Brynhild, grief-stricken but triumphant, a woman who has avenged the deception that deprived her of the man she wanted and survived intact. (Andersson 1980: 240)

It is an interesting take on what her suicide was meant to convey, and it immediately brings me to my second point: the division of Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr. Andersson consistently refers to Brynhildr as a shield maiden and warrior woman, rather than a valkyrie. And much like the suicide this small,

but important, distinction makes a huge difference. For as we saw above in Quinn's reading of the valkyrie in the *Völsung* tradition, this association carries with it a lot of weight. The archetype of the valkyrie is a familiar figure to the audience, her mere presence in the narrative brings with it connotations that effects the understanding of the story. When the narrator reads “Hon nefndiz Sigrdrífa oc var valkyria” (*Sigrdrífumál* 4. Edda 1965: 229) then the audience will know to expect something from her. It signals to the audience that this meeting is significant, and it explains any extraordinary powers as well as why she is dressed in warrior's garb. The poet(s) and compiler of *Codex Regius* spends no time explaining what a valkyrie is because the audience is expected to know. Expectations of Brynhildr and her character's role in the story is created the moment she is mentioned in the same context as a valkyrie. So even if the division between Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr is logical, especially if the intention is to find the source of where Brynhildr comes from, then what she was intended to be at the time that our extant sources was written, will be lost. Andersson writes that:

Our survey of the legend has taught us that this story is not from a unified source. It is composed from a variety of poems and a variety of concepts. There is general agreement that the warrior maiden who contravenes Odin's will and is awakened from her magic sleep by Sigurd was not originally Brynhild, but a woman named Sigrdrífa, whom the author of *Völsunga saga* [...] identifies as Brynhild. (Andersson 1980: 238).

This touches very closely on the concept of storyworld. Andersson agrees that the legend is composed of a variety of sources ranging from poems to pure hearsay, but then instantly disregards parts of this storyworld because they read as a poorly added element. It doesn't “fit the story” and is as such hacked away in order to find the “purer” form. But the audience at the time probably didn't have a concept of an “original”. Andersson also calls Sigrdrífa a warrior maiden rather than a valkyrie, completely disassociating her from the valkyries that came before her in the poetic *Edda* compilation and in *Völsunga saga*. He also addresses the choice of identity in *Skáldskaparmál*:

Snorri (or his redactor) could have used the name Sigrdrífa outright, but welcomed the name Hildr in *Helreið* because it did not absolutely commit him to the identification of Brynhild with Sigrdrífa. (Andersson 1980: 116)

This is indeed very possible, but we must not forget what *hildr* actually means, and that the use of Hildr as Brynhildr's name happens in *Skáldskaparmál*: the very book explaining heiti and kennings

and their use in poetry. The writers, authors and compilers had the possibility of picking the parts of the legend that were important to convey, and they invariably chose to keep Brynhildr as a valkyrie, the double betrothal and Sigrdrífa as Brynhildr. Is it right to fall into the trap of disregarding elements because we see them as less “authentic”? And what makes them less so? Our personal interpretations of what is important to convey?

What makes the poetic *Edda* especially intriguing is that it is first and foremost a compilation of poems. They can all be read individually, but put together these poems tell a coherent narrative of the Volsung dynasty, the deeds of heroes, revenge and in the end the destruction of said dynasty. By its very nature this compilation comprises the work of many different poets and their varied interpretations of the legend and we might not immediately agree with them on what is important to focus on. Because of our limited sources, attempting to separate Brynhildr and Sigurðr at this stage seems to me a fruitless endeavor. Though it raises several interesting questions:

If Sigurd was the dominant figure in the cycle, why was he displaced by Brynhild in the central poems? Or conversely, if Brynhild was originally the dominant figure, why was Sigurd later credited with a series of youthful exploits and not Brynhild? (Andersson 1980: 79)

Sigurðr's youthful exploits can be found engraved and carved on archaeological finds far predating any of our textual sources, and shows us that this tradition at least (Reginn and the killing of Fáfnir), was a part of the storyworld at an early stage of the legend. The way Sigrdrífa speaks of her youth, naming specific kings, gives the impression that the audience is supposed to be at least familiar with the story. It should signify that the poem harks back to such distinct events in a character's life. But any such reference is now lost to us and we can only speculate on who Sigrdrífa might have originally been, either in or outside the Volsung storyworld. Andersson writes about Brynhildr's part of the legend as the possible main protagonist, rather than Sigurðr:

She must have dominated from the outset, and Sigurd must always have been in her shadow. Rather than trying to imagine Brynhild as a late accretion to the Sigurd legend, we may more easily imagine that Sigurd's adventures were expanded because of a flattering association with such a powerful heroine. (Andersson 1980: 80).

Though this is a very tempting way of looking at it, I would rather say they benefited from a mutual

inclusion. Sigurðr's story would probably have prevailed for quite some time longer without Brynhildr, but would she have prevailed without him? Or would she have been swallowed up by Guðrún, the way Sigrdrífa was by Brynhildr? The theme in the Sigurðr and Guðrún cycle is that of the never ending circle of hatred, in which anger fuels more anger. Sigurðr was the youthful and brash warrior whose rather gullible trust in his own immortality and the faithfulness of his friends ended up getting him betrayed by those around him. His foster-father Reginn, his best friends Gunnar and Högni, his first love Brynhildr and even his mother-in-law Grimhildr; all for the cursed gold. It is even described in *Brot* how they celebrated and feasted after his death. Brynhildr's importance in this narrative goes beyond being the jilted lover, just as the gold is more than a treasure and represents the sickness of greed, then she represents the devastating effects of hatred and war. Her association with valkyries and the name Hildr are not coincidences. The poetic *Edda* is not a random collection of poems; it definitely follows a very literate understanding of composition and narrative. In her work *The Medieval Saga (1982)*, Carol Clover deeply shows the Icelandic (and continental) medieval author's preoccupation with what she calls the "cyclic impulse":

The single Icelandic saga is conceived as a central action or series of actions from which emanates contingent matter in forward and backward unfoldings in the form of prologues, epilogues, genealogical expansions, pendant *þættir*, and the like. (Clover 1982: 59)

This can also be extended to the eddic stage, at which point we might read the Sigurðr cycle as the central action and the previous and following cycles as the backward and forward matter. In other words: *Völundarkviða* and the *Helgi* poems act as the prologue and the genealogical expansion, the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr the climax, and the Guðrún and Atli poems are the aftermath, the effect after the cause. As Clover states in the first chapter the Icelandic saga is known for being very convoluted and meandering. The structure of the plot is not as obvious as we might want it to be with many digressing paths and anecdotes that at first might seem irrelevant: "Despite claims of pure plot and economy of action, there is something peculiarly ascentric and expansive about the sagas which cannot be explained away as *Stoffreude*." (Clover 1982: 19) Because of this it might be tempting to disregard the importance of the other poems in the heroic cycle of the poetic *Edda* and what they are supposed to bring to the story of Sigurðr. What might initially appear as an eclectic collection of poems actually hold several striking resemblances to the structure of the Icelandic saga. Because of this it is important to remember what a valkyrie is, what they are in the Völsung storyworld and why Brynhildr became one in the Norse tradition. Valkyries play an integral part in their personification as wise, strong women who bring war and death as part of their nature.

4.2.2 Valkyries in the poetic *Edda* and how they connect to Brynhildr

It is established in the poetic *Edda* that reincarnation is a power at least one valkyrie masters, Sváva/Sigrún, and it is mentioned more than once. At the end of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* it is added that this is based on wives' tales, and that one shouldn't give it much credence, but if you want to know more you can find it in *Karoliþom*:

Þar var trua I fornescio, at menn veri endrbornir, enn þat er nu calluð kerlinga villa. Helga oc Sigrun er callat at veri endrborin; het han þa Helgi Haddingiascati, enn hon Kara Halfdanardottir, sva sem qveþit er í Karoliþom, oc var hon valkyria. (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II Epilogue*. Edda 1965: 201)

The author of this prose accepts that what is to them called wive's tales were probably the actual belief in “ancient times”. This belief begot the idea that Helgi and Sigrún were reborn as Helgi and Kára. Furthermore, the writer accept that rebirth was something they believed happened to not just valkyries but regular people as well: “*menn veri endrbornir*”. The same reference to their nature as humans capable of being reborn is made in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*: “Helgi oc Svava er sagt at veri endrborin” (*Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar epilogue*. Edda: 178), but it must have been important enough for the writer/compiler to mention it explicitly and even refer onward to further reading. He also wants to make sure to remind the audience that Sigrún was a valkyrie, and when she was reborn she continued to be one. The note on wives' tales lets us know that oral tradition is very much still keeping alive aspects of the legend, and even though the old beliefs are dead, they are worth writing down as a curio and gives another layer of context. Quinn comments on the verses that the oral tradition was very much alive:

The verses assume their audience's familiarity with heroic figures like Guðrún Gjúkadóttir and mythological phenomena such as valkyries. Most probably this indicates that the sagas' audiences knew a range of conventions instantiated in the Regius texts, and they knew these from a living oral tradition (Quinn 2000: 45).

And while the co-existence of an oral tradition and a written tradition is not much disputed anymore, it might be tempting to disregard the oral tradition's influence on the written, and not just the written word's influence on oral tradition. Wives' tales, though explained as outdated beliefs by

the author/compiler of the poetic *Edda*, should not be completely disregarded by us. And by this I mean the concept of rebirth and the power of valkyries and the influence this association had on the interpretation of a character. If we rephrase “wives' tales” to “storyworld” the implication makes itself known at once. According to this storyworld then reincarnation was something associated with the valkyries and some of the heroes that existed in the lore of the Völsungs. In the Codex Regius we have up to three poems establishing the nature of valkyries and their role in Helgi's life. They give us a foundation to build our understanding of valkyries, and our expectations of their roles in the Völsunga son's lives. After the Helgi poems we meet Sigurðr and learn his story of how he was conceived, raised, got his sword and his horse and his name *Fáfnisbani* before finally introducing him and the audience to the valkyrie. In this case the valkyrie Sigrdrífa. The name Sigrdrífa is, as far as we know based on our limited textual sources, an abnormality to the poetic *Edda*.

Something in the transitional phase in the Norse branch of the storyworld allowed for the merging of Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr. This synthesis must have taken place at a time in which the compiler of the poetic *Edda* found it prudent to include the Sigrdrífa name instead of just changing her name, as it is done in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Völsunga saga*. In the poetic *Edda* we are still following the youthful exploits of the Völsung hero Sigurðr when we meet the valkyrie Sigrdrífa. This is the last poem from his point of view (as far as we are aware) before switching over to Brynhildr and Guðrún. Chancing upon this valkyrie is a part of Sigurðr's *bildung* and it enables him to become the king he is supposed to be by wielding the wisdom Sigrdrífa grants him. It is very much in tradition with the previous Helgi poems as discussed above. Though Sigrdrífa is arguably the character which fulfills her valkyrie role in the Völsung tradition, and not Brynhildr: it is Sigrdrífa who teaches Sigurðr runes, who, according to the saga, wins his heart and bears him a daughter. Brynhildr is not named Sigrdrífa at this point in the saga, but she does recite the poem from *Sigrdrífumál* inevitably linking them together. By keeping Áslaug as a part of canon and placing her firmly in the timeline, we accept the significance of Sigrdrífa in Sigurðr's story. In the end Áslaug is the only child surviving and the only Völsung to continue forwards into the next bracket of the legend.

Dividing Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr must be tempting when reading the German branch because of how Brynhildr's story is structured there. We learn of Sigurðr's family and ancestral history in *Piðreks saga*, while Brynhildr exists here in a closed vacuum. The only facts that are relayed of her is that she resides over a court, has good horses, is wise and extremely strong. That is all that is needed to be known to tell the story. This is, however, not the case in the Norse branch where she

has an extended story with family relations, foster families and ambitions outside of marriage. Brynhildr's story exist in an intratextual and intertextual setting and valkyries were not without connotations and associations. Brynhildr of the Norse and German branch had several common themes and attributes, but Brynhildr in the Norse branch belongs in a Völsung tradition in which valkyries are thematically significant for the narrative. Which aspects of Brynhildr's story as it is told in the Norse branch coincides with that of Sváva and Sigrún, the valkyries present in the poems arranged before Sigurðr's cycle? In order to fully grasp Brynhildr's place as a valkyrie in the narrative is to analyze how she relates to not only the valkyries of *Völsunga saga*, but also those of the poetic *Edda*. I will here first list the motifs as they appear in the Helgi poems before comparing it to the narrative of Brynhildr:

There is an instant love or attachment to the hero from the valkyries based on the hero's abilities. Especially versus the man they have been betrothed to against their will. The hero proceeds to help her by killing the man she does not want, though in most of these cases this ends with her kin also dying or being harmed. The theme is that she cannot have what she wants without suffering great loss because of who and what she is.

Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr arguably fulfill all of these points. Sigrdrífa seems to instantly recognize Sigurðr's abilities upon waking. Even Brynhildr from *Þiðreks saga* is able to see who Sigurðr really is, even when he himself is unaware of his birth. Brynhildr is exceedingly aggravated that she is unable to get the man she wants and that she has to marry the man she views as beneath her. The twist here is that Sigurðr, unlike Helgi, does not keep his promise to her and marries another woman.

The valkyries are all accomplished warriors and are at the time of meeting their hero riding to or from battle. The hero's friends caution him that this woman is of special birth and rank.

Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr are described as warriors their entire life. When Sigurðr finds Sigrdrífa she is trapped inside an hauberk as if she just returned from battle when she fell asleep. The name Brynhildr comes from her love for battle and the helmet she always wore, and she makes it clear that if she had not been forced into marriage she would have enjoyed a life as a warrior. But again the twist is that Sigurðr is not warned about her status, rather he is the one to inform Gunnar.

The valkyries' attachment lasts through the death of the hero, and in most of the cases his death greatly weaken her to the point of death. Sigrún resides with her dead hero in his grave mound for a night before realizing the futility of it and then dying shortly after.

For the other valkyries the death of their hero was devastating to the point of eventual death.

Brynhildr does not wait for her powers to wane, possibly because her grief is not of the romantic caliber. Rather she takes the sword in hand, fighting off anyone who tries to stop her, and kills herself.

Reincarnation seems to be a big part of their story.

Reincarnation is only hinted at by Brynhildr and Högni, but there is definitely a theme of life after death in *Helreið*.

The thematic parallels are clear and it is fair to say there was a reason the compiler chose to keep both *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* as well as the poem of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, while including notes on their nature of rebirth. There is an implication here that he, the compiler, might have been loathe to spell out and that is of Brynhildr and Sigurðr being reborn. The name of Sigrdrífa might have been included for just this reason, in order to thematically tie her in with the other valkyries Sváva and Sigrún. This brings me to Andersson's argument that Brynhildr's suicide was not originally part of her story and should not signify in the analysis of her character. Or, as he states, should not cloud our judgment of who her character was. But Brynhildr does not read as a broken woman upon her deathbed. Rather she is calm and collected as she distributes her wealth to those closest to her and even has the time to grant them a prophecy.

Unnz af hyggiandi
haurscrydd kona
ung at aldri
orþ víþr qvað (*Skamma 51*. Edda 1965: 256)

It is as if she is preparing for a long voyage from which she will not return. This image is again reinforced by the wagon she is burned with in *Helreið*, a prop I will not assume was an incidental detail: “oc var hon í reiþ þeirri, er guðvefíom var tioldoþ” (*Helreið*. Edda 1965: 260). The wagon is mentioned further in *Norna-Gests þáttr* and the concept of the rich draping seems topical. It reminds us again that Brynhildr comes from a different place, it reinforces the journey she has done from the valkyrie Sigrdrífa, into the mortal world and then back again. It might not be the type of reincarnation or rebirth we expect from Sváva and Sigrún, but death here does not seem to be the end, rather the morphing into another existence. Brynhildr herself does not seem the least bit surprised by it, quite the opposite, it appears as if this was her purpose all along and she is very familiar with the journey ahead of her:

Hrynia hanom þa
a hæl þeygi
hlunnblic hallar
hringi litcoþ,
ef hanom fylgir
ferð min heþan;
þeygi mun ór for
aumlig vera. (*Skamma* 69. Edda 1965: 259)

But this transitional journey loses its significance if we do not read Brynhildr as a valkyrie. It is established that in the Völsung storyworld an afterlife exist, specifically for valkyries and Völsung heirs. Though this is not a prevalent or important theme in either *Völsunga saga* or *Piðreks saga*, it certainly is in the poetic *Edda*.

4.2.3 *Helreið Brynhildar, life after death and the fulfillment of the Sigurðr cycle*

According to Andersson the poem *Helreið* is “static and add no new story material” (Andersson 1980: 108) and concludes his brief analysis of the poem as a writer's idle curiosity on what Brynhildr's youth could have contained, and that by linking her to Sigdrífa expanded upon her lore. He writes: “In short, *Helreið* is an effort on a very modest scale to create the sort of *enfance* for Brynhild that was provided in such rich detail for Sigurd in the various poems devoted to his early adventures” (Andersson 1980: 116). He also admits that the mention of the swan *hamir* Brynhildr possessed in her youth tie her in with Sváva and Sigrún. On the *Helreið* poet associating her with Sigdrífa he writes: “By equating her with the valkyrie Sigdrífa in the “Erweckungslied,” the poet of *Helreið* was able to solve the mystery and fill Brynhild's youth with valkyrie lore.” (Andersson 1980: 116). I disagree with these conclusions somewhat. Not necessarily on *Helreið* having been someone's attempt to expand upon Brynhildr's youth, but Andersson's disregard for what this synthesis of the valkyrie Sigdrífa and the shield maiden Brynhildr actually contribute to the reading and understanding of her character. Clover (1982) argues the economic nature of medieval Icelandic sagas, and while the poetic *Edda* is not, in fact, an Icelandic saga it does borrow its structure from it. She writes:

The illusion of unity comes in part from the style of sagas- the language, which if it is not precisely “oral” is widely considered to be a model of simplicity and exclusion. Here the test of necessity has some validity; every word counts, and some words, such as adjectives, count even more than others

by virtue of their underuse. (Clover 1982: 24)

One could argue that this description is especially apt regarding the structure of eddaic poems. And yes, adding *Helreið* after *Skamma* might have been the compiler's way of elaborating on Brynhildr's youth, but the connotation that specific identity brings with it is much more significant in the context of this storyworld. My conclusion is that her death was a means to explore the concept of dying in a different setting than the strictly biblical. That the sphere of poetry ostensibly telling the tale of mythological and legendary heroes afforded a way to write about topics that is hard to digest. Such as keen loss after a death, or the longing for someone even if they have moved into the next. This is perhaps made clearer in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* in which Sigrún's longing for her husband makes her unable to accept his death. He returns to her for one night, essentially fulfilling the age old wish of one last goodbye, but he is cold as a corpse and she is unable to warm him. The grave mound function as the in between realm where they can interact, and Brynhildr likewise makes the same transition when she travels to Hel. These women with the power to transcend life and death act as go-between. The preoccupation in the poetic *Edda* of this transitional state is continued in *Helreið*, a poem which I intend to analyze more in depth below.

The poem *Helreið* exist as an extant text in Codex Regius of the poetic *Edda* and in *Norna-Gests þáttur*. It is quite short with only 14 stanzas, and written in eight-lined *fornyrðislag*. It briefly explains what happens to Brynhildr after her death and is unique in its theme compared to the other heroic lays in the poetic *Edda*. None of the other characters in the Sigurðr cycle or Guðrún cycle gets this type of postmortem exposition, and especially not through a lengthy monologue. Even if, as Andersson concludes, the poem itself does not give us any new information regarding the story of Brynhildr, the placing of it within the compilation certainly does. In the poetic *Edda* it works intratextually by using elements from *Sigrdrífumál* to remind the audience who and what Brynhildr is. *Norna-Gests þáttur* is intertextual in associating itself with the Codex Regius or a similar collection containing both *Helreið* and *Sigrdrífumál*, and another saga that it merely refers to as “Sigurðarsaga”, but seems to have been in circulation at the same time. *Helreið* in the poetic *Edda* follow directly up on the events that concludes *Skamma*, and is itself followed by a prose section explaining the events after Brynhildr's death.

The poem itself starts with a few lines of prose explaining what happens after Brynhildr kills herself. Despite Brynhildr's dying wish in *Skamma* to be burnt together with Sigurðr, this poem tells the story of how there were two funeral pyres built, and that Brynhildr was burnt *after* Sigurðr. It is

a noteworthy change from how it is told in *Völsunga saga* where they are burnt together, building on the events of *Skamma* rather than those in *Helreið*. This is the version we find in *Skáldskaparmál* as well, making *Helreið* and *Norna-Gests þáttr* the only variants where they are divided after death. In *Helreið* of the poetic *Edda* the pyre is only mentioned shortly, but in *Norna-Gests þáttr* the prose is expanded upon and adds context to the meeting between Brynhildr and the gygr. We learn in *Norna-Gests þáttr* that the gygr was an associate of Sigurðr, that she saw him as the greatest of kings and that she often used to help him. She says that his blood is on Brynhildr's hands and that Brynhildr should have been burnt alive rather than with dignity on a funeral pyre. In the poetic *Edda* we are given the impression that Brynhildr meets the gygr after she has been burnt and is on her way through Hel. The author of *Norna-Gests þáttr* expands on this scenario by having the gygr travel to the funeral in order to defame Brynhildr for her actions rather than it being a chance meeting. The hirdmen ask Gestr about the legend in a fashion that indicates that the poem *Helreið* was a variant of the story on which not everyone agreed: “Þá spurdu menn Gest hvuort Brynhildr hefde nokkut kuedit daud. Hann kuad þat satt uera. Þeir badu hann kueda, ef hann kynne.” (*Flateyjarbok* 1860: 355). The author has in this *þáttr* an opportunity to add yet another variant into the storyworld in which Brynhildr journeys to Hel. According to this *þáttr* then Gestr was there at the proceedings, but acts purely as a narrator, giving none or few of his own opinions, and the hirdmen take on the role of audience. *Helreið* can definitely be read as an apologetica in the poetic *Edda*, but even more so in this context. Andersson writes that it is generally accepted that *Helreið* was added in to stand in deliberate opposition to *Guðrúnarkviða I*, but is himself also of the opinion that this was not the only reason for its inclusion (Andersson 1980: 116). If *Helreið* is to be read as an opposition to *Guðrúnarkviða I* then the gygr takes on the role of the doubting character, or perhaps even the audience. She is ignorant of Brynhildr's past and calls her evil, ill-fated and a lovesick girl who cannot make up her own mind. *Helreið* ends by giving Brynhildr ten stanzas of free monologue to declare who she is and what has been done to her to make her choose the way she did. The gygr calls Brynhildr a *hvarfúst hofuð*, probably indicating her not being able to settle on either her husband or Sigurðr, nor whether she is angry, elated or grieving. The gygr's last stanza underlines the evil fate (or norms) that rests over Brynhildr, and further not only accuses her of Sigurðr's death, but also the desolation of Gjúki's children:

Gygrin kvað:

“Þú vart, Brynhildr,

Buðla dóttir!

heilli versto

í heim bori;
Þú hefir Giuca
um glatat bornom
ok búi þeirra
brugðit goðo.” (*Helreið 18*. Edda 1965: 261)

The gygr, being a gnostic character, acts here to prophetically summarize what Brynhildr's actions will lead up to, despite it not making much sense in the overall timeline of the narrative. The writer of the poem is familiar with *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Brot*, but also *Guðrúnarkviða I* and *II* and *Atlamál hin Grænlenska* and *Grænlensku*, and the poem expects the same knowledge from the audience. In the poetic *Edda*, *Helreið* works as both a summary of Brynhildr's life and the fate she and Sigurðr had, but also as a repeat of the dire warnings given by Brynhildr at the end of *Skamma*. It is a very well placed poem for the narrative after the dramatic ending of Sigurðr and Brynhildr's life, and is followed directly by the prose section *Dráp Niflunga*, which details what happened to Gunnar, Högni, Guðrún and Atli. It closes a chapter of the cycle and prepares the audience for the next phase, which takes place several years later. The last valkyrie and the last Völsung hero of legend are both dead, though according to Brynhildr they can now be together forever. *Helreið* might not tell us much that is useful in recreating the original “*Brunhildenlied*”, but it does tell us quite a bit of what Brynhildr might have meant for the current audience. Not only does the Völsung dynasty end with a poem monologued by the one who had the last heir killed, but it ends with Brynhildr putting a claim on him in the after world. Where *Helreið* ends abruptly by Brynhildr chasing away the gygr in the poetic *Edda*, the writer of *Norna-Gests þáttr* adds that the gygr runs away screaming which excites the hirdmen: *Þa sögðu hirdmenn konungs: gaman er þetta, ok segbu enn flæira*. (*Flateyjarbok* 1860: 357). The king, perhaps nervous about the un-Christian nature of Brynhildr's travel through Hel, stops the stories of Sigurðr and Brynhildr.

The arrival of the gygr in *Helreið* is surprising, but probably not entirely incidental. Brynhildr could have given her monologue to anyone present at her death; she had already spent a lot of time declaring her will and prophesying into the future, anyone present would have done as an audience for her confession. Just as the valkyries exist in a common conscious so does the existence of gygrs and what they bring to the storyworld of the Völsungs. The poem *Helreið* bridges the gap between Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr, molding the two characters together, establishing again the association of valkyries on Brynhildr. In *Helgakviða Hjörðvarðsson* there is another instance of a *senna* against a gygr, Rimgjerd, and this poem also contains a valkyrie and a legendary hero with the gift of rebirth.

Further, Sigurðr is one of the remaining great heathen heroes and his fraternizing with gygrs reinforces such a theme in a story such as *Norna-Gests þáttr*. That Brynhildr the valkyrie is the one to chase away the gygr might be an indication of the associations valkyries could have had to angels, for example.⁶

4.2.4 Valkyries' inherent nature of war and the link to rebirth

Reading Brynhildr as the archetype of a valkyrie allows for an expansion of the storyworld in which being a valkyrie meant more than a shield maiden or warrior woman. Disallowing this association denies larger parts of what Brynhildr's character had become, which might not add much to the discourse in literary history, but do show us a faceted layer of the medieval audience. Whether it was their power and strong sense of self-autonomy or their likeness to the biblical angels, Brynhildr's version of it stimulated something in the imagination. Andersson uses the words “broken woman” and “suicide the only remaining option” to describe the type of associations that has been typically attributed to Brynhildr ending her life. Removing the suicide from Brynhildr, as he suggests was originally the case, allows for a very different interpretation of her actions: she has Sigurðr killed, her deceiver, by forcing his sworn friend, her other deceiver, to plot the murder and thus placing an oath breaker curse on Gunnar. In the end crumbling two dynasties. After this she walks away, possibly to live the life of a warrior as she originally intended. It is a good ending for her, but we do not have any extant texts telling us this. She does take her own life and we as modern readers choose to call it suicide, with all the stigma that follows such a word. It was not a desperate move by a grief stricken woman however, but a planned action. Brynhildr makes it very clear on several occasions both in poems and in *Völsunga saga*, that there are no chances of Sigurðr and her living together in life:

6.”Hafa skal ec Sigurð,
eþa þo svelta,
mag frumungan
mer a armi.

7. Orþ meltac nu,
iþromc eptir þess:
qvan er hans Guðrún,
enn ec Gunnars;

6 For further discussion on valkyries as angels see Johansson (2017).

liotar nornir

scópo oss langa þrá.” (*Skamma 6-7*. Edda 1965: 248)

Brynhildr becomes aware that her life has been cursed by the ill-will of the norns, a curse Helgi explains to Sigrún that she also has. Helgi tells her explicitly that the norns want to cause her harm and that his tidings are ill: the man that she loves has had to kill her kin because her very existence was to create war. Rightfully this causes Sigrún grief, despite her being the one to ask Helgi to be her man and protect her against the engagement her father tried to force upon her. Helgi has this to say:

“Huggastu, Sigrún!

Hildir hefir þu oss veritþ,

vinnat scioldungar scapom” (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II 29*. Edda 1965: 196)

At which point she accepts her lot as a valkyrie and declares that she would have killed them herself as long as she could be with Helgi. The concept of forced fate and the inability to thwart destiny is a common theme in a lot of Norse medieval literature. As a valkyrie Sigrún is the embodiment of war and will naturally cause havoc; she better embrace her nature than grieve it. What happens if such a force, that is the valkyrie, is deprived of the man they have chosen? If the one man who could parallel her strength chooses another woman? And yet we see in *Völundarkviða* that even if she does find a worthy man her desire for battle is so great that one day she will simply disappear. The valkyries' fight for autonomy tie heavily in with the maiden-king trope, a topic I will discuss below.

Accepting Brynhildr as a valkyrie and linking her to the character Sigrdrífa becomes imperative in analyzing her as a character in the Norse branch. In this iteration of the storyworld she is a valkyrie and brings with her all the associations that they have to reincarnation and life after death. The compiler of Codex Regius included three poems, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, all with the concept of reincarnation of valkyries and chose to make it very clear that Brynhildr is the valkyrie Sigrdrífa. There was an intention in this reading beyond a writer thinking it a good idea at the time. For us to understand the necessity of merging Sigrdrífa and Brynhildr we must be aware of who she is in the Norse tradition. The author of *Völsunga saga* opts not to keep reincarnation as a theme for valkyries, and also chooses not to keep *Helreið* and its contents. The dual death of the tragic lovers and their being buried together were perhaps more suited to the courtly trends of the *riddarasögur*.

We do not know who composed the prose sections of the poetic *Edda*, whether it was the compiler of Codex Regius himself or if he chose to keep the text already written on the nature of rebirth on *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. Whatever his motives; he did include them. Quinn (2000) comments on the word *endrbornir* and *forneskja* as they appear in this prose in regards to the Bishop Jón creating a growing unease towards the writing on such topics. Her explanation is that the compiler chooses to cite the poem “*Karoliophom*” rather than relay the poem itself. As such the reference to rebirth is there but not explicitly. She writes:

The naming of the unrecorded poem is nonetheless evidence of its existence and suggests that sensitivity to the transmission of *forneskja* was more acute for a scribe on the point of committing a text to vellum than it was for those who were familiar with it from oral recitation. (Quinn 2000: 38)

The idea is that even though the clerics or scribes committing the text to vellum were adverse to discussing themes such as rebirth, perhaps the audience at large were not. With an oral tradition still very much alive the audience was probably able to connect the nature of rebirth in Sigrún and Helgi's relationship to that of Brynhildr and Sigurðr. The compiler might not have been comfortable relaying the actual act of rebirth, but *Helreið* comes very close in explaining the nature of it. And the fact that Brynhildr could possibly reincarnate is stated in *Skamma* by Högni:

“Eino þvi Högni
andsvor veitti:
“Letia maðr hana
langrar gongo,
þars hon aptrborin
aldri verþi!” (*Skamma* 45. Edda 1965: 255)

Is this merely an expression thrown about in a heated moment, or is it a narrative choice made by the poet to indicate the eventual fate of Brynhildr? Whether Brynhildr originally committed suicide or not, it certainly is a topic dwelt on at length in the Norse tradition.

4.3 The trope of the maiden-king: The *Völsung* storyworld's approach to Brynhildr's fight for autonomy

Above I have discussed Brynhildr in the context of a valkyrie as we recognize them in the *Völsung* storyworld and what this reading can do to our understanding of the text. The wildly different interpretations in the poetic *Edda* versus *Piðreks saga* and *Völsunga saga* in terms of adding “magical” elements to Brynhildr's strength gives us three different characters. In the poetic *Edda* the compiler has created a portrait of a young valkyrie who fought the male authorities in her life at every turn, eventually choosing to take her own life to prevent them using her as a pawn in their own games. In *Völsunga saga* she is named a valkyrie but her powers are more a matter of providence and her highborn nature. She is simply “other”; wiser, smarter, stronger and gifted (cursed?) with prophetic abilities. But ultimately, although she is named a valkyrie, her death is her end, not a new beginning. *Piðreks saga* is closer to *Völsunga saga* in this regard as Brynhildr is never named anything but human, though she possesses all-knowing and superhuman strength. Her will is hard as steel in this saga and she makes sure that everyone pays dearly for what they do to her. Without a shred of guilt or a tear shed she has Sigurðr's mangled body thrown into the bed where Grimhildr is sleeping. She also does not kill herself in the version of *Piðreks saga* that we have, as it simply does not correspond with her character in this narrative, showing a great deal of consistency for the version of Brynhildr they have chosen to depict. In the context of the *Völsung* storyworld the female archetype valkyrie is integral for the development of her character. Other tropes prevalent in the texts is the element of the “bridal-quest” trope, but this is not so much a characteristic as it is a plot-device. If anything it is a part of Sigurðr and Gunnar's *bildung*, not Brynhildr's.

4.3.1. The dubious power of the maiden-king

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2017) discusses the theme of the maiden-king as a narrative tool in what was to become the popular genre of *riddarasögur* together with the rising Norwegian court and nobility. This genre, as we interpret it today, was a fusion of the popular *lais* and courtly romances from the continent and the more familiar themes of heroic legends and *fornaldarsögur*. The motif, as Friðriksdóttir describes them, is of a young woman of noble birth, often characterized as haughty and cruel and sometimes armed, who delights in tormenting her male suitors and who rules over land or people (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 107). Though these descriptions might not be

immediately applicable to Brynhildr, the themes these stories visits can help shine a light on some of the struggles she faces. These stories follow the maiden-king, the young woman whose goal is to be a sovereign and to avoid marriage at any costs, yet the sympathies seem to lie mainly with the man who tries to woo her. While bridal-quests tends to challenge the male protagonist to show his prowess and worthiness by passing trials, then the maiden-king appears to be the challenge in itself in these romantic stories. How can the male protagonist outwit her, or as is sometimes the case, dominate her with brute force? While the maiden-kings tend to show ingenuity, wisdom and strength the “happy ending” is her giving up her power and submitting to the male wooer. The theme is not unfamiliar to us even today and we see it a lot in games and superhero media where strength is abundant: the trope is a strong woman who opposes the male protagonist at every turn. Friðriksdóttir points out the difficulties in reading the maiden-king trope as modern readers:

The maiden-kings are by modern standards empowered, but their rule, often legitimate within the saga world, is nevertheless depicted as deviant, and they always marry in the end, losing the autonomy and legitimate power they have before. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 116)

The female character is depicted as powerful in order for her to lose said power to the male protagonist, the loss of a woman's autonomy and power is the man's greatest prize. The tragedy is that the women tends to lose their spirit to the point where they no longer desire their autonomy, where giving up is easier, and it is framed as desirable for them to give up this fight. Breaking Brynhildr would of course be the ultimate prize for a powerful king. The wooing of Brynhildr, as mentioned, reads more like a bridal quest than the breaking of a maiden-king. In the Norse branch Brynhildr does not rule anything, and at the point of either Sigurðr or Gunnar meeting her she is either bound by Oðinn or kept by a male relative. She does, however, covet her own autonomy and her plans for herself in the future does not entail marriage. If she is to marry it is to be on her own terms and resents it when she realizes that these terms have not been met. She uses this as a leverage against Gunnar and in order to explain her actions to the audience. Friðriksdóttir states: “In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr, the likely model for later maiden-kings, relates the circumstances of her marriage to Gunnarr, forced upon Brynhildr by her father.” (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 112). This dialogue also takes place in *Skamma*, as Brynhildr explains to Gunnar why she laughed when her plans for killing Sigurðr came to fruition. She explicitly states that she was young and happy as she was free at her brother's court with absolutely no desire to marry. In the poem it is Atli that forces her on the threat of her riches, rather than her father, but the result is the same: she is a pawn used to get closer to the Gjúkung and eventually the gold they have a claim to through Guðrún. Greed is another

theme explored in the maiden-king literature as the female protagonists use their power to punish anyone who threaten their autonomy or to accumulate more wealth, which usually ends up being their undoing. Brynhildr does covet Sigurðr's gold, and is loathe to give up her own. When faced with the choice of staying free as a shield maiden, or keeping her gold as well as accumulating more wealth as a married woman, she eventually concedes to the proposal. The distribution of said wealth is a large part of her death scene as well. She wants to reward those loyal to her with this gold that turned out to be worth nothing to her in the end. The red gold, the blood gold, that bought her freedom.

4.3.2 Authorial intent: how to love a valkyrie

Being forced into marriage by any male relative is traditionally something valkyries in the *Völsung* storyworld opposes greatly. The lengths they are willing to go to in order to avoid marrying the man their father prearranged for them can be seen in Sigrún, for example, who, though initially devastated by the death of the family, easily admits she'd kill them herself if she had to, in order to retain her choice in spouse. This willfulness is thematised in the Helgi poems through the curse on her kind, the valkyries, as they are destined to bring havoc and war with them wherever they go. Yet they are so very lovable and irresistible for these male protagonists, who are willing to do whatever they can to keep them happy, including killing their kin. In the context of the maiden-king trope, created as Friðriksdóttir argues to thematise powerful women and the trouble this brings with them, it reads almost as a heartfelt sigh. To love these women who cannot forsake their nature that is to want the same thing as men: autonomy, sexuality, physical prowess and love. Völundr, Helgi and even Gunnar in his way in the poetic *Edda*, all choose to support their valkyrie or maiden-king, despite the warnings given to them in doing so. This discourse changes when leaving the intratextual themes of the poetic *Edda*, the valkyries, and moves into the sphere of (more courtly influenced) sagas, the *Völsunga saga* and *Piðreks saga*.

In the spirit of the valkyries, Brynhildr and Sigrún who appear in eddic heroic poetry, maiden-kings show autonomy by disobeying their fathers, mistreating suitors, and pursuing their own agenda; specifically avoiding marriage and ruling their kingdom. This female image is not consistent with the position of women largely endorsed in Continental romance [...] (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 108)

In Brynhildr's case she did not just disobey her own father, but Óðinn the all-father as well, the

highest standing patriarch as represented in the Christian view of pagan lore. Brynhildr is already married when she begins mistreating those around her, and as far as she is concerned this is a just reaction to what they have done to her. Andersson proposes a reading of her suicide as the actions of a broken woman, and it would be in line with the maiden-king theme, but as I argued last chapter it can also be read as a part of her plan. When she kills herself she has to physically fight off Gunnar and parts of the court; it is definitely disobeying her husband who seems helpless and desperate in his attempts to stop her. Hogni on his part says that they should just let her do it, as nothing can stop her and she has always been hard of mind since birth. Gunnar was never able to break or otherwise deserve Brynhildr, and his attempt at becoming the king she wanted backfired when she realized what type of man it is that would be willing to kill his sworn friend so easily. Hogni takes on the voice of reason in this narrative and tries to convince Gunnar that he cannot possibly please a woman like Brynhildr, and that causing evil is what she thrives at doing. Brynhildr on her part feels that everyone around her are weak, gullible and certainly deserving of her scorn. This is why the dynamic between Brynhildr and Hogni makes it difficult to discern the authorial intent. On the one hand we have the predictable male voice through Hogni, condemning Brynhildr's autonomy and calling Gunnar a fool for listening to her. On the other hand there is a lot of vellum space dedicated to Brynhildr and her experiences, including *Helreið* which is arguably an apologetica in her favour. As an audience we are moved to empathize with her even though her actions are condemnable. Friðriksdóttir writes that typically these women have to be re-socialized or killed in order to keep the status quo, which is a society reliant on female submission (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 130). A woman can be wise, she can control resources and be good at it, but only if it is in the interest of her male kin. In the end Brynhildr does end up dying, albeit on her own terms. She could have been content with the man she married who now reigns over Sigurðr's land and gold as well, but she isn't. Was death truly the only way to redeem her character at this point?

Returning to the theme of the maiden-king and the punishment of the women who fight for their own autonomy, this was not discussed in the narrative just using Brynhildr's character, but also Guðrún. These two characters work in this setting as two sides of the same coin. Both covet the same thing: Sigurðr. Guðrún is at the outset a meek and good daughter and is gladly given away to Sigurðr. There is a decided difference in the turn of phrase in regards to women choosing their men or being given to them:

Mey bvdo hánom
oc meipma fiolþ,

Guðruno ungo

Giuca dottur; (*Skamma 2. Edda* 1965: 247)

Versus Sigrún asking Helgi for his hand in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*:

Nama hagna mer

of hug mela,

hafa qvaz hon Helga

hylli scyldo. (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 17. *Edda* 1965: 194)

To Brynhildr and the other valkyries there are often a decision-making process. There is a point in the story where they have to choose which man to marry, or to marry at all in Brynhildr's case. Guðrún never does get that chance even though she can be as hard and willful as any of the other female characters in the *Völsung* storyworld. While young she is given to Sigurðr as a part of the strengthening of the bonds between the men, and when she opposes the marriage to Atli they drug her. Brynhildr even warns her about it, despite the hostility between them at the end. When Guðrún does eventually make a bid for independence and kills Atli it is to revenge her brothers, underlining Friðriksdóttir's point that the powerful women are extended tool's for the men:

Thus the maiden-king narratives warn us against women using their learning in defiance of patriarchal authority, encouraging instead meekness, humility, and deference to their father's wishes. Wisdom is only approved of as long as it has the purpose of benefiting the hero or the community rather than empowering women to pursue their independent agenda.

(Friðriksdóttir 2013: 111)

And while Brynhildr and Guðrún are both described by the omniscient narrator and various characters in the poems and sagas as the very wisest, strongest and most cunning in magical arts, they are still used as pawns for the men to achieve their goals. But, there are some differences to this theme as well in the *Völsung* storyworld, such as Grimhildr, Guðrún's mother, who uses her daughter and Sigurðr willfully in order to get what she wants, without any real repercussions against her (unless you count the eventual extinction of your line). According to *Grípisspá* and *Völsunga saga* she used a potion to make Sigurðr forget Brynhildr, and she is also the one to teach him how to change his appearance in order to fool her. In *Völsunga saga* Grimhildr takes on the role of destiny as she pulls the threads that will move the plot forward, but still keep Sigurðr innocent of his

betrayals to Brynhildr. This way a sort of star-crossed love can still be viable between them and their death becomes more tragic. Though ostensibly she does it for her own and her family's gain, in a narrative sense her character is used to forward the male protagonist in a more audience-friendly way. Sigurðr becomes innocent and the brunt of the blame is put on a female character. This also makes Brynhildr less sympathetic when she does not want to forgive Sigurðr for his deception. Compared to for example *Piðreks saga*, in which Sigurðr gladly accepts Guðrún and the brotherly bonds that she brings before suggesting Gunnar marry Brynhildr instead. This gives us a discourse within the storyworld itself on whether Sigurðr is a hapless hero, caught in the web created by the women around him, or an active agent who defied what the norns had decreed. As discussed in previous chapter then the Codex Regius compiler seemed preoccupied in the idea of Vǫlsung heirs together with valkyries and their eventual reincarnation. In *Vǫlsunga saga* the theme of Brynhildr and Sigurðr becomes more of a Tristan and Isolde affair, complete with potions and the symbolism of a funeral together.

When Brynhildr opts to kill herself rather than live in a world where she is married to Gunnar and Sigurðr is slain she can be understood to once again thwart the desires of the men around her. As she lays dying she tells Guðrún that she should have killed herself as well:

“Sęmri vęri Gvðrun
 systir occur
 frumver sinom
 [at fylgia ðaþom]⁷
 af henni gęfi
 godra raþ,
 eþa ętti hon hug
 ossum likan.” (*Skamma 61*. Edda 1965: 257)

This might at first read as an admonishment to Guðrún for not being a good and loving wife to Sigurðr and following him in to the next life. But in context it takes on a bit different, and perhaps more sinister, undertone. Brynhildr speaks these words just after having foretold Guðrun's sad life with Atli, and the death of her own brothers at his hands. Reading this stanza of *Skamma* together with what happens to Guðrún in the prose of *Dráp Niflunga*, then perhaps Brynhildr was right in her warning:

7 Bugge notes on this line: “at fylgia ðaþom, som mangler i R, er af Udgg. optaget efter Papirafskrr.”

Ofriþr var þa I milli Giucunga oc Atla; kendi hann Giukungom vold um andlat Brynhildar. Þat var til setta, at þeir scyldo gipta hanom Guðruno, oc gafo henne ominnisveíg at drecca, aþr hon iatti at giptaz Atla. (*Dráp Niflunga*. Edda 1965: 264)

There is nothing in Guðrún's future except violence, pain and grief so she should take her life while she still has the strength to do so. Brynhildr even adds that if Guðrún had true friends they would have suggested the same. Guðrún ends up trying to take her life later, but fails. It is of little importance to the Gjúkung brothers whether Guðrún is happy as long as they again can give her away to form a connection with another powerful lord. If Guðrún had inherited her husband's gold instead of Gunnar and Högni taking it for themselves, a lot of harm could have been omitted. "Resocialized and married or dead" seems indeed to be the few options left; Brynhildr chose death while Guðrún remained to see her line extinguished.

Brynhildr fulfills the aspect of the maiden-king trope that discusses females opposing their male kin or husband. If we for the sake of argument commit to the reading of Brynhildr and Sigrdrífa as one character for this narrative, then Brynhildr began her opposition at a very young age. According to herself merely twelve winters old when she willfully opposed Oðinn and, as valkyries are wont to do, chose her own champion. For this she was given the very topical punishment of having to marry once her magic induced sleep passed. That marriage specifically was the punishment shows an awareness of, if not the maiden-king trope itself, the type of character Brynhildr was supposed to portray. Marriage would in many ways bind Brynhildr's autonomy as much as the sleep and the skintight hauberk did. At this point in the legend she swore that she would only marry the bravest of all men in a last bid at shaping her own future. This would later be her undoing because of the disguise Sigurðr dresses up in. She does agree to marry Sigurðr, but because of his altered appearance she ends up with Gunnar. It can certainly be read as a warning that destiny, or the norms in this case, will punish you harshly if you do not do what the patriarch bids you to do. The theme here is that Brynhildr could have been happy if she had not been so willful in her choice. Gunnar was said to be a good king; brave, though not the bravest, rich, though not the richest, and of a good family, though not descended from the gods. If Brynhildr had just settled, like Guðrún did, then everyone would have had a chance of happiness. But she isn't satisfied, and she uses her ability to egg Gunnar into action to remove the more powerful king, Sigurðr, and placing her own husband on top. This bid for power is heavily admonished, yet excused to some degree, in the text. In the end the death of Sigurðr is to the benefit (momentarily) for Gunnar and Högni, while Brynhildr dies.

Friðriksdóttir argues that this type of power taken by a woman is eventually punished:

Women's knowledge and access to resources – if used independently and not for the sole benefit of male kin – are frowned upon and seen as a threat because they entail the possibility of independence and self-determination. All power that women gain seems automatically to provoke anxieties about weakened male power. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 112)

As Friðriksdóttir summarizes it; Brynhildr lived a life of her own design removed from her male kin, and even if she was willing to use her prowess as a warrior to bolster her brother's army, the fact that this was her wish and not his made this life impossible. She was more worth to him as a bargaining chip in marriage than as a warrior despite her abilities. Sigurðr's total disregard for her once he realized the benefits he would reap if he married Guðrún instead is perhaps even more pointed. But how can we read the ensuing events, when he was betrayed by the very friends he sought to strengthen the loyalties of? Perhaps the men were not all-wise in their dealings, and the breaking of a promise still bore repercussions even if they were to a woman? A way to solve this problem was to make Sigurðr innocent of his deception of her, as they did in *Völsunga saga*, by introducing a plot device such as the forgetfulness potion. As if his behaviour towards Brynhildr was distasteful even to them⁸. There was something in Brynhildr's decided love for Sigurðr, that way she opposed to submit to the status quo, that seems to have appealed to at least parts of the medieval audience. This theme of the story is revisited several times, and it appears as if Brynhildr was the model for many female characters at the time⁹. The same can also be said about Guðrún's opposition to Atli and her seeking revenge for her daughter. It then becomes apparent that even if there were sentiments against women's empowerment in a society whose peace relied largely on their submission, then that was not the only story people wanted to hear.

4.3.3. Gender performance and the discourse on female empowerment in old Norse literature

Gender and gender roles are always hotly talked about subjects in studies of Norse literature when discussing female characters. Tropes and types have been created to map out, as I read it, where it all went *wrong*. When did women stop being their own persons and when did the Christian clergy forget to write them and begin to write types. The maiden-king, the harpy, the ruler, the loyal

8 And Atli was always cast as the villain, even when he revenged his sister's death by killing the sons of Buðli, the way it is framed makes it seem obvious he is more interested in the gold.

9 As quoted earlier then Friðriksdóttir mentions that the entire maiden-king trope might have been modeled on Brynhildr. Guðrún from *Laxdæla saga* also seems to be acknowledged to have Brynhildr as a source etc.

woman, the princess for the bridal quest and so on, Friðriksdóttir discusses plenty of them in her book. One interesting analysis is that of the “monstrous woman”, the gygr, giantess or half giant, upon whom the other characters can be freely aggressive and physical. She is decidedly “other” and thus justified as a place do discover violence towards women and female sexual behaviour. These women represent those of lower class or who are of a different ethnic or cultural background whom the men of the upper class (who are usually the protagonists of Norse literature) cannot marry, “but never the less have both sexual and emotional relationships with” (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 77).

Valkyries as represented in the *Völsung* storyworld is in many ways the opposite of this. They are decidedly “other”, like the giantesses are, but always of high and noble birth with powerful kin at their back. Perhaps the valkyries were used to explore themes on the topic of love towards a woman of too high status, opposed to the love towards a slave woman. There must have been dangers involved in getting the hand of a willful and powerful woman who, if she does not feel the right loyalties, could easily destroy you. To marry one of these valkyries, despite their cursed state of war, is depicted in the poetic *Edda* as one of the great achievements a *Völsung* hero must accomplish to fulfill his potential. But there seems to be a great risk involved in marrying a valkyrie who later decides her man does not live up to her expectations. Gunnar in all versions of the legend is a great example of this; Brynhildr unleashes her wrath on him and seems not in the least bit afraid when she threatens him; he always ends up doing her bidding. Another example in the poetic *Edda* is Völundr himself who loves his valkyrie, but his life is not enough for her. She simply leaves one day together with her valkyrie sisters and Völundr spends a miserable time searching for her. Anne Heinrich's discusses in her article “The type of the prepatriarchal woman” the words Brynhildr uses when talking to Sigurðr as he tries to rouse her out of her depression.

I see an alternative of two meanings: (1) “Race” or “kind”, which could refer to Brynhildr's prepatriarchal status, and (2) “inherent nature”, which sets her apart from her environment. But, in Brynhildr's statement “*Annat er vart eðli*” these two meanings are complementary, not alternative. (Heinrichs 1986: 122)

It is an interesting take on Brynhildr's nature whether you believe in the concept of *prepatriarchal* meaning or not. If I replace the word *prepatriarchal* with *valkyrie* then she becomes an *other* based on her status, but in a highborn sense opposed to as a monstrous woman. This, as Heinrichs writes, also applies to Brynhildr's “inherent nature”. She is born different, her love for battle and desire for power makes her restless and cruel. This idea of Brynhildr being “other” and having an inherent nature that sets her apart extends to *Þiðreks saga* as well, even if this saga does not otherwise

contain much of the “mythical”. Sigurðr explains her physical strength in this saga as being a part of her *náttúra*, and he is the only one who can match her in this (Heinrichs 1986: 122).

I mentioned briefly above the concept of loving a woman who is as strong and powerful as the man, or in some cases even more so, as a part of the theme explored by the use of valkyries. This can be tied in with Friðriksdóttir's analysis of the “monstrous woman” and how their bodies serve as a literary tool to explore forbidden types of desire. For a man it is expected of you to be the patriarch and to be the strong conflict solver, but even if literature can depict clear types I highly doubt women or men were any more “typical” then than they are now. Conflicts were bound to arise and powerful women have always existed, even if history has tended to lose them out of sight. Maiden-kings and valkyries both explore the themes of women striving for autonomy and power, and the men who covets them. Friðriksdóttir concludes:

The initial situation of the maiden-king narratives seems to accord well with the female fantasy that Showalter describes: they live their lives independently of men and are entirely uninterested in marriage, frequently because of their haughty belief in their own superiority. This is probably an authorial justification for the underlying social understanding that they are unwilling to relinquish their power, which is inevitable if they do marry. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 131).

According to Friðriksdóttir the maiden-king narrative is often used to discuss the subject of females living without men, and their perfect satisfaction in doing so, by explaining it as a character flaw in these women. A bit of power is enough to make them think they can live perfectly well without the support of a man and is consequently punished in these stories. Yet this is not entirely the case in all narrative settings. In the Norse literature that remains to us there are certain areas of society that are depicted as off limits to women such as talking publicly at the *þing*. They can be depicted as mastering other areas that have become associated with men such as combat, strategy and ruling, and while “typecasting” is certainly done to a great extent there are also several instances of complicated and many faceted characters, even female ones. Friðriksdóttir opens up the discussion of women presenting as male, either in appearance or in actions, by using Þornbjörg from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* as an example:

Butler's theory of performativity is pertinent to the *meykonungar* and shield-maidens, especially in relation to Þornbjörg, the most striking representation of a maiden-king [...]

She is not satisfied with the traditional gender role open to her, marrying a promising young man of good fortune and lineage and becoming his queen (with the derivative and advisory power that this entails), and she prefers to gain and maintain official power as a prince would. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 114).

It is interesting that Friðriksdóttir chooses to use the term *Other* for certain female types, a term coined by Simone de Beauvoir, and then to cite a theory by Judith Butler, who, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), problematizes this as reinforcing the binary way of thought. This bridging of theories allows for a room in the discourse where the binary and the non-binary can exist at the same time. Just as there are those with a strict understanding of “male” and “female” exist today, different ways of viewing the world and those around them must have existed then as well. Is some of this discussion apparent in Brynhildr's narrative?

When Sigurðr find's Sigrdrífa sleeping on Hindarfell he is unable to tell what her gender is until he cuts open the hauberk she is trapped in. For a moment she is “Schrödinger's cat”; without gender, without roles, tropes or expectations to action in the narrative. Abridging them all in one way or another; Brynhildr walks on the fine edge of performativity. She dresses in warrior garb and excels at both weaving and chess, she is gifted in prophesy, a traditionally feminine art, but is also stronger than most of the men at court. In *Völsunga saga* Brynhildr admits that she has to the best of her ability fulfilled the role of a married woman and she will do so no more: “Hird eigi þat, þvíat alldri ser þú mik glada síþan í þinne haull eda dreeka ne tefla ne hugat męla ne gulle leggja god klędi ne ydr rad gefa.” (*Völsunga saga*. 1906-08: 73) Much like Þornbjörg who excelled at passing as a man yet performed her feminine duties later, Brynhildr performs across the masculine and feminine. There doesn't seem to be anything “inherently female” in these characters, as they are able to perform as both man and woman to the same ability. In *Gender Trouble's* (1990) introduction Butler brings forth the notion that defaulting to male/female, and then projecting our interpretation of what the inherent nature of female is, is quite common in literature:

Does being female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is “naturalness” constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex? (Butler 1990: 2)

It is no revelation that what constitute as the “natural female” differs depending on place and time, and what might seem to us as an obvious feminine performance might not have been the same

seven hundred years ago. We are therefore dependent on analyzing authorial motives where few authors are known, and there are omniscient narrators explaining these female performances. In other words: We are trying to read 'female' in a text written down by men centuries ago. We are at the same time creating a preconceived reading based on who we think wrote the text and with what agenda, as well as defaulting to a binary reading in which we are searching for the female performance. It is then of note when a narrative tells a story not necessarily expect in this framework. Friðriksdóttir states about *Nitida saga*:

Paul Bibire has suggested that *Nitida saga* is a conscious response to *Clári saga* [...] but unlike most of the maiden-king texts, it depicts *Nitida* positively. Most critics agree that the text is pro-woman [...] (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 128)

There is a decided lack of aggression towards women performing male acts in *Nitida saga* that makes Friðriksdóttir view it as part of a more extensive discourse that might have taken place in what we today call the *riddarasögur*. This could be significant in lieu of Brynhildr's character which could go in either direction; she is reprimanded for her personality and actions by the characters in the texts, but she is always given the opportunity to defend herself, and the narrative often read as apologetic. When she died it was at her own terms and with the ability to redistribute her own wealth. Was this a part of the discourse? Do the shifting narratives of Brynhildr reveal a level of conscious thought on how women were being portrayed in courtly literature? Giving Brynhildr the status as a valkyrie might also have been a conscious effort to add to the creation of female characters that were physically strong, very wise though perhaps brash, but with great hearts that loved deeply. At least Sigrún/Sváva did, not just in one life but several, though Svanvit, Völundr's valkyrie, eventually left the life of marriage. It is still noteworthy how grieved the men were upon the valkyries' departure, and Völundr never stopped missing her. These poems, though far from friendly towards women, does speak of a slightly different type of dynamic between the genders. Friðriksdóttir states:

It is more productive to think of *Nitida saga* as a contribution to an ongoing discourse about marriage and gender roles in medieval Iceland, where the more violent and ruthlessly patriarchal maiden-king sagas, especially *Clári saga* with its overtly didactic epilogue concerning the subordinate role of women, are interrogated. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 129)

Though Friðriksdóttir here discusses the relationship between *Nitida saga* and *Clári saga*, I believe

this can be applied the *Völsung* storyworld as well. According to Friðriksdóttir, Brynhildr and the *fornaldarsögur* could have been a forerunner or inspiration to the later maiden-king theme that we see in the *riddarasögur* literature. Yet there appears to be a discourse in the various iterations of the legend in *Völsunga saga* as well, and Brynhildr's (and Guðrún's) story could arguably be said to be used for it. Though the women have power and wisdom it falls on the men in their family to decide what they are to do with their lives, they aren't free in any stretch of the imagination. Yet there is something quite indestructible about them, and Brynhildr uses her cunning to play the men against each other. The prose and the poems in the poetic *Edda*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga* present their own, unique interpretation of these events and of Brynhildr in particular. Even within the same storyworld there seems to have been a discourse on what it means to be a manly hero and how he is to behave towards the women around him; in the poetic *Edda*, Sigurðr is mostly portrayed as strong of will and always eager to gain more power either through riches, brute force or learning. In *Skamma* he is shown to be physically very tender towards Guðrún, but quick to blame Brynhildr for the attack by Guttormr. In *Völsunga saga* he is a much more romantic hero and even though he is strong physically there is also a lot of time spent dwelling on his emotions towards the two women in his life. He is heartbroken to lose the goodwill of Brynhildr. *Þiðreks saga* stands out the most between the three as Sigurðr here is a brutish giant who is not willing to negotiate and enters Brynhildr's stronghold by slaughtering her men. When asked by Gunnar to take Brynhildr by force he accepts this challenge gladly and even takes one of her rings, which if he had been more brains than brawn, he would have realized would cause her enough humiliation that she would have to retaliate. This discourse goes beyond the role of females, but enters the realm of masculinity and femininity, and the interchangeable nature of it, and the relations between men and women as friends, enemies, lovers and partners.

These relationships are explored for the most part in the two sagas *Þiðreks saga* and *Völsunga saga*. In the poetic *Edda* one could arguably say that it is cause and effect that are the main themes since the very nature of poetry leans heavily on imagery, while in the sagas, especially *Völsunga saga*, there is room for more sensory topics such as desire, longing, revenge and loyalties. The way these two different medias were performed would also play a part on how the topics were dealt with. Poetry such as the eddic one is quite bombastic and, as I have mentioned, probably performed well with more than one performer. The sagas on the other hand were suited to be read aloud and allowed for more contemplation on the themes discussed and for introspection while listening. As Friðriksdóttir suspects some of the sagas were probably not just written for the entertainment, but also for the education of the young women in the audience. The message is clear: if you let power

go to your head and you don't stay in your subordinate place you will be punished. There are many various warnings in regards to what a woman can, and cannot do and rape seems to be the most used tool to curb her mistreatment of the male protagonist (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 117-126). The relation between Brynhildr and Sigurðr is omitted in the poetic *Edda* and Brynhildr herself explains in both *Brot* and *Skamma* that Sigurðr never touched her. The recognized existence of Áslaug forces the narrative in *Völsunga saga* to identify the relations between Brynhildr and Sigurðr before their marriages. It is consensual and they both seem to have a good time with each other, it isn't until Guðrún shames Brynhildr later for what happened that Brynhildr balks at having two men she's had relations to in the same house. When Sigurðr offers to divorce Guðrún her response is: “Eeki er slíkt at męla, ok eigi mun ek eiga u konunga í einne haull, ok fyrr skal ek líf lata enn ek svíkia Gunnar konung” (*Völsunga saga* . 1906-08: 76-77). The writer of *Völsunga saga* spends quite some time on this scene in order to make them both forgivable. Sigurðr innocently forgot his promise to Brynhildr, which caused him a lot of pain, and he is willing to leave Guðrún to right it, which seems to cause him even more pain as his chest mail is about to burst with pent up emotion as he declares it. Brynhildr on her part is adamant that even though she cannot love anyone else but Sigurðr, neither will she be unfaithful to Gunnar and have two men under her roof and in her bed.

Courtly literature introduced the idea that male honor depends on the behaviour of women; thus female sexual activity outside the strict confines of marriage is a great source of worry in these sources. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 123)

In order for the audience to feel the sadness and fated relationship between Brynhildr and Sigurðr, their purity must be absolute. There are no accidental slip ups between them. When Brynhildr realizes her love and envy for Sigurðr in *Skamma* it is after she sees him being gentle with Guðrún, not after any type of seduction has taken place. She also wishes the sword Gramr to be put between them on the funeral pyre as they burn, to symbolize their platonic relationship while alive. In this context the authorial intent of keeping Brynhildr pure seems rather clear. She might love and hate Sigurðr emotionally, but she never cheated on Gunnar physically, and though Sigurðr expresses an interest in bedding Brynhildr (even to the point where he is willing to leave Guðrún for it) he accepts the admonishment he gets from the proposal gracefully. This Christian-like purity allows Brynhildr to still be the heroine despite her revenge. The way Brynhildr's plot is resolved in *Völsunga saga* she comes across more disillusioned than vengeful. There are no scene after her death as there is in the poetic *Edda* and so we must conclude that she simply dies, but at least she took Sigurðr with her to the grave and so she retains a small amount of her autonomy.

Þiðreks saga's Brynhildr is both the most faithful *and* the most adverse to the maiden-king trope at the same time. While it visits several of the themes of humiliation of the man, and the consequent physical punishment of the powerful maiden-king, the resolution is completely in Brynhildr's favour to such a degree that the saga appears to be the anti-thesis of the trope.

The maiden-kings' degradation is a punishment for their earlier treatment of the protagonist (or his companions); her abuse of the suitor can take strikingly violent forms, and the men are often disgraced and emasculated to the point where the narrative becomes sadistic. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 117)

In *Þiðreks saga*, Brynhildr's emasculating action of hanging Gunnar up on the wall every time he tries to consummate their marriage is framed more in a humouristic sense than a sadistic one. Gunnar is obviously not of the same caliber as she, which becomes even clearer when he has to ask Sigurðr for assistance. He gets his revenge when he sends Sigurðr to do what he cannot, but unlike the other maiden-king stories Brynhildr in the end gets the last laugh. She might have lost her physical strength, or as it might also be read, her inclination to oppose her weaker husband now that she thinks he is as strong as her, but Brynhildr was still a reigning queen in her own keep before marriage and all her faculties are very much intact. There is no hesitation in her when she has to teach Sigurðr and Grimhildr a lesson in humility and the greedy and weak-willed Gunnar fulfills his role. Typically the rape and later public humiliation where this is revealed should have broken Brynhildr, but it backfires and she does not become the submissive maiden-king as the trope dictates.

Removing her sexual autonomy is one of the tools with which the subversive maiden-king can be forced back into her subservient position in patriarchy and the “natural” order restored. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 125)

In *Þiðreks saga* this is handled extremely literally. Brynhildr has a strength which Gunnar cannot match, and with it she decides what happens in the bed. She uses it to humiliate him and remain autonomous of her body. It is not until Sigurðr, arguably her equal, that she eventually submits. After having lost her virginity, which was her power (her trump card, as proposed by Friðriksdóttir, which she would be worthless without unless married), Brynhildr accepts life as Gunnar's wife and fulfills her duties at court. Brynhildr is not a valkyrie or otherwise connected to the mythological or

otherworldly in *Piðreks saga*, yet she has this power which only Sigurðr can recognize and it is tied to her virginity. She goes from being a literal empowered queen to Gunnar's wife and consort by having it taken from her. But her powers are not completely gone, rather they have changed nature, because now she can send Gunnar to do the physical labour she no longer have to do. When Sigurðr meets Brynhildr and she assists him with horses and the name of his heritage, she rules over knights, after she is married she rules over a king.

What we see in Brynhildr is the result of a discourse on the concept of women's submission. Anne Heinrichs (1986) proposes the idea of a *prepatriarchal woman*. She analyses the narrative of the 'strong' women in the foursome-dramas found in *Völsunga saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and how they potentially reflects an idea of women as independent characters, a theme that was, according to Heinrichs, at the time these manuscripts were written down, slowly disappearing from society. These women certainly challenge a few per-conceived ideas of women's place in public space, their physical prowess and ability to make independent choices. But the word *prepatriarchal* might be a bold choice of word in the context these texts were written down.

Friðriksdóttir frames it a bit differently, proposing that the anxieties surrounding women with power were based on the new heritage laws that were being passed under Hákon Hákonarson's rule (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 107-109). At which point the bloodline became fully patriarchal and the wife's body the vessel of the man's child. Her own autonomy were not only undesirable, it was dangerous to the patriarchal order. There is a power women have always had which men have not; the surety that their child is actually their own. The reaction to this has invariably been to create a society where female sexuality and autonomy is completely in control. Yet there are sentiments advocating for partnership and equality, and the destructive forces that could be unleashed when someone is forced into a marriage that is not suitable for them is thematised in literature. The popularity of the *Völsung* storyworld's interpretation of a powerful woman striving for her own autonomy and love and in some cases achieving it (though within reasonable means) speaks of a society in which the last word for women had not yet been said.

4. 4 The performance of female speech: Brynhildr's whetting of Gunnar

I have discussed the themes of women of power above and how they are treated in the narrative in the form of the maiden-king trope. Yet the power women wielded in Norse literature came in varying degrees. Even women who were not princesses or valkyries is depicted to have some measure of control on their surroundings. In this chapter I will focus on the concept of whetting,

how this action has been perceived as belonging wholly to the female domain, and how it has shaped the understanding of Brynhildr and Gunnar's relationship.

4.4.1 The whetting woman in a blood feud society

A lot of the writing on women in sagas, and old Norse writing in general, has centered around the concept of *whetting*. It is of great interest to see what happens when a woman steps forward and verbally forces a male kin or husband to take action in order to restore honour to the family. Usually this is the point of the story where the action escalates and is eventually forced into a conclusion. The discourse surrounding this narrative were for a while concentrated on what the whetting or egging meant for the actual medieval society and not just as a literary tool. Was it a reflection of the role females held in *blood feud* society, or was it just an easy way to scapegoat the female characters in literature? Carol Clover explains the almost ceremonial aspects of the whetting in her much written about article “Hildigunnr's Lament” (2002) and the likeliness for the texts to have borrowed from each other. She leads her example by analyzing the actions of Hildigunnr from *Njáls saga* and Guðrún from the poetic *Edda*, among others. She focuses on the use of whetting and lamentation together, or as is the case, the use of lamentation to make the whetting more forceful. Carefully chosen words are used by the woman before or together with symbolic gestures in order to make the man who are being whetted understand the seriousness of what he is being asked to do. Because women were unable to seek compensation either through legal means publicly or through blood, the men would have to do it for them. In many cases the men seem very reluctant to do so, content in remaining removed from the obligations they have towards their female kin. The lamentations performed by the women were used to both praise the dead and to remind the male kin of the sorrows that were going unanswered or unpunished. Often the “bloody token” is used alongside as a grisly effect on both the male character and the audience:

The 'bloody token' has traditionally been regarded, like the *hvot* scene itself, as a literary motif borrowed from saga to saga, but one recent study suggests that it is rather to be understood in quasi-legal terms as a procedural token in a transfer of authority. (Clover 2002: 17)

The token works as a physical reminder for both the *whetted* character and the audience. Blood has been split and blood must continue to be split in order to rectify the wrong that has been made. The discussion on *hvot* and whetting focuses a lot on the concept of *honour* and *revenge*, which are definitely important elements, but the very concept of whetting demands there be a woman who has

lost a close male kin, her protection, and she has to implore another man to make sure that the threat to her is removed. The threat can be an actual physical one, another man who wants to force her to be his wife, to take her farm or who will eventually come to harm her children. What happens to a woman who is seen in society to not have a male kin willing to take up blade for her? There is a lot at stake for an unprotected woman in a *blood feud* society. Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's story as it is relayed to us in the extant versions of the legend explores what a woman must do if she is without her male kin's protection. Married away to Atli to stem off his anger after Brynhildr's death, Guðrún finds herself in an impossible situation where she has to both fend off his suspicions of her and warn her brothers of his deceit. But, as is inevitable, neither Gunnar nor Högni pays much mind to the several warnings both Brynhildr, their own wives and Guðrún gives them and ride to their death. It then falls upon Guðrún to not only take revenge for their death, but also to eliminate all threats to herself, by killing Atli's heirs who could grow up and take revenge for their father. The tragedy here is of course that they are her own sons as well, but they are a threat never the less. These stories paints a ghastly picture of what the *blood feud* system could do to a woman when she has no men willing to do their duty in protecting her. It can arguably be applied to Brynhildr as well despite the fact that she seems to have had, if not a close relationship with Atli, to have been regarded as one of his most treasured sisters. He was willing to revenge her death and denied Oddrún the chance to marry Gunnar once he became a widower. Brynhildr blames Atli for the devastating effects of marrying her to Gunnar, and reveals to Guðrún that it was all because of the cursed gold Sigurðr carried with him to her halls:

25. Þa qvaþ þat Brynhildr

Buðla dottir:

“Veldr einn Atli

ollo bolvi

of borinn Buðla,

broþir minn.

26. Þa er við I hall

hunscrar þioþar

eld a iofri

ormbeþs litom,

þess hefi ec gangs

goldit siþan,

þeirrar synar,

same ey.” (*Guðrunarkviða I* 25-26. Edda 1965: 246)

The poem ends with the image of Brynhildr holding on to a pillar, fire in her eyes and poison spitting from her mouth. The poem itself concentrates on the sorrows of women and the hardships they have to endure in losing their close kin. Though *Guðrunarkviða I* appears to be very little sympathetic to Brynhildr, it allows her three stanzas to voice her grievances on her male kin for the actions she feels she's been forced to take. When Guðrún finally relents and allows her grief to take over and she cries, Brynhildr curses whoever helped her to release the tears. Guðrún retaliates by swearing revenge on the one who killed Sigurðr, something Brynhildr uses to her advantage as she points the blame to Atli. It is reiterated in *Brot*, *Skamma*, *Helreið*, *Guðrúnarkviða I* and *Völsunga saga* that Brynhildr feels compelled or wronged either by her male kin, Sigurðr and Gunnar or by the fates themselves, though her reaction to this wrongdoing varies. I will return to the incident in *Brot*, which begins in *medias res* with Högni asking Gunnar what Sigurðr must have done in order to deserve being murdered by them. Gunnar answers with the lie Brynhildr told him about Sigurðr and her sharing a bed while Sigurðr was disguised as Gunnar. Högni, who has always been suspicious of Brynhildr, sees through the charade at once, but agrees to conspire against Sigurðr nevertheless and helps preparing Guttormr for the deed. Afterwards Brynhildr hails them as great warriors who protected what was rightfully to be theirs. The same motive is repeated in some capacity in the different versions, either the lie or the speech about Sigurðr owning gold and land which should have been the heir of Gjúki's rightful inheritance. These themes explore not only the jealousy of Brynhildr but also the ramifications surrounding inheritance and land disputes without set laws to govern claims. Dividing Gjúki's inheritance allows Brynhildr to exploit the greed in both Gunnar and Högni to achieve her own ends.

While Brynhildr threatens Gunnar in *Völsunga saga* that she will take everything she owns and leave him to go back to her brother unless he does what she asks, her homecoming would most probably be anything but sweet. She finds herself in a situation where she has been wronged and her honour tainted by another queen whom she considers to be beneath her. Without a “bloody token” or any other male kin willing to right the wrong done to her, she constructs a lie in order to appeal to Gunnar's pride. In a society where women were excluded from the legal arena and their final instance of justice comes at the graces of a male relative the ceremonial act of whetting becomes their outlet. Clover argues that this was an integral part of women's role in the family as opposed to the hypothesis that women were conserve to the *blood feud* society, and had a wanton need to create unrest as supposed by other scholars such as R. George Thomas:

More likely, if women did in fact resist judicial composition more readily than men, they did so because they were excluded from the legal arena and hence from whatever antagonistic satisfaction was to be had from the successful prosecution of a case [...]; because little or no economic benefit ran to them directly from a judicial settlement; and finally because, as I have argued here, the death rituals of the old system not only provided women an emotional and artistic outlet but also involved them, in a way that the new system evidently did not, in the family politics of honor and inheritance. (Clover 2002: 36)

The act of lamentation and whetting as it is represented in literature paints a picture of women excluded from the public arena, but with as much at stake as any man. Perhaps even more so in some instances, as the loyalty of those around them seem somewhat flimsy at best. Guðrún betrayed both Sigurðr and Brynhildr by revealing the dishonour done to Brynhildr in a hall in front of everyone, and was in turn betrayed to Atli by a woman in her own house. Borghildr as well was caught in a dilemma where she had to avenge her brother against her husband's son because her husband would not deal with it as was proper. Striking first and striking hard seemed to be the women in the *Völsunga* storyworld's best defense. Brynhildr had little to no sympathy from her brother who was the one who forced her into the marriage, and her own husband was a part of the deception, so who would take her side? Who would fight for her honor unless she made them? Interpreting herself as forced into a corner, Brynhildr had the choice of giving up and live unhappily but obediently, or she could revenge her honour by inciting her husband. This arguably uniquely female predicament solved by the literary tool of whetting allows for a space open to the interpretation of “female language”. Else Mundal comments on Clover's article that while lamentations and *hvøt* were often performed by the same woman and in the same scene, one cannot assume based on the examples given that this was the only use for lamentations or *grátr* (Mundal 2013: 371). Her main interest is to find remnants of a uniquely female form of performative poetry or song and she builds an interesting case. But to me the application of what can be a female mourning tradition, *grátr*; to what is seen as a female role in Norse literature, *hvøt*, is the most intriguing aspect. There must certainly have been an association between these two acts and the role women played in performing them. Even Brynhildr, the most physically capable person next to Sigurðr, used whetting as a means to an end.

4.4.2 How to read women in Norse literatur: the interpretation of feminine space

This search for remnants of female stories in a heavily male dominated literary canon has created new ways to read the same texts, and a focus on characters such as Brynhildr and Guðrún who are both characters with an agency that is easily recognized by modern readers. Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* begins with these admonishments:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous 1976: 874)

These are strong words, but ultimately, has become the goal of many to find the lost voices of women in writing. I mentioned shortly the use of Norse texts as a foundation for nation building during the 20th century as a part of a hermeneutical reading, but this “nation building” in a large degree excluded women. These texts would however become an arena in which a different kind of rebuilding, women in literature, also takes place. Cixous thematises the problem of writing female experiences with a literary language that has been established by the patriarchy. That describing the female experience of their bodies has been shamed and denied, and that this also has become an arena for men to explore, rather than a female one: “Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a.... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?” (Cixous 1976: 876). It is the result of the themes and tropes discussed in the previous chapter in which women were restricted in order to safeguard male interests; centuries of bound agency, autonomy and sexuality. And perhaps this is why themes such as whetting and lamentations, that appear to be dominantly associated with an exclusively female role, hold so much interest in the discourse on women in Norse literature. Does it signify? Is it a representation of society or merely a creative tool used to further the plot? It is tempting to believe that *Helreið Brynhildar* is added to the Codex Regius compilation as a part of an ongoing discourse on the issue of female autonomy, consciously or no. Clover points to the unavoidable fact that our female voices are in fact not female:

But the mention of utterances brings up a second distinction of great importance. The word “utterance” implies oral communication, but all of the women's voices we have from the Middle Ages are of course conveyed to us in words written on a page (Clover 2002: 56)

Not only are the words we often associate as oral not in fact so, they are also written and composed, as far as we are aware, by men. It becomes an interpretation of a gender as we perceive them in the medieval era through the lens of another gender. The exclusivity of literature have to an extended degree depended on academic interests, which is in a state of change all the time. What was of interest then might not be so anymore, but some ideas seem to remain. Síf Ríkhardsdóttir (2017) analyses the emotional interior found in the Old Norse texts, and even though she mainly keeps to the Icelandic sagas and poetic *Edda* as canon, she mentions the disregard of certain other genres grounded on their “effeminate style”:

The long story of scholarly dismissal of the Norse romance is indeed largely due to a national propaganda of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that sought its foundation in literary heritage, more specifically in the myth of a national epic of a heroic past. What was perceived to be the 'effeminate' rhetorical style of the romances (compared with the terse 'masculine' style of the sagas) is interconnected with a model of emotional behaviour that became unpopular as a means of nation-building. (Ríkhardsdóttir 2017: 19)

I do believe that some of the disregard for the romances also stems from an inherent reluctance to accept literature obviously influenced by southern movements. The Icelandic sagas has to a large degree been viewed as a more “purely Norse” creation. Clover discusses this in her introduction to *The Medieval Saga* on the grounds that many scholars has assumed that “the style and composition of the [Icelandic] sagas, together with the main content and themes, are attributed to native tradition” (Clover 1982: 15). This might very well stem from the associations that the north is masculine (vikings, raids, violence, honour) while the south is more effeminate (courtly romance, knights proving their worth to princesses, poetry and *lais*). Clover on the other hand advocates for a more polysemic view of the extant literature, something which has become more of the norm the past decade. That the romances, hagiography, genealogy, poetry and sagas were all a part of an ever evolving literary movement; “and that, despite large and obvious differences in temper and style, the Icelandic sagas as literary compositions bear direct comparison with some of the major narrative works of contemporary France and may therefore be classed with them as medieval.” (Clover 1982: 16). It can be agreed that while it is understood that Icelandic sagas were created and written in a time of fluctuating impulses, their intent were different than those of the *ríddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, and did not hold any more importance over their contemporaries then, and neither should they now.

4.4.3 Brynhildr as the manipulative shrew

Sarah M. Anderson explains the name of the essay collection *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (2002) as referring to the passage in *Njáls saga* where Flosi comments on the “cold counsel of women”. Her reasoning is that it has by this point become a proverb not only in old Norse literature, but also in the discourse of said literature: “Allusions and discussions of this phrase are a critical commonplace, and thus the power of the proverb to reduce and essentialize old Norse attitudes towards women has not always been resisted” (Anderson 2002: xii). The following essays in the collection discuss the inherent importance of female counsel and female presence in the different narratives left to us. In the previous chapters I have tried to analyze Brynhildr in the various tropes of valkyrie versus shield maiden and the maiden-king, but her role as the goader and the murderer of Sigurðr the hero-king is perhaps her most famous. Be it because of divine design, jealousy, or a meditated act together with her brother Atli, Brynhildr sends her husband to kill Sigurðr, the man that she covets. In both the poetic *Edda* and in *Völsunga saga* this scene is played out in great detail, and the results are dwelt upon from the angle of both Brynhildr and Guðrún. The former a woman who serves herself first and foremost in a literary tradition where we're not used to seeing such a thing unless the woman is brutally punished for it. For some her actions are repulsive and egocentric and not fitting for a heroine, for others it is a sign of a tradition where women were autonomous and physically and psychologically capable. For most she usually ends up somewhere in the middle. But it is nevertheless important to remember that the emotional reaction one has is always a subjective one and should not be interpreted as the poets':

We run the risk of re-constructing medieval emotionality through the prism of our own preconceptions of the emotive subject, which is just as culturally constructed and historically dependent as the one we seek to understand. (Ríkhardsdóttir 2017: 11)

And this is in a large part the reason why I decided to use the concept of storyworld to analyze the texts, as it allows me to take a step away from reading an “evolution” into the different representations of Brynhildr the character.

The hero of a story being murdered by his best friends at the ministrations of a scorned woman is an essential part of the legend of Sigurðr. It places Brynhildr in yet another narrative category of that of the “scheming woman” or the “whetting woman”. Her counsel would indeed seem “cold” as she convinces Gunnar that what is Sigurðr's should have been his by birthright, or in some cases, lies to

him about Sigurðr being a betrayer of his trust. F. Regina Psaki (2002) argues that “the counsel of women are warmer than in the indigenous saga” in the northern translations, and that the medieval misogyny might not be the idea of an “inferior woman”, but that of a sexual difference in general (Psaki 2002: 201-202):

The gender-inflicted reading preference of scholars, which is not innocent of the ideologies of our own time and of our construct of the Middle Ages, has made a cliché of the manipulative Norse megera who achieves her “cold” ends through her hapless male relatives. For the counsels of women to be “cold,” they must be inimical to a masculine hegemonic discourse or male social system of values: they must promote discord where the masculine paradigm would seek accord, if not friendship [...]; or, paradoxically, they must promote sophistication and self-indulgence where the masculine paradigm would inculcate strength, toughness, and self-testing. (Psaki 2002: 201)

It gives another perspective to the automatic reading of Sigurðr, Gunnar and Högni as the central protagonists of the heroic cycles, at which point yes, the proper status quo would have been for Brynhildr to have accepted the men's ministrations of her life and be satisfied with what she had. Except she doesn't, and she isn't, and this gives rise to Theodore Andersson's (1980) suggestions that it might not have been a Sigurðr cycle, but a Brynhildr cycle, originally. Brynhildr does indeed promote discord where Gunnar wants accord, but that is on the basis on his right to Brynhildr's life on false pretenses. As discussed in chapter 4.2, the poetic *Edda*'s compiler's use of the poem *Helreið* to tie Brynhildr in with the valkyrie narrative gives her a status as “other”. Gunnar's exclamation upon realizing that he is losing her shows that though greed and pride is definitely a motivator, he does feel true devotion for her:

«Éin er mer Brynhildr
allom betri
vm borin Bvöla,
hon er bragr quenna;
fyrr scal ec mino
fiorvi láta
enn þeirrar meyar
meiþmom tyna.» (*Skamma* 15. *Edda* 1965: 250)

He is in much the same position as Brynhildr by being in love with, or at least greatly desire, someone he can never truly have in an honourable sense. This common desperation between them finds its target in Sigurðr who becomes the focus of their frustration and eventual victim. Upon his death they both realize that it solved nothing and that their unhappiness is even greater.

The escalating factor in *Völsunga saga*, *Piðreks saga* and even in the composition of the poems in the poetic *Edda*, is Brynhildr's realization that she is married to the wrong man. The variants here is rather in the different ways she reaches this realization. In *Völsunga saga* there is a previous betrothal between her and Sigurðr that resulted in a daughter, and Guðrún reveals to Brynhildr that she was in the end tricked into marrying Gunnar on false pretenses. In *Piðreks saga* there is an initial meeting between Brynhildr and Sigurðr at which point they get betrothed, but she later agrees to marry Gunnar instead and is somewhat content until Guðrún reveals that Sigurðr disguised himself as Gunnar to claim her virginity. The poetic *Edda* is a bit more diffuse because of the lacuna, but Andersson (1980) argues that the reconstructed “*Meiri*” poem probably followed the events in *Völsunga saga*. But as it stands we have *Brot*, *Skamma* and *Helreið* as extant texts and they are the ones I will refer to.

In *Brot* there is not much exposition besides Högni mentioning that Brynhildr was jealous of Guðrún for having a great husband in Sigurðr, and was unable to see her own great husband in Gunnar. At the end of the poem there are two stanzas in which Brynhildr chides Gunnar for having betrayed the better king, and that he should have known Sigurðr would never have done the deed she lied about. It is assumed in context that this refers to Sigurðr and Brynhildr having shared a bed, as she describes how Gramr was between them the entire time. *Brot* focuses more on the aftermath between Brynhildr and Gunnar, while *Skamma* dwells on the shock of the betrayal both for Sigurðr and for Guðrún. The sequence of *Brot*, *Guðrúnarkviða I* and *Skamma* gives us two narratives: one following the present events and another that functions retrospectively. First there is the brothers plotting Sigurðr's murder, the rejoicing when their plan comes through and the eventual realization of what they have done. *Guðrúnarkviða I* deals with the aftermath, and dwells on the sorrows and hardships felt by women (and men) in a *blood feud* society. The poem ends with Brynhildr's draconic anger as she looks down upon Sigurðr's dead body. So far the storyline has followed the current events, but then *Skamma* looks back retrospectively in time from Brynhildr's point of view. There is a short summary of Sigurðr marrying Guðrún, their travel to Brynhildr's and how she was courted. She is described to initially have been happily married to Gunnar without an evil thought in the world until jealousy hits her through the ministrations of the fates. Brynhildr cannot let go of the

thought that something is “wrong” and eventually she convinces Gunnar and Högni on the threat of divorce that they must kill Sigurðr. Unlike *Brot* which ends the morning after the murder, *Skamma* goes through the farewell between Sigurðr and Guðrún before it refocuses on Brynhildr's actions as she kills herself and her servants in order to follow Sigurðr into the next life.

There is a focus on the preparations of the murder of Sigurðr, the murder itself and the aftermath in the poetic *Edda*. Brynhildr is in all these cases the instigator for the cycle's climactic event which is the death of Sigurðr, and the same is true for the two saga's that follow this storyline. In all versions Brynhildr reaches a point in which she confronts either Gunnar or Högni with an ultimatum. The words spoken by Brynhildr in order to incite Gunnar into planning the murder with Högni are presented thus in *Skamma*, *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga* and the consequent reactions by Gunnar/Högni.

In *Skamma* Brynhildr confronts Gunnar after having spent some time meditating on the situation at hand:

“Mun ec aptr fara,
þars ec aþan varc
meþ nabornom
niþiom minom;
þar mun ec sitia
oc sofa lifi,
nema þu Sigurð
svelta látir
oc iofurr aþrom
oþi verþir.” (*Skamma* 11. Edda 1965: 249)

After which Gunnar angrily withdraws to contemplate the words and what actions he must take. He is loath to break his oath and would miss Sigurðr dearly, but he is also surprised that Brynhildr is willing to forsake riches and land to achieve her ends. Eventually he turns to Högni for advice, phrasing the proposition in a way that might tempt him with the gold Sigurðr owns. Högni on his part feels it a grave injustice to break their words and knows that the reason Gunnar is now thinking of it is because of Brynhildr, but he eventually agrees. The disgust and disregard for the life she leads with Gunnar is very clear in this stanza as Brynhildr would rather go back to her kin and be

useless than continuing the way she has. The turn of phrase *sofa lifi* puts one in mind of a state of depression, or also pointing back to the sleeping state she was in as Sigrðrifa before Sigurðr woke her up. There is also the suggestion, or the vain hope, that killing the greater king will allow Gunnar elevate his status and she will no longer be false to her own vow. Of course there is a terrible flaw in this plan; it will make Gunnar into an oath breaker, even worse than what he already is in her eyes.

The words spoken in *Völsunga saga* are very similar to those spoken in *Skamma*:

Þá mælti Brynhildr: “Þú skalt láta þædi ríkit ok féit, lífit ok mik, ok skal ek fara heím til frenda mínna ok sitía þar hrygg, nema þú drepír Sigurd ok son hanz. Al eigi upp úlfhvelpínn.” (*Völsunga saga*. 1906-08: 79)

Brynhildr threatens Gunnar that she will be leaving together with the gold and land unless he complies to her request. As in the poem she urges him to also kill Sigurðr's son, to ensure that he does not have to fear the retaliation of an avenger later. The next paragraph of the saga reads like a mix of *Brot* and *Skamma*, in which Gunnar both accuses Sigurðr for having betrayed his trust and pitches the murder as a good way to get their hands on the gold and all the lands to Hogni. Again Hogni answers that Sigurðr is better alive and that their kingdoms stand stronger when they are united, but eventually agrees.

Þiðreks saga is the saga most removed from the plot in which Brynhildr uses Gunnar's love as an emotional leverage to get what she wants.

Haugni hefir riðit nocoro síðaR af borginni en adrir þæir oc hæfir talat við drotningu brynilli langa rið. oc í [þæira æin mæli er þætta, at brynildr biðr haugna at sua skal hann til haga at Sigurðr svæinn skal æigi hæim koma þat quælld. oc at hann megi þann | dag deyia. en þar til vill hon gefa honom gull oc silfr oc adrar gersimar, [slict allt er hann beiðizt. (*Þiðreks saga* 10-15. 1908-11: 265)

Brynhildr goes directly to Hogni and proposition him with gold and silver to make sure that Sigurðr does not arrive home alive. Hogni initially declines on the grounds that he doesn't think he is strong enough, but eventually concedes and does what she asks of him. There are absolutely no inclination towards hesitation from either Hogni or Gunnar. After Sigurðr is with a spear while he is leaning down to drink some water, Gunnar and Hogni actually congratulate each other on the good hunt and

proposes that they take the kill, Sigurðr, back to Grimhildr, who they want to show the “boar” as they call Sigurðr's dead body.

In all three instances Brynhildr desires the death of Sigurðr, and Högni is eventually swayed by the proposition of gold. Gunnar's emotional state in regards to the breaking of his oath and losing his wife is only visited in two. While *Völsunga saga* and the poetic *Edda*'s main themes are arguably the destructive forces of greed, longing and unrequited desire and love, *Þiðreks saga* frames the death of Sigurðr as a tragic end to a hero by the hands of a scorned woman and greedy brother-in-laws. The escalating factor is in all instances the will of Brynhildr. Her incitement speech carries with it two elements; that of her absolute loss of faith in their marriage and what she hopes will cure it which is the death of Sigurðr at Gunnar's hands. Brynhildr's *hvot* is typical in that she insults Gunnar by telling him that the life she has with him is no life at all, and that she would rather rot away in her kinsmen's hall. This is followed up by setting an ultimatum which cannot be denied if Gunnar wants to keep his honour as a man and king. This ultimatum is treated within the bounds of the narrative as a physical action. Brynhildr is held accountable for Gunnar and Högni's decision to kill Sigurðr. Friðriksdóttir states:

Whatever the narrator's attitude to the whetting woman, and whatever her historicity, the figure is demonstrably active and powerful within the narrative: she is the catalyst for or driving force behind feuds, and her speech thus has the effect of an act in Austinean terms because her words function as an “event”; they demand a response by the recipient if he intends to keep his honor intact. (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 21)

In *Þiðreks saga* it reads more as a direct retaliation against Grimhildr who dared to oppose her in her own hall more than any specific ill-will towards Sigurðr. In the Norse branch of the *Völsung* storyworld, Brynhildr uses her speech to incite a reaction from her husband that seems binding, but her reasons are not to retaliate the death of a family member, so what of her lamentation? As discussed above, Clover proposes that a true hot scene contains an element egging words, a lamentation or the presence of a 'bloody token'. Besides her threats of leaving, Brynhildr does not, and cannot, provide any of these things. Does she truly whet Gunnar? Is she the only culpable character? In context Brynhildr's desire to kill Sigurðr reads as jealousy and anger that Guðrún has something which she does not and she exults when she hears Guðrún's anguished cry. Yet the revenge is a short-lived victory for her and the words she uses when she incites Gunnar speaks of a loss of interest in life. Her “lamentation” is not so much over a family member she has lost that

needs to be avenged, but the death of her own aspirations, and what it means to forsake one's own happiness for that of others.

5 Conclusion

When constructing this paper my main concern was to understand Brynhildr's role in the widespread narrative that is the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Her character struck me as especially interesting in that it seemed both consistent and full of discrepancies at the same time. With the plethora of texts telling the story of Brynhildr I chose to restrict myself to what I termed the Norse branch of the legend. Through the concept of storyworld I have been able to read the texts on equal grounds, allowing me to analyze the character of Brynhildr as she is represented in each version without the need to create a hierarchy. Because of the lack of author, and in some instances a definite date of creation, the reconstruction of a historical horizon needed a different approach. There are many recognizable tropes visited in several bodies of more or less contemporary works that allowed for an analysis set in a historical context; the valkyrie, the shield maiden, the maiden-king and the whetting woman. By applying these as they are understood by current scholarly work to have been used in their time has allowed me to see Brynhildr's impact on the narratives.

Imagine a story shared by many people across class and country borders and bridging perhaps several generations in a time when writing was for the elite few. By nature this story would warp and change, and it would mean different things to different people. This is our storyworld, and in it exist Brynhildr and all the other characters as beacons of reference. Certain elements are the same, such as the betrayal of Sigurðr, but what it means and how it happened depends on which variant you read. How do you analyze such a character? This became my main concern and through my thesis I found that Brynhildr was not “just” that or the other, but rather all of them. In the poetic *Edda*, which contain many different voices all on its own, the compiler wanted the audience to associate Brynhildr with a valkyrie and all that this entailed. In it she is powerful and wise, but also a herald of destruction closely bound to the dragon-gold through symbolism. *Völsunga saga* is a *fornaldarsögur*, with courtly elements from *riddarasögur*, and tells the story of Brynhildr as a

prophetic woman and an accomplished weaver living in a tower at her foster-father's estate. Eventually seduced by Sigurd despite her better judgment she is later coerced into a marriage with an inferior Gunnar. She is the maiden-king, proud and powerful, but trapped in the web of other's making. It ends with heartbreak for her and Sigurd and their bodies are burnt together. The trope of the maiden-king is even stronger in *Piðreks saga* in which she rules her own court until Sigurd talks her into marrying Gunnar, which she does only hesitantly. Gunnar is nothing compared to her strength and it is not until Sigurd overwhelms her in the guise as Gunnar that their marriage is consummated. Again Guðrún (Grimhildr) is the one to reveal the deception, but unlike many other maiden-king's this disgrace only fuels Brynhildr's anger. She has Sigurðr murdered at the hands of Gunnar and Högni and gets her revenge. In all scenarios Brynhildr is an active protagonist and she becomes the "whetting woman"; egging or bribing in order to get her will. All these elements becomes the sum of one.

5.1 Theory and method

I used *storyworld* as method to give me a platform to work on and mentally spreading out my chosen extant texts. It enabled me to see them all in connection and the influence they had on each other and the surrounding literature, as well as the influences they were subjected to. This, and previous text critical work on the Völsung narratives, such as the stemma, were valuable points of reference. It seemed natural to approach this hermeneutically through a close reading, though some elements of the texts were of greater interest to me than others. These elements were how to approach the reading of 'women' or the 'female' in texts predominantly written down by men. I used already established narrative tropes such as the maiden-king and the whetting woman, as well as the archetype valkyrie to discern how these related to each other and to the story. With this framework I saw a connection between Brynhildr's character striving for autonomy and the discourse in Norse literature on the topic of women with power. How the female and the male characters relate to each other and a preoccupation with death and how to cope with grief. What I also wanted to test was the concept of 'female space' and a 'female language' through acts associated with women as proposed by Hélène Cixous (1976). But even though remnants of oral poetry such as *grátr* might exist, and these could be based on a tradition led by women, it is as Clover (2002) argues that we are in fact reading *text*. A text that has gone through several instances of personal interpretations. I found little to base my conclusions on and Brynhildr's whetting scenes of Gunnar do not fully fit into the ceremonial acts as proposed by Clover (2002). Even though the misogyny I first set out believing permeated the narratives at hand is clearly there, it turned out to be much more nuanced than expected. Brynhildr's character could easily have been made into a witch much akin to the more

hapless Morgan le Fay, yet her bid for autonomy appears to me to have been as much celebrated as reviled.

5.2 Brynhild as a narrative tool

It has become apparent through my analysis of Brynhildr that the tropes she inhabits all serve a function that pull the narrative forward. It might seem a matter of course at this point, but my conclusion is that at the point of our extant texts being written down, Brynhildr had become so ingrained in the storyworld of the *Völsungs* as they are represented in our Norse branch, that without her the narrative would not function. To refer back to Andersson and the theory of the '*Brunhildenlied*' I would say that whatever part of her that is left from this lay is by this point just a small facet, no more or less important than the others. When I began this thesis my goal was to analyze what I perceived to be the two main features of Brynhildr's personality: the valkyrie and the queen (the shield maiden). In the end I found that three aspects of her performance were of interest: the valkyrie, the maiden-queen and the whetting woman.

5.3 The valkyrie

It is not enough to know that Brynhildr is a valkyrie, it is also paramount to understand what a valkyrie is in the context of the storyworld. Quinn uses a model in which she dissects three of the valkyries as they are represented in the beginning of *Völsunga saga* and dissects their importance in the creation of the *Völsung* dynasty. She argues their status as “granters of life” by the virtue of their bodies rather than the choosers of dead kings, which is usually what is associated with the valkyrie. The model consists of a sequence of happenings which is applicable to the three valkyries: valkyrie is sent out to help the current generation of *Völsungs*, a hero is born, hero marries valkyrie, then the death of the hero at the hands of a relative in the next generation (Quinn 2009: 139). The question then became; does the valkyries who helped create the *Völsung* dynasty correspond with the valkyrie that ended it, Brynhildr?

To some extent I found Quinn's hypothesis lacking. While the valkyries held elements of life in both the form of magical powers and in their bodies as women, there is a certain nuance between the concept of life and death in the narratives. The valkyries stand in an in between and are capable of traversing between the two. The authorial voice of texts such as *Skáldskaparmál* and the poem quoted within show a wariness towards the power of resurrection and the havoc such abilities could wreak. In the story about Hildr it becomes clear that returning to life after death is not necessarily a sign of *life*, as what it caused was just more *death*. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* thematised the

wrongness of fraternizing with the dead as well. When Helgi came to Sigrún he was cold and surrounded by the mist of death and there were no real comfort between them. I then applied this ability of existing in the transitional state of life and death on my reading of Brynhildr. It then became apparent that Brynhildr corresponded more with the valkyries as they are represented in the poetic *Edda*, than those intended for the *divine design* in *Völsunga saga*. In essence she is more a valkyrie of cursed fate like Sváva and Sigrún, than a bringer of life like Hljóð. Brynhildr does to an extent fulfill her “valkyrie-duties” in her Sigrdrífa identity as she tutors Sigurd and helps with his *bildung*, but valkyries in the *Völsung* storyworld are more than just life-bringers as discussed above. They possess the power to reanimate the dead or resurrect, but as shown in the poetic *Edda*, they are also closely associated with war and destruction.

5.4 Valkyrie or shield maiden?

In his work *The Legend of Brynhild* Andersson concludes that Sigrdrífa and her status as a valkyrie can be removed from our reading of Brynhildr, or, at least understood to belong to a later tradition than the one of '*Brunhildenlied*', the hypothetical original Brynhildr lay. With this he also proposes that Brynhildr's death was not originally a part of her story and that we should rather read her as a victorious woman than a desperate and dead one. These are the results of a very different reading than mine since Andersson concerned himself with the stemma, the hierarchy of texts and the recreation of a lost lay. By using the concept of storyworld as my approach to the extant texts Brynhildr's status as a valkyrie became essential in understanding her role in the poetic *Edda* cycles, as well as those in *Völsunga saga*. Rather than looking for the original Brynhildr, I wanted to find the effects she had on the narrative. It was difficult to abandon Andersson's hypothesis that Brynhildr was an external element added to that of the Sigurðr cycle and the *Völsungs*, especially faced with the variant of her presented in *Þiðreks saga*. But the poets and compiler made a conscious choice by titling her a valkyrie, rewriting Brynhildr as an archetype already existing in the storyworld. Where Andersson looked for differences to extract her from the storyworld, I looked for the narrative tools used to integrate her. By establishing her as a valkyrie in the same tradition as those found in the *Helgi* poems and *Völundarkviða*, her death also became more symbolic than just a senseless suicide. Ending the Sigurðr cycle with Brynhildr's ride to Hel and recounting her days as a young valkyrie fulfills the cycle and she becomes Sigrdrífa again. It is never explicitly stated whether Brynhildr and Sigurd were reincarnated through her powers as a valkyrie, but Brynhildr do expect a life after death, perhaps much like Sigrún and Helgi had in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*.

It is my conclusion that both her status as a valkyrie and her suicide are important elements to our reading as they are the central differences between the Norse and the German, the northern and the southern, branches of the legend. Brynhildr is a shield maiden, but in the context of the poetic *Edda* the valkyries carry with them a broader definition than just a woman who fights in wars. The valkyries as we know them in the poems all insert unrest and uncertainty in the text and are understood to be ill-fated, yet their destiny is intertwined with that of the Völsungs. They are not “mere” women but in possession of a set of abilities that sets them above, or at the very least, makes them “other”. It is in Brynhildr's very nature to act against man as Högni deliberates:

“hon krang of komz
fyr kne moþur,
hon e borin
ovilia til,
morgom manni
at moþrega.” (*Skamma 45*, Edda 1965: 255)

The concepts of nature and destiny are well cemented in Norse literature and Brynhildr's status as a valkyrie both explain and excuse her warring tendencies. The difference between titling Brynhildr a valkyrie or a shield maiden is that the former is what she is inherent by nature, the latter is what she does as a profession.

5.5 The Maiden-king

While valkyrie and shield maiden are both terms used to describe Brynhildr, she could also be deemed a prototype for the maiden-king trope often seen in *riddarasögur*. The maiden-king motif that we find in *riddarasögur* is “a fusion of different narrative elements, profoundly influenced by the structure and themes of foreign romance literature,” but were built upon native stories found in *fornaldarsögur* and heroic lays “where images of independent women abound.” (Friðriksdóttir 2013: 107) The maiden-king are women with power or land who often treat their male suitors cruelly, but are often punished for this in a narrative sense and learn their place in society as subordinate. Friðriksdóttir's analysis of this trope in the *riddarasögur* tradition sheds light on a growing sense of fear of female power in a society that are coming to depend more on the structure of male heir inheritance. Her conclusion is that there is a discourse between the stories that advocate for female submission and narratives in which women retain their autonomy. Applying this discussion to the Völsung storyworld and the females portrayed therein, specifically Brynhildr and

to some degree Guðrún, showed a pattern throughout of two women striving for autonomy. While the male kin of both Brynhildr and Guðrún tried to govern their life, the narrative would never allow this to be the default status quo. Where a marriage was forced they would rebel and death would be the inevitable result. The discourse in the poetic *Edda* and *Völsunga saga* do not seem overly preoccupied with the idea of women transgressing their boundaries, but rather the suffering women (and men) go through in a *blood feud* society. A society where honour of the family is paramount ends with women having to slay their children to revenge their brothers or fathers in Guðrún's (and Signy's) case. In *Þiðreks saga*, which to me was perhaps the most surprising result, Brynhildr initially appears to be a classic maiden-king who spurns and humiliates her suitor as beneath her, and is eventually subdued through rape, but retaliates in the most grisly way possible and ends the victor.

The trope of the maiden-king makes room for a discussion within the narrative of the dangers of wanting a partner that is not suitable for you. Brynhildr desires her own autonomy more than anything else, but if she cannot have it she will marry the bravest man. Through ill-fate she is denied this and is told to settle for “second best”. This she does not do, and it puts both Gunnar and Sigurðr in a position where they have to choose. In *Völsunga saga* Sigurðr chooses Brynhildr, but the choice demeans him in her eyes; he should have been steadfast from the beginning. Gunnar must choose between the woman he loves and the man that he considers a brother. His sense of manhood and pride does not allow him to lose his wife, even though it sets him morally in peril. Brynhildr's continued denial of succumbing to the status quo forces the men around her to reconsider their priorities. For the both of them the question became: what is most important, land and riches or the keeping of oaths? Sigurðr swore himself to Brynhildr but his marriage to Guðrún was profitable in alliances, Gunnar swore himself to Sigurðr but killing him would grant him more land as a king. At the culmination of these choices Brynhildr stands as a judge and the outcome is death for Sigurðr and bereavement for Gunnar. Friðriksdóttir proposes that the aspect of greed is what often becomes the maiden-king's undoing, but in this instance Brynhildr doesn't just succumb to it, she symbolizes it.

5.6 The whetting woman

The terms *cold counsel* or the *whetting woman* are much used in the discourse of old Norse literature and has become tantamount to the avenging woman in *blood feud* society. A woman performing a *hvot* would apply several different tactics such as a *bloody token* (a part of the diseased: their clothes, sword, empty chair), the dead body itself, lamentation of *grátr* to instill a

sense of duty in the man that is obligated to help her through kin-ship. Though the whetting happens through dialogue, the performance of speech itself is treated as an action on par with the physical act of murder. Brynhildr's speech is treated as much as an act by the other characters as the physical deed of killing, or preparing to kill, Sigurðr. Even if Gunnar is the one to convince Hǫgni to kill Sigurðr and they together meditatively prepare Guttormr for the act, she is the one blamed for the death of the hero-king. This speech-act is associated specifically with female characters, as is the lamentation, creating a female space in what is often assumed to be a male-dominated narrative. Though the dialogue, or monologue, in our sources are not speech but written text, it is debated whether there are remnants of oral tradition in said texts. Scholars such as Else Mundal (2013) and Carol Clover (2002) argue for a female tradition being represented through the strong association of lamentation being in the jurisdiction of women, not just in the north but throughout Europe and history (Clover 2002: 37-38). This correspondence between women and grief is translated into literature as women being responsible for upholding the honour of diseased family members. Norse literature is often set in what they interpreted as a more archaic society in which blood feuds are still relevant, and thematise this by writing women who demand compensation through blood revenge. Brynhildr as a whetting woman breaks with the traditional depiction when the one she wants to avenge is not a fallen kin, but herself. Yet Brynhildr is in the same predicament as other women in this literary trope; she finds herself in a situation where she will not be properly compensated for the injury done to her. With no court to settle a divorce she utilizes one of the few options available to her.

The egging of Gunnar allows for room in the narrative for Gunnar and Hǫgni to continue being perceived as heroes rather than just oath breakers. When comparing the scenes where Gunnar and Hǫgni contemplate and then performs the deed in *Skamma* and *Vǫlsunga saga* to that of *Þiðreks saga*, the thematic difference becomes obvious. In *Skamma* and *Vǫlsunga saga*, Gunnar is angry and bewildered by the choice he has to make, while in *Þiðreks saga* he is easily persuaded by Hǫgni, and they are both exultant after the kill. The whetting of Gunnar allows the audience a measure of sympathy for him. That Brynhildr is to hold the entire blame for Sigurðr's death is natural, her character is already ambiguous and layered and capable of taking on this role without destroying the audience's emotional investment in her. Gunnar and Hǫgni's transgression would have been too large, as we see in *Þiðreks saga*, where any sympathies for them are void. Brynhildr's responsibility for Sigurðr's death also lends her death scene added gravitas. It would have been inappropriate for her to follow him in death if she did not have a stake in it; if she was merely a lovesick woman mourning the death of a man she couldn't have in life.

The valkyrie, the shield maiden, the maiden-king and the whetter; Brynhildr performs in all the roles tying together and pushing the narrative forward. Brynhildr is the personification of the strife that the gold, the greed, brings with it. She is *hildir*, like the valkyries before her. It is the moment that Sigurðr claims Fafnir's cursed gold that he hears the whispers of the valkyrie Sigrdrífa, after all.

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